

Project Title: Social, personal or intimate? Cultural differences in distancing behavior in Germany in times of Covid-19

Applicants

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In a Nutshell

What cultural differences exist with regard to proxemic behavior in Germany, and (how) do they change in times of Covid-19? Do mathematical models for modeling the spread of infectious diseases sufficiently take these differences into account? As a key result of this project, we want to answer these questions and thereby contribute to the improvement of pandemic modeling.

Project Description

The spread of Covid-19 has widely challenged deep-rooted notions of how close one can get. With more than a third of the world's population in lockdown, mastering loneliness, learning physical distance, and interacting on the condition of reduced bodily contact become the today's skills in demand. The right choice of interpersonal distance starts being viewed as a premise of survival.

While the topic of distancing is often reduced to the question of how far people should stand apart in queues or public places, proxemic behavior is in fact a more complex and differentiated issue. In his groundbreaking study, Hall (1966) differentiated four kinds of distance: public, social, personal and intimate. The preferences for each of them are shaped by cultural norms subject to variation. Cultural norms, regulating, for example, much of gender-specific behavior, attitudes towards strangers, the patterns of children's upbringing, customs of spatial behavior etc., appear to be the most important factors to describe the preferred distance: What is intimate in one culture may be personal, social or even public in another (Zakharine 2005, 2007, 2008). Activities involving either bodily contact or the shared use of clothes or dishes are associated with different social environments. With whom to share a glass or a plate or a cigarette, underwear or a bed is practiced differently in different societies (Zakharine 2008). Whether medically erroneous or not, commonly used hygienic explanations and confidence in cleanliness exert influence on everyday behavior.

Mathematical theories modeling the spread of infectious diseases (such as SIS/SIR) generally do not take different kinds of bodily distance or spatial behavior into account, as their main focus is on the independent time variables. Modeling of infections, as in the case of Covid-19, proceeds under the assumption that the longer the exposure time, the higher the chances of getting infected, and that infection risks are lower for those who interact "from a distance". But what this means is not sufficiently clarified by the numbers confusingly ranging between 1 meter (WHO) and 8,2 meters (Journal of the American Medical Association). Up to date, medical regulations associating bodily distance with the risk of contamination remain sweeping, generalized and devoid of any qualitative differentiation.

The fear of contamination and the consequences of social distancing for mental health are among the main reasons for behavioral uncertainties that have been fueling protests against quarantines in one part of the society and a strong demand on total isolation in another – or so it seems: The misleading depiction of the population as divided into two opposing camps

makes large-looming ambivalence invisible. There is a mismatch between the notion of “distance” as expressed in experts’ guidelines, and the variegated and tacitly held notions of “the right distance” in the daily life of most citizens. The ill-defined status of ‘interpersonal distance’ in its relation to ‘public’, ‘social’, ‘private’ and ‘intimate distance’ is a latent source of uncertainties and ambivalences.

It is therefore indispensable to explore and to take into consideration different types of proxemic behavior in order to obtain the best predictions regarding the effects and side effects of medical regulations related to bodily contacts. It will become even more important for the future to effectively verify research approaches given the fact that proxemic behavior is subject to change in the time of epidemics, migration and global heating.

Proxemic Behavior: State-of-the-Art

Sorokowska et al (2017) recently provided a comprehensive study, comparing proxemic behavior in 42 groups worldwide. Previous research compared proxemic behaviors of different groups, such as that of “Anglo-Americans” and “Mexican-Americans” (Baxter, 1970), “Arabs” and “Americans” (Herrera 2010), “Russians” and “Western Europeans” (Borisova/Butovskaya 2004).

Three different groups of factors have been taken into account for explaining the differences in proxemic preferences: (1) environmental - as with regard to temperature/climate, but also urbanization and industrialization; (2) anthropological and (3) socio-psychological factors. We focus on the latter two for the remainder of this proposal.

Regarding anthropological factors, Edward Hall’s pioneering distinction between low-contact cultures and high-contact cultures remains unrivalled to this day within the different fields of empirical research (Hall 1966). Hall’s distinction is based on his assumption that representatives of different cultures differ in their interpersonal distance preferences, depending the contexts of public, social, personal, and intimate communication (‘ceremonial’, Zakharine 2005). Starting from this premise, Hall and his followers hypothesized a significant variability in preferred interpersonal distances across countries when approaching a stranger (social distance), an acquaintance (personal distance), or a close person (intimate distance). Gender, status and age also have an influence on the choice of interpersonal distance (Beaulieu 2004, Ozdemir 2008, Herrera 2010).

Regarding socio-psychological factors, the correlation of interpersonal distance with the level of individualism and collectivism remains one of the strongest assumptions within the behavioral studies (Hofstede 2001). A close distance choice correlates with trust into efficiency of intra-group relations. This is what collectivistic cultures are based on. Individualistic cultures are characterized by a lower degree of trust into intra-group relations which correlates with a stronger predilection for autonomy and antipathy towards close bodily distance (Hofstede 2001, cf. also: Borisova/Butovskaya 2004).

Our Approach

In comparison to the US, Germany lags behind regarding research in cultural differences of proxemics behavior. This is regrettable, given the fact that roughly a quarter of Germany’s inhabitants comes from a so-called “migrational background”. While this is a regrettable research gap even in normal times, considering that spatial behavior currently undergoes drastic changes, and no baseline data exists yet, we believe it is high time to explore cultural

differences in spatial behavior in Germany.

However, proceeding from pre-existing ethnic or migrational categories would mean to pre-assume a dominance of these for differences in spatial behavior in the current situation, even though these might be subject to change right now. In order to allow for a more open framework, and in order to account for the unusual setting of such a study in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, we opt for a qualitative, explorative study design that uses “perceptions of change” as a starting point. We aim at interviewing as many participants as possible on what they perceive as changes in proxemic behavior, on their side and on the side of others. Further in the interviews, this will serve as a contrast foil for speaking about proxemic behaviors as experienced and practiced before Covid-19. Here, we will draw upon Dmitri Zakharine’s past research experience (Zakharine 2005, 2007, 2008). In a second step, on the basis of our qualitatively derived results, we wish to implement surveys in order to gather quantitative data. — Even though not representative of Germany as such, the city of Freiburg - one of the earliest hotspots in Germany - is a good location for an explorative study, as it has a highly diverse population with many migrational groups present, so that ethnicity and migrational background can be taken into account without *a priori* dominating the study design.

Goals

We hope to achieve results that can help experts to improve or contextualize the results of mathematical modeling, to support state authorities to slow down the spread of Covid-19 and to communicate appropriately to specific communities, and to better understand, anticipate and handle the distancing aspects in future epidemics.

Preliminary work

The planned proposal builds on a number of previous studies. One of them is the applicant’s large-scale socio-historical study entitled ‘The Transformation of Interpersonal Communication in Modern Eastern and Western Europe’ (Zakharine 2005; see above). Based on the historical analysis of conduct books on the one hand and written sources describing situations of cultural clash during the encounters of Eastern and Western Europeans, this study argues that patterns of spatial behavior are usually not subject to rapid change - a hypothesis that we wish to re-examine under the current conditions. The study identified a large number of invariable patterns of spatial behavior in various communities over centuries. This thesis received further empirical confirmation through interviews conducted by Zakharine in Germany and Eastern European countries (Zakharine 2008). A main result of this publication was a stronger tendency of Western Europeans to form polis-communities which lay particular emphasis on the perspective of strangers, in contrast to oikos-communities preferred by Eastern Europeans.

Veronika Lipphardt has built an expertise in public discourses on science and responsibility of science (2018). Together with mathematician Peter Pfaffelhuber, she has demonstrated the technological pitfalls and public misunderstandings of a digital technology supposed to predict the “biogeographical ancestry” from an unknown DNA-trace (2020). Uncertainty, ignorance and tacit knowledge, all relevant in this project context, as well as mixed methods and the potentials of ethnographic methods have been dominant topics in her teaching.

Methods

Under the current circumstances, we opt for a ‘mixed methodology’ as the main strategy. The project is going to combine 1) qualitative and 2) quantitative approaches, laying particular emphasis on 1a) interviews (expert, non-expert, semi-guided); 1b) participatory observation; 1c) discourse and document analysis of complementary sources (e.g. guidelines, signs,

conduct books, websites, recommendations used for intercultural purposes); and 2a) survey taking; 2b) statistical data evaluation; 2c) testing the effect of proxemic variables on modeling and simulating epidemic spread.

For our work program, see the Kostenplanerläuterung.

Team

The research is mainly pursued by PD Dmitri Zakharine, a distinguished senior researcher with much experience in intercultural settings. Together with Veronika Lipphardt and sub-contracted instructors, he will guide and train a group of students to gather and analyze data for this project. They will develop blended learning modules that can be used for later projects as well. The implementation of this project is also going to make a significant contribution to the supervision of advanced students of interdisciplinary study programs, concretely: Interdisciplinary Anthropology and Liberal Arts and Sciences, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The project-based intensive courses will particularly promote those sections of sociology, history, life studies and mathematical modeling that are needed in research fields dealing with the spread of epidemics and virus transmission.

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