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Glen Gatin, Brandon University

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Keeping Your Distance

Glen Gatin, Brandon University

Abstract

This analysis began with inquiries into the substantive area of distance education using the classic grounded theory method. Analysis revealed a pattern of problem-solving behavior, from which the theory *Keeping Your Distance* emerged. The theory is an integrated set of concepts referring to the conscious and unconscious strategies that people use to regulate distance, physical and representative, in their everyday lives. Strategies are used to control physical, emotional, and psychological realities and to conserve personal energy in interactions with individuals and/or institutions. For all social interactions, people use a personalized algorithm of engagement that mitigates conditions and consequences and preserves optimal distance. *Keeping Your Distance* provides a theoretical starting point for considerations of the changing notions of distance. In part, these changes have been brought about by developments in the fields of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and online social networking.

Introduction

This study began in the substantive area of distance education by analyzing the responses of people who used computer-mediated distance education as they solved problems and resolved concerns. Data were collected in face-to-face interviews as well as from institutional documents, collegial comments, casual conversation and observational data. Glaser's (1998) dictum that *all is data* was interpreted to mean that not only is it *possible* to use a variety of data sources, but that as many data sources as possible *should* be examined. Initial participants for this analysis were chosen from related groups: students, support staff, administration and faculty involved in the distance education enterprise. After the analysis of the first three interviews a pattern began to form; after the sixth interview the core variable emerged. Interviews continued until the main properties were established and saturated. Early theoretical sampling looked beyond the initial groups from the distance education arena to test the generalizability of the core variable. Extant theory provided important data, particularly, Moore's (1997) Theory of Transactional Distance.

Data were coded and condensed into written memos. Memos were sorted according to analytical rules (Glaser, 1978). The most critical rule for sorting was the relationship of the memo to the core variable; if a memo was not related to the core

variable or a property of the core variable, it was left out of the analysis. The analyst established rules for the determination of the core variable, the one that explains the most variation, recognizing that “the goal is not to cover all possible theoretical possibilities nor explain *all* variation.” (p.122). Other rules relate to the integrative fit of ideas and are “based on the assumption that the social organization of the world is integrated and the job of the grounded theorist is to discover it” (p. 123). The memos become the outline, and then the writer must merely connect and integrate the ideas together into a formal theory.

The theory of *keeping your distance* emerged through at least three distinct levels of abstraction: concrete/descriptive, metaphoric/symbolic, and abstract/conceptual. What follows is the elucidation of that theory using the “conditions and consequences” model (Glaser, 1978, p. 74). These are not *findings* but an integrated set of hypotheses. Illustrations and examples are from data collected in this research and are provided for the purpose of establishing imagery and understanding. These illustrations and examples are for the purpose of making the theory clear and should not be considered as proofs or descriptions of the process used to derive the theory. References to theoretical work *by others* are not necessarily intended to seek verification of this theory or to try to verify another theory.

Overview

Keeping Your Distance is a grounded theory about a pattern of behavior people use in their social interactions and engagements with others. Essentially, people arrange their world in such a way as to have physical and emotional control of their circumstances by maintaining distance in various realms. Arranging for physical distance in the spatial or geographical sense is the most obvious response, but symbolic distance is often used as a proxy for physical distance. People use physical distance to ensure safety, autonomy, and emotional control and to preserve energy while engaging with the world. Seeking to create physical distance may be a response to a perceived physical threat, but physical distance may also be used to mitigate perceived emotional and existential threats. People develop and employ a repertory of techniques to maintain a symbolic distance, even when in physical proximity to others. Techniques used are most often a combination of behaviors or strategies.

Theory

People *keep their distance* in response to conditions that arise in various settings in their everyday lives. They employ purposeful strategies designed to ensure an optimal distance, and these strategies have outcomes. In *keeping their distance*, people use complex systematic processes to adjust for changes in conditions and to adjust for the effect of previously applied strategies. The *keeping your distance*

process is recursive and in most instances does not result in a completely satisfactory outcome. The drive for optimal outcome is balanced by the energy required by the strategic responses. People may be able to tolerate a less than optimal distance if there are mitigating factors. Mitigating factors of *keeping your distance* include a personal coefficient of preferred distance.

***Keeping your distance* applies across contexts**

The tendency to engage in *keeping your distance* persists across contexts although the strategies may vary. Strategies that a person uses in his or her everyday exchanges with family may be different from those used in pursuit of education, career, or other social contexts. In a family relationship, physical contact is usually regarded as a necessary ingredient. Parents and children are hugged, friends embraced, lovers caressed, all requiring direct physical contact. In these circumstances more discrete *keeping your distance* methods are employed. Even the most loving relationship requires some distance. People need to allow distance in any relationship and respect the subtle *keeping your distance* cues that others display. In many family relationships *keeping your distance* is ritualized and built into such things as the boys' night out or girls' night out. Anecdotal comparisons indicate many such ritual distance strategies associated with in-law relationships. These are accepted mechanisms of ensuring that relationship boundaries and distances are observed in the most intimate family relationships. Collegial discussions offered the example of the distance that an adolescent establishes and maintains from parents as a necessary component of developing maturity. *Keeping your distance* strategies applied in an education setting would not be appropriate in a family context, just as intimate exchanges appropriate in a family relationship are inappropriate in an education context.

Keeping your distance is a basic pattern of social behavior that is expressed in the activities of individuals but is also manifest in interactions with institutions and communities. People use *keeping your distance* collectively and the outlines of the basic pattern can be seen in communities and companies as easily as with individuals. Ideologically distinct communities such as religious or political groups manifest the *keeping your distance* impulse most clearly but all communities employ methods of creating distance for their membership. Every community -- geographic, professional, or social -- has a repertory of techniques designed to keep members close and nonmembers at a distance. A physical community (in the geographic sense) may erect a gated wall to keep others at a distance.

Professional communities use licensure, credentialing and communication controls to ensure that nonmembers are kept at a symbolic or physical distance. Social communities use strategies for member identification, communication, and sanction which ensure that members in good standing are in the inner circle and nonmembers are out of the loop.

Many incidents were recorded in data of *keeping your distance* in the work context. In traditional hierarchical workplaces, highly bureaucratic agencies evoke a range of human psychosocial responses and present a number of complex problems that people must deal with on a routine basis. Respondents described a broad range of strategies that they used to function in the workplace, many of them referring to distance. An illustration of this was the observation of a receptionist who used desks and office equipment to erect a barrier to maintain distance between her and the clients that she was employed to serve. *Keeping your distance* is often a prominent feature of a workplace survival response set used to maintain distance between superiors, co-workers, and difficult situations. Beleaguered workers at one education facility eagerly anticipated their relocation to a campus at a distance from administrators. Their perception was that the distance thus gained would enable them to perform their jobs efficiently and without constant unreasonable demands and undue threats to their workplace autonomy from administrators who were perceived to be mostly interested in exercising arbitrary authority.

Keeping your distance was also credited with motivating adaptive responses where an individual who finds him or herself in an intolerable situation will use discontent to energize a program of professional development that will allow him/her to create the desired distance. People make career change choices based on their *keeping your distance* strategy set. One respondent offered that the reason s/he was engaged in education was to improve his/her employability skills to “get away from crappy jobs, working for ignorant people.”

***Keeping your distance* accounts for changes over time**

One of the tests of a theory is persistence over time. People experience change over time and their responses, the strategy sets, the triggering conditions, and the intensity of response may vary with time and experience but *keeping your distance* accounts for a basic tendency that persists. The behavioral expression of a person's *keeping your distance* strategy may change over time but the propensity to use *keeping your distance* strategies remains comparatively constant over time. A shy person may learn, with time and experience, to appear less shy in public but still feels shy. A person may also learn, with time and experience, to function with less than optimal distance but the propensity to prefer more distance persists. A respondent reported that while he had been teaching for some time in a face-to-face situation and had adapted reasonably well, he was pleased to be able to teach by distance, as his natural preference was for more distance. His natural preference for what he considered an optimal distance had not diminished with time. Another contributor spoke of the discomfort she experienced appearing in public and the distance-related strategies that she employed to reduce exposure to public scrutiny. She recognized that the strategy was career limiting and attempted to try a different approach by enrolling in a public speaking club. While she became adept at public speaking over time she recognized that her lasting preference was to keep her distance from such occasions.

Systems Thinking Informs the Theory

Simmons (2006) described the ambitions of grounded theorists with respect to systems:

An important thing to understand about grounded theory in relation to its suitability for studying and understanding systems is that, rather than being focused on verifying relationships between limited numbers of preconceived variables, it is designed to discover *all* relevant variables including those that may be discovered later or in other settings. Not only does this provide the ability to study whole systems, not just parts of systems, it enables the theory to be modified as new data emerge or as new data are collected from other settings (p. 488).

In proposing the grounded theory of *keeping your distance* I have a similar ambition: to explain a complete system of social behavior patterns in a way that allows for modification and its application in various settings. Each action taken creates a new set of conditions that sets up a new response and consequence. Reflection allows people to adjust their strategies to obtain optimal outcomes but the theory of *keeping your distance* suggests that a systematic bias exists. People want/need to keep their distance and they err on the side of distance. As people accumulate life experience, they increasingly refine their use of distance to maintain personal autonomy and control. Indicators of this were taken from reports of older people contemplating placement in senior citizens facilities where their autonomy and personal control would be constricted. Similar indicators were revealed in the reports of people who elected to work out of their own homes and maintain distance from a restrictive work environment.

Degrees of constraint and freedom are continually being calculated for best results but *keeping your distance* can justify forgoing what might otherwise be considered optimal. Each of the conditions that evoke *keeping your distance* has consequences that cause problems for people if they do not have an adequate response.

Conditions that Evoke *Keeping your Distance*

Conditions that evoke the *keeping your distance* response may be outward actions or internalized mental/attitudinal states. From the data collected in this analysis, the main conditions under which people respond with *keeping your distance* are perceived threats to personal safety, personal autonomy, emotional stability, and psychic integrity. Keeping your distance is also used to preserve physical and emotional energy under conditions of unacceptable demands. Similarly, the consequences of a chosen *keeping your distance* strategy may be manifest externally but are more likely to be internalized and not readily apparent to casual observers. The theory of *keeping your distance* provides a theoretical foothold to understand the systematic way that people use distance for control in their lives.

Explanations of these patterned responses are often not clearly articulated for

various reasons. In a number of instances respondents appeared to be providing *properline* data, possibly from recognition that their strategies might be perceived as antisocial. They offered elaborate rationales for such patterns of behavior. In situations such as these, the analyst must use abductive reasoning to discern the most likely explanation for a given pattern of behavior. Glaser (2007) suggested that properline or even obviously distorted data are not necessarily rejected from a grounded analysis. Because grounded theory produces abstractions not descriptions, “distortions are just more variables to conceptualize and make part of the data” (p. 4).

Consequences of the conditions

What happens if people do not effectively employ strategies to preserve optimal distance? The conditions of perceived threat to optimal distance have consequences for people that make it necessary to adopt *keeping your distance* strategies. Collegial discussions with informed observers suggest that individuals who do not employ effective strategies experience a lack or loss of physical safety, emotional control, and/or personal autonomy. They may also feel that they are wasting precious resources on unproductive interactions. Further observational data suggest that inadequate responses may give rise to defensive reactions that exacerbate conditions.

Dimensions of *Keeping Your Distance*: Exposing the Latent Patterns

People use *keeping your distance* in distinct patterns of behavior as they solve common problems or concerns in their everyday lives. These patterns can be organized into categories, each pattern providing a slightly different perspective on the core variable. Each category has elements and strategies that are unique but also have essential commonalities; the principal common thread is the use of distance. Interpersonal contact and relationships are the essence of the human experience. At the same time, these interactions and relationships bring a myriad of problems that must be dealt with in a systematic fashion. While people may resolve relationship problems with a variety of means, one of the consistent features of solutions is to maintain distance. That distance may be emotional, psychological, or symbolic but often creating actual physical distance is a significant component of systematic relationship management. When creating physical distance is not possible, people use symbolic or psychological strategies that represent physical distancing.

Distancing for physical safety

The most basic pattern of behavior for *keeping your distance* is the commonly observed pattern of creating physical distance to avoid interactions that could have real or perceived harmful physical effects. At a medical clinic, people will attempt to

use distance to separate themselves from others who are coughing or sneezing or manifesting open sores. A natural impulse is to increase distance in the interests of self-preservation. Even if a threat is not physical, the response is to physically create distance by moving away. I have watched as people physically distance themselves from a person who expresses a seemingly inappropriate comment, behaves in an unconventional manner, or wears inappropriate clothing. In my work with physically, emotionally, and mentally challenged people I have observed people seek to create the maximum allowable distance between themselves and someone who appears “different.” I have made similar observations at political events when someone has made a statement that challenged the status quo. People visibly moved away from the challenger. The best explanation for this behavior is that people believe that they can use distance to avoid the contamination of association with someone who is displaying behavior or appearance that is likely to attract censure.

Keeping your distance is still important in physical safety. People manage their distance with various strategies to preserve physical safety. For example, on-campus incidents of sexual assault have made remote technology-mediated education a much safer option, an important consideration for some women. One of the incidents that indicated this concept was a description provided by a woman who moved from a rural center to a major city to pursue higher education. In moving to the urban center she was thrust into social circumstances that included gang activity and drug culture. These constituted a physical threat and emotional turmoil. She subsequently adjusted her behavior to attend university by distance, with the intention of avoiding these perceived threats. Her *keeping your distance* strategy included activities that were designed to preserve her physical safety.

Social groups appear to use *keeping your distance* strategies on many scales. Consideration of historical data suggests quarantine and isolation are ways that distance is created and maintained to preserve mainstream society from exposure to disease and contagion. The historical record shows that leper colonies and tuberculosis sanitariums were designed to protect society from the real and perceived harmful effects of association with infected individuals (Cosgrave-Mather, 2003; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007). While societies are considerably more enlightened with respect to the treatment of disease, the notion of using distance has a long history and remains a default mechanism for dealing with problematic social issues. Distance has the effect of reducing a sense of responsibility for problematic situations, as evidenced by reports of the response of governments to deadly conflicts in foreign lands. One of the leading public rationales for the U.S. Bush administration’s war against Iraq was framed in terms of distance, to fight terrorism over there so we won’t have to fight them over here (Luntz, 2004). Bageant (2007) points out that perceived distance allowed people to disassociate from their governments’ questionable practices.

Distancing for emotional control

This pattern is apparent when engaging in personal, emotional and intimate relationships. It should be noted that the distancing referred to is a part of a normal pattern of behavior and not necessarily pathological. The desire for intimacy is always balanced with a need for emotional independence. Even in the closest and most harmonious relationships, a sense of space is critical for emotional stability. One person explained that while she loved the night courses she took, her objective was as much to get out of the house to save her sanity and thereby enhance her marriage. She observed that others she knew would go to the bar but that had the potential for other undesired effects. In a productive and valued relationship, the distance is kept to a minimum. However, even within positive relationships a need is perceived for personal space and at least some occasions of physical separation.

In adult intimate relationships, distance is a critical element of emotional control and is negotiated and adjusted regularly. Distance, in the sense that one partner or both are aloof and uncommunicative, may be perceived to have detrimental relationship effects. In these circumstances, the problem may actually be over-distancing, where the normal impulse to *keep your distance* is out of adjustment and the negotiated distance between partners is in disequilibrium. *Keeping your distance* is not necessarily a symptom of a dysfunctional relationship. Intimate partners attribute the allowance of space or distance as important factors in harmonious relationships and this is certainly borne out in anecdotal comparisons and personal experience.

Keeping your distance is also used to maintain distance from emotional encounters that are potentially painful or embarrassing. Poets, authors and songwriters have the particular gift of articulating emotional themes, and *keeping your distance* is directly referenced in a number of songs, videos, and movies. An Internet search for references to the term “keeping your distance” in popular culture yielded a rich source of data for this section of the analysis. The most persistent theme of these references is of the preservation of emotional control and stability. The song “Keep your Distance” by folk singer Richard Thompson features the following lyrics:

Keep your distance, keep your distance
When I feel you close to me what can I do but fall
Keep your distance, oh keep your distance
With us it must be all or none at all. (Thompson, 2001)

Another popular song that enjoyed a certain amount of play in my house was “Miss Independent” by Kelly Clarkson. The song begins by describing an individual as

Miss Independent,
Miss Self-sufficient,
Miss Keep your distance. (Clarkson, 2003)

This common theme in popular culture recommends keeping your distance to preserve emotional control, acknowledging that romantic relationships can be

fraught with heartache and disappointment. The common remedy recommended by many “advice to the lovelorn” columnists is to keep your distance as best you can. The negotiation and maintenance of optimal distance is an ongoing concern in romantic relationships. Keeping your distance was a rule for romantic and emotional involvement that was broken only under the most certain of circumstances. Keeping your distance may entail actual physical distance but may also entail other strategies such as withholding or redirecting conversation, avoiding eye contact, negative verbal cues, and forbidding and distancing body language. Electronic equivalents such as “unfriending” or blocking people on social networking sites are common.

Other physical cues may signal a wish to maintain distance from certain individuals and reduce distance to others. To illustrate this concept, consider individuals who choose a style of dress or grooming to signal affinity and draw those with similar affinities closer. The same cues ensure greater distance from those who do not share the same affinity. Observations of clothing style choices and presentation suggest that keeping your distance influences personal presentation. These behaviors are cues that greater or lesser distance, most often actual physical distance, is desired. One respondent, a part-time performer in a band specializing in a particular genre of music, reported that when he wore his band t-shirt, people interested in that genre would engage him in conversation and make assumptions about his lifestyle and affinities. In most non-performance circumstances he chooses a style of dress and appearance intended to keep his distance from the type of people attracted to that genre of music.

Relationships outside of family have a different set of strategies but have the same desired effect--emotional control. Emotional relationships in these realms have significant elements of power and influence and involve basic and complex subjective experiences such as fear, anger, apathy, frustration, surprise, satisfaction, and motivation. One respondent reported that one of his coping strategies was “just walking away” (creating distance) from a tense situation at work, an effective strategy to manage anger. Distance in work relationships is implicitly and explicitly negotiated and carefully maintained. A respondent working in an education setting reflected that she used a number of strategies to demonstrate that she was in a position of authority. Concerned that her youthful appearance might erode her credibility, she used verbal cues and physical space to discourage closeness that would impact her professionalism.

In hierarchical organizations, status is often represented by distance. Observational data of hierarchical institutions confirm that high status individuals within an organization have the largest offices with the best views and the most advantageous proximity to other powerful workers. Low status holders occupy the less desirable physical spaces and must endure either physical crowding or isolation. Low status female workers may have to endure uncomfortable physical proximity to male co-workers and must adjust their *keeping your distance* strategies for the sake of job security. The relationship between stress and physical crowding (lack of space or distance) has been studied from a number of perspectives.

Maintaining distance for emotional control is closely related to the need for autonomy, with many overlapping issues and similar strategies. Many indicators from data collected for this study were interchangeable in multiple categories.

Distancing for autonomy

This pattern is manifest when people perceive that their autonomy is threatened. A sense of personal autonomy is essential for identity formation, and *keeping your distance* is adopted to establish and maintain the necessary space, where a person or community can feel that they are self-determining. *Keeping your distance* is a response to chaos, in the practical sense where there seems to be no clear connection between cause and effect. Respondents reported a common strategy of physically or emotionally withdrawing to avoid chaotic situations until ambiguity is resolved. *Keeping your distance* is a response to problematic or toxic encounters such as those that involve aggressive marketing, bullying, racism, or persecution.

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of this dimension was taken from the report of a respected professional who described in detail the efforts that he employed to keep his distance. This included numerous choices including place of residence, one that guaranteed that neighbors would not intrude, his clear signals to uninvited visitors to his residence that he preferred that they respect his distance, and his general adoption of a pattern of living that ensured that he would always be able to maintain control and autonomy through distance. Although specific strategies may vary, the basic pattern is best explained as a desire to ensure autonomy through distance.

Marketers and professional salespeople have long recognized the basic tendency for people to keep their distance. In marketing terms this is known as resistance, and one of the strategies recommended for overcoming this tendency is to get people close enough to touch their products (Peck & Shu, 2009). If a salesperson can get a customer close enough to touch the new electronic device, drive the new car, or sit in the living room of the new house s/he knows that the chances of making a sale are improved. One blog promoting consumer awareness suggested in a post that the best way to resist this sales technique was to “keep your distance” (Holzmann, 2009).

Distancing is an important component of political image management. A very common journalistic convention uses the construction: X sought to distance himself from remarks made by Y. Political responses are framed in the language of distance. Analysis of the history of new world settlement shows that the prospect of being able to maintain political and religious autonomy was one of the principal appeals for immigrants attracted to settlement in the US and Canada. Physical distance from arbitrary exercise of power was a critical aspect of this impulse and remains a common strategy for religious and political groups. In many cases, this pattern of settlement involved groups of people with religious beliefs or political affinities. Like-

minded individuals, or those that subscribe to a religious or philosophical perspective, will gather in communities that are intentionally set apart from greater concentrations of population. One respondent, a member of a community that prefers rural living, reported that the community prefers to keep their distance from the influences of mainstream society in populated centers. This community had established an extensive educational network with related communities. This collective strategy allowed them to *keep their distance* but still enjoy the educational benefits that otherwise would only have been available in a more urban setting.

With other ethnic, religious, or political groups, *keeping your distance* is a major component of social control strategies. A common colonialist strategy was to establish areas set aside for indigenous populations, the reservations set aside for the North American Indians, the townships of South African apartheid. The intention was to keep indigenous people at a distance. My discussions with acquaintances living on reservations indicate that while there may be privations, hope remains that physical separation from mainstream society will preserve cultural autonomy.

As society becomes more technologically oriented, many traditional expectations for privacy have changed, and strategies for keeping distance change apace. Concerns about security and antiterrorism have given people difficult choices. Ubiquitous closed-circuit television CCTV monitors have turned parts of the world into a 24/7/365 surveillance society. Much of the security benefit is illusory and highly theatrical but the result is that people are facing greater difficulty in maintaining autonomy and a sense of personal freedom. Many people employ a variety of strategies to *keeping their distance* from government control and state scrutiny.

As technology becomes more pervasive, many people use technology to manage distance. A respondent noted that while she is not close to people in her neighborhood she has online relationships that she considers close friends. These relationships sustain her in a way that allows her to control the duration and intensity of contact.

Distancing for energy conservation

Social engagement requires varying degrees of investment of physical and emotional energy. In some circumstances, people evaluate the energy invested with the amount of personal return. The return may be reciprocity or it may be the sense of personal satisfaction and positive personal self-regard. People learn to manage their distance to maintain personal energy for causes and engagements that they consider the most rewarding. *Keeping your distance* is used to preserve physical and emotional resources. Some interactions with people and institutions drain personal energy and interfere with goal-directed behavior. *Keeping your distance* strategies are used to minimize the impact of such associations. In some cases, the preservation of energy aspect of *keeping your distance* simply involves the avoidance of people or circumstances that the individual finds annoying or unappealing.

Numerous individuals reported being pleased to be able to use distance education because it allowed *keeping distance* from other students who weren't as motivated or interested in progressing at the same pace. One woman described experiences in face-to-face classrooms that she perceived as a waste of time and effort dealing with extraneous, often minor social issues that were not useful to the learning experience. *Keeping a distance* from problematic people and issues allowed people to be much more efficient with limited time and energy resources. The distance afforded by computer-mediated education was worth any ostensible limitations of the delivery format.

People reported *keeping their distance* from other situations where they felt sympathetic but realized that they just didn't have the skills, resources, or energy to make a difference. A number of respondents spoke of *keeping their distance* from friends or family members that they described as needy. They wanted to help but realized that they would not be able to assist, and no amount of effort made on behalf of the needy individual was going to be effective. In these cases, people specifically used such *keeping your distance* strategies as using an unlisted telephone number, screening phone calls, making excuses, and in some cases, making life choices to avoid frequent contact with relatives. One person moved to another city because a family member was unable to make appropriate choices and was continually looking to be bailed out of jams. Even in the most loving and generous relationships, *keeping your distance* is an important factor. One person defined the optimal distance to live from relatives as close enough for occasional child care but far enough that daily entertaining was not an expectation. *Keeping your distance* allows people to direct their energy in the most effective causes.

Employers are challenged with the issue of *keeping your distance* with respect to their workforce. Workplaces must be organized so that people are in physical proximity to ensure efficient operation. However, putting people together has mixed benefits. In a harmonious workplace, people share ideas and support each other. Much sharing of critical work-related information happens in informal settings, the coffee table, and the water cooler. On the other hand, inevitable squabbles and struggles for power and resources may distract from the company's goal. Companies often feel threatened by collegial relationships because they fear that the workers will make unacceptable collective demands. Many companies spend a great deal of effort making sure that the proper distance is maintained in a workplace. Observations of many modern workplaces demonstrate that while the physical coffee room is gone, the virtual coffee room is provided through in-house instant messaging. Many companies err on the side of greater distance even though they are aware that closer communication may help productivity and profit. Analysis of policy documents and observations of office settings indicates that increasingly, companies embrace communications systems such as web-based social networking because it allows them to avoid workplace information silos but keeps workers on task and physically separated.

The conservation of energy apparent in *keeping your distance* can be seen as an effort to control for social entropy, to avoid the loss of energy associated with the decay of social relationships. As individuals recognize that their involvement in a social exchange is absorbing increasingly large amounts of personal energy and that the situation is degrading and unlikely to improve, they apply strategies that will increase their distance to preserve or redirect personal energy. One woman reflected on leaving a dysfunctional marriage, where a significant concern was creating distance to preserve emotional and psychic energy rather than waste her effort on a no-win scenario.

Moderating the *Keeping your Distance* Response

Keeping your distance acts as an “always on” filter for threatening, problematic, annoying, or bothersome things. The strength of the filter varies from time to time with the intensity of connected variables. The cost of closeness is weighted against benefits, corrected by a *keeping your distance* factor. People have an ideal distance where they feel comfortable but if conditions change, that distance is no longer comfortable and strategies are engaged to adjust distance.

Skin thickness

One respondent described her ability to tolerate conditions as depending on how thick her skin felt on any given day. The determination of “skin thickness” is a highly personalized social algorithm, a set of rules or heuristics that provide adjustable and adaptable solutions to recurring problems. This algorithm is recursive and is comprised of feedback loops where the choices made on one occasion affect future events and allow for the incorporation of unexpected events. The metrics of distance are widely variable for each individual. Each person has different physical criteria for acceptable distance.

People implicitly and explicitly consider contingencies or mitigating factors and compute the relative advantages of physical and emotional proximity to other people, communities, or institutions. Each calculation trades off an ideal personal sphere of control and influence for the benefits of association with others. Some people may tolerate a suboptimal situation for a period of time if a more desirable set of circumstances is likely to emerge. Describing an intolerable work situation, a person mentioned that she could only endure because of the presence of a mentor and a supportive peer group. Without these supports she would have “run away screaming.” Mitigating factors impact the development and deployment of strategies and temper the need to *keep your distance*. The complexity of most interactions requires continual adjustment. Variation in *keeping your distance* is based on life experience and circumstances; effects associated with class, age, gender, and economic status influence *keeping your distance*. Perceived threats that would normally trigger *keeping your distance* may not prompt the same response if mitigating factors are present. The presence of a mentor, a supportive group, an

engaging distraction, will reduce the felt need to react. Mitigating factors can accumulate across contexts to decrease the likelihood of triggering *keeping your distance*.

Decisions guided by *keeping your distance* strategies may be conscious and clearly articulated, but just as often they are unconscious and implicit in action choices. A few cases illustrate the strength of the *keeping your distance* phenomena. A person who has experienced periods of homelessness reported that he was prepared to endure the privations of living on the street to preserve the distance that he felt was necessary from agencies and institutions that threatened his sense of autonomy and independence. Similarly, an elderly person endures considerable inconvenience to remain in his/her own home and preserve the distance s/he feels is necessary for his or her autonomy.

Achieving Optimal Distance

The effect of *keeping your distance* strategies intended to respond to threats to autonomy is that a person feels a sense of self-efficacy in his/her independent goal-directed behavior. Distancing ensures adequate personal latitude to accomplish goals.

When effective, *keeping your distance* strategies give people a feeling of being safe from physical harm or contamination. They feel that they have sufficient control in emotional engagements. They feel that they are free from the arbitrary exercise of authority. They feel as if their energy is being directed in a satisfying way. When *keeping your distance* responses are ineffective or inadequate, people experience renewed or continued discomfort and either increase their distance or move to another mode of distancing. Often the effect of *keeping your distance* strategies alters conditions. These new conditions then require a readjustment of the *keeping your distance* calculus and adoption of additional distancing strategies that increases, maintains, or lessens the distance.

Unintended negative consequences of *keeping your distance* occur in two respects: the failure to develop adequate *keeping your distance* strategies, and an exaggerated *keeping your distance* response. Either situation can be self-limiting, self-defeating and in some cases, clinically significant from the perspective of psychopathology. A person that does not develop an adequate *keeping your distance* response or adequate set of strategies can feel dependent and miserable because he or she is unable to avoid the collateral damage that occurs when s/he is in close association with particular individuals or groups. At the other extreme, a person with an overdeveloped *keeping your distance* strategy set isolates and feels miserable for lack of human contact. In my experience working with people with various emotional disturbances, a commonly observed behavior was an extreme form of distancing: isolation sometimes accompanied by alcohol binging. Often that behavior would attract the attention of social services agencies and result in

unwelcomed intervention.

People vacillate between the two extremes seeking a comfort zone. The consequence of not developing and maintaining *keeping your distance* can be misery one way or the other. Many respondents described these issues in the context of family relationships and in particular the phenomena of delayed adulthood. The popular movie *Failure to Launch* explored the phenomena of people in their 20s still living with their parents in a state of suspended emotional development (Dey, 2006). Failure to launch describes a situation where keeping your distance strategies have failed.

Deferring the *Keeping your Distance* Response

Where the perceived threat is to emotional control, the *keeping your distance* response may involve a physical distance, but may also involve a temporal element. The strategy involves arranging for temporal distance where an individual delays or defers an interaction to put distance between him/herself and a perceived threat to emotional control. Distancing strategies for emotional control that involve intrapsychic elements are experiential in their outcomes. One respondent described creating distance from problematic experiences by “putting them on the high shelf.” The outcome is that a person is able to engage in functional and satisfying relationships.

Overriding the *Keeping your Distance* Tendency

Conflicting internal impulses, usually based on emotional or cognitive elements--fear, loneliness, career considerations, or sexual interest for example-- may cause a person to act against his/her inclination to *keep their distance*. One may consciously tell oneself that one should be warmer, more neighborly, more approachable, but one ignores the *keeping your distance* impulse to his or her regret. An individual working in direct sales reported that he had to “really psych himself up” to sell stuff that he didn’t really believe in to people who didn’t really want to hear from him. In this case he not only had to overcome the tendency of others to maintain distance but also his own tendency to keep his distance. Sales directors call the latter tendency “call reluctance” (Dudley & Goodson, 2007).

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

The theory of *keeping your distance* contributes to the theoretical dialog in the field of online learning. One of the core theories of the field of distance education is Moore’s (1997) theory of transactional distance. This theory posits that a fundamental problem with distance education exists because of the emotional and psychological effects of physical separation between teachers and students.

Transactional distance is seen as resulting in a sense of isolation, feelings of disconnectedness, and a loss of motivation to continue with a course or program. The solution to this identified problem was to design interventions that reduced or eliminated transactional distance. The theory of transactional distance continues to provide a meaningful frame for the critical analysis of online learning (Giossos, 2009).

The theory of *keeping your distance* supports the fundamental premise of Moore's theory in the sense that perceived distance is an important consideration in online learning. However, the theory of *keeping your distance* contests the most often recommended remedy of working to reduce the sense of distance. Because people develop strategies to maintain distance from other people, situations, and institutions, any intervention designed to reduce distance is not necessarily welcome or helpful. Institutions should permit people the maximum amount of autonomy and control by allowing them to keep their distance.

Conclusion

GT analysis revealed a pattern of problem-solving behavior; the theory of *keeping your distance* is an integrated set of concepts referring to the conscious and unconscious strategies that people use to regulate distance, physical and representative, in their everyday lives. Strategies are used to control physical, emotional, and psychological realities and to conserve personal energy in interactions with individuals and/or institutions. For all social interactions, people use an algorithm of engagement intended to maintain optimal distance.

The theory *keeping your distance* fits the data, grabs the attention and imagination, it is highly generalizable and it can be modified to accommodate new data as it emerges (Glaser, 1978). Consistent with previous experience reported with theories generated using this method, additional reformulations of *keeping your distance* will develop as the implications and precepts of the theory are tested against further experience.

The theory of *keeping your distance* provides a theoretical foothold for considerations of the changing notions of distance in the face of new developments in the field of media studies, ICT and social networking. The theory of *keeping your distance* will aid policy-makers and institutional planners in their efforts to design flexible, respectful learning environments that accommodate new realities of a technologically advanced society.

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