

Acehnese Proxemic Behavior: A Public Investigation

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Abstract

There is a public assumption that Indonesian people, particularly Acehnese, do not utilize personal space during interactions. This study investigated the proximity levels used by Acehnese people when communicating with other people. The observation approach was used to collect data. The participants involved in this study were people who were in natural interaction in public places such as park, playground, market, mosque, restaurant, sports field, and beach. The data were pictured and kept anonymous in regards of ethical codes maintained in research. The results show that there are three conditions obtained from this study. First, mostly, Acehnese people use intimate level of proximity, which is less than 0.46 meter eventhough when they are interacting with strangers. However, this condition only applies if the interactions taking place is male-male interactions or female-female interactions. Second, in a condition where the stranger interaction is male-female, the proximity employed by the people is in the level of personal—which is 1.2 meter. Lastly, men maintained farther distance compared to women. In conclusion, the farthest proximity level that Acehnese applied was social level (1.2 m to 3.7 m); yet, the main influencing factor is genders.

Keywords: proxemic behavior, level of proximity, gender interaction, non-verbal interactions, proxemic investigation.

Introduction

Aceh is a province of Indonesian Republic with most of the residents who are friendly people. Common perception that comes to people who come from other countries, especially tourists—is that Indonesian people, particularly Acehnese, do not hesitate to talk to everyone they just met, even if it is a complete stranger from another country. There is an advantage from this condition. Because Acehnese do not keep any certain distance when meeting strangers, it is easier for them to learn the language the strangers use as they get easily intimated and acculturized. However, the negative effect is that people—generally from western countries—consider that Acehnese people are rude for they keep saying “hello” and initiate conversations even at wrong and unexpected moments. As asserted by Hall (1990),

there are differences in western culture and Asian culture; western culture tends to choose spacious area when talking, while Asian tends to get intimate. This spacious area when interacting (verbally or silently) is called *proxemic* as firstly introduced by Edward T. Hall in 1966.

This study considered purposeful since it investigated the levels of proximity used by Acehnese when they are interacting each other. There are four proxemity levels as lined out by Hall (1990), namely intimate, personal, social, and public. Hence, this study is considered important since more people are coming to Aceh, whether for work or tourism purposes. This study is expected to help the visitors to engage effective communication with indigenous people, as well as it is also hoped to provide information for Acehnese that different approach is basically needed when dedicating others with their hospitality. Based on the explanation above, a research question being sought in this study is as formulated in the following: What proximity level is generally used by Acehnese people during interactions? Are there any other influencing factors?

Literature Review

Space while interacting exists in various levels in different cultures. Each culture determines its own way of representing intimacy level between speakers and listeners. Hall (1991: 60) inserts that "space speaks to us just as loudly as words". He further introduced the term *proxemics* to refer to different space level used in different culture during interaction. According to Agnus (2012), there are three areas in proxemics field, they are distance, space, and modes of behavior and perception. However, this study only focused on the use of distance during interaction. Since there are four levels of territory brought in by Hall (1963), below is provided the illustration of the territory radius of each individual.

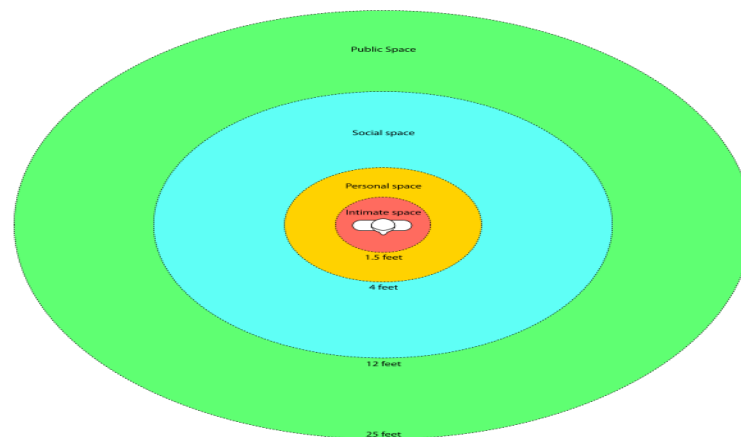


Figure 1. Proxemic Distance (Hall, 1963).

The figure above shows the four areas of territory. The first one is intimate level which is up to 0.46 meter; personal level is between 0.46 meter and 1.2 meter; social level is between 1.2 meter and 3.7 meter; and public level is over 3.7 meter. Hall (1963) further clarifies that intimate space includes touching, whispering, and embracing. People in this zone are close ones such as children and spouse. Then, personal space is usually marked by talking with normal voice, usually with friends and relatives. Social space is marked by talking with normal to rather loud voice. It is usually used during the interactions with acquaintances and unfamiliar people. Lastly, public space is marked with the use of certainly loud voice, sometimes a special device such as microphone and loudspeakers is also put in use. This space is generally attempted in seminars, public lectures, presentations, etc.

Some examples are also provided by Hall (1990) as in the following. The first example is territory in American culture. In public, Americans employ two or three persons in conversations and there is also a distance between one group and another. The way they keep from intruding others is by controlling their voice to be not too loud. However, if they speak loud enough, other people would only pretend they do not hear. Next, in Germany, they consider visual and sound intrusions to their private sphere. This means that if we look at them for no reason in public—or talk loudly—they will likely to get angry. The English, although they are sometimes interchangeable with Americans, these two countries definitely have a great disparity. If American classifies people by space they use, Englishmen employ social status as a way of classifying people's status—especially those who were brought up in middle- and upper-class social status.

Another different perception is as happening in Japan, an Asian country. There is, indeed, no word "privacy" in Japanese. Japanese sees the contrary side of American culture where they have special space for work, for family, bedroom, etc. It is not a problem for the Japanese to sleep close to each other on the floor. However, the concept of privacy does exist in Japan; they prefer to give meaning in arranging objects. Later, the Arabs is considered to have the most intrusive ways in defining privacy. It is the characteristics of the Middle Eastern culture to push and shove people in public, even pinching and touching in public. Most westerners are commonly shocked when visiting Arabs, as the Middle easterners are, too. However, Iranians keep their distance even among themselves when they are in public places (Gharaei & Rafieian, 2013).

In Indonesia, which is also an Asian country, similar perceptions as the Japanese are adopted. In her study, Ningrum (1998) found that intimate and social distance in Indonesia is closer than that settled by Hall (1990). Besides, she also mentioned that there are other factors that influence the distance, namely gender and types of relationship. Furthermore, Prawitasari (2009) adds that the room safety also determines the personal distance of Indonesian people. In addition, Ballendat, et.al (2010) also mention that other factors such as position, identity, movement, and orientation play roles in determining the spatial distance among people around us. From the reviews above, it is resumed that people with different culture, expects other people to act like, or at least, respect the way they behave in their culture. As Eresha, et.al (2013) also support that German and Arab people even want robots to react like their own culture when interacting with them, including in maintaining territorial space in communication.

Research Method

This research employed qualitative approach with observation as the personal identity of each participant is being anonymized. After 30-45 minutes observation, the relationships between participants are generally known, whether they are family members, friends, or strangers. Clark (2006) further clarifies the statement of ethical practice in disguised-observation which implies that the confidentiality and anonymity of research data obtained from the participants must not be exposed for any explicit or implicit pledge, as well as proper method and secure manner should also be implemented. The observation was conducted in a small town Meulaboh Aceh Barat, Indonesia. Eight public places were observed to see the participants' spatial distance in these places, they are: a park, a playground, a market, a hospital, a mosque, a restaurant, a sports field, and a beach. Researchers took pictures of the public who spent time in the places. The researchers did not record their conversation—neither initiated any conversation—as it might have broken the secure manner and could have cause anti-observed behaviour from the participants. As soon as the data were obtained, they were analyzed through data reduction, data display, and data verification (Miles, Huberman, and Saldana, 2013).

Results and Discussion

Below are presented results from the observation. The first picture shown is about a family who were seated in a hospital bench.



Figure 2. Proximity between male-female non strangers.

From the picture above, it can be seen that those people are family members who were waiting in a hospital. The woman sat at the edge of the bench, separated by a little boy between her husband (black shirt). She did not sit directly next to her husband. Meanwhile, the husband sat directly next to man in white shirt. In this situation, the main consideration they seated is gender. Generally, if there is still extra space, men do not sit directly close to women. However, intimate distance which is less than 0.46 m was still applied.

Then, the second situation is provided below where people were waiting in a bank.



Figure 3. Proximity between male-female strangers.

In the figure above, left circle, the woman and the man are neither family members nor acquaintances. They were strangers for each other. The distant level that can be seen is approximately above 0.46 m, but still in personal distance which is 1.2m. In the right circle, both of these women are friends and we can spot them sit closely to each other in the level of intimate (less than 0.46 m). Again, what comes to consideration when sitting in public is gender.

Both situations above are in line with Ningrum (1998) stating that Indonesian people do apply closer levels of proximity but genders and types of relationship always prevail as the influencing factors. Besides, in Aceh, cultural norms as stated by Parker & Leo (2011) are also seen as an influencing factor in determining the interaction distance.

Next, below is provided the proximity level between other female-female non strangers.



Figure 4. Proximity between female-female non-strangers.

In the picture above, there were two nurses seen walked hand in hand. We can see that the distance applied in this situation was intimate distance which is less than 0.46 m with physical contacts. These women are coworkers who work in a hospital. This is somewhat similar to Turkish cultural behavior as urged by Celik (2005) that speaking or standing too far from one another is not comfortable. Another picture shown below poses a proximity distance between two female strangers.



Figure 5. Proximity between female-female strangers.

They did sit next to each other but the distance was in the level of personal which is within 1.2 m. They did not talk during their time waiting in a police station. To explain two situations above (female-female nonstrangers and female-female strangers), the rule by Ningrum (1998) can be applied again. In the situation of female-female nonstrangers, they made physical contacts because the type of relationship they have is intimate. Both of them work in the same place and same profession. Contrarily, in the condition of the female-female strangers, both of them did not have anything in common so that hardly did they start conversations although they sit in personal level of proximity.

After that, below is the distance level among male strangers.



Figure 6. Proximity between male-male strangers.

We can see in the picture above, left circle, where two male strangers were seated. They kept farther distance which is more than 1.2 m, or it is included into social distance (within 3.7 m). In addition, the right circle was provided to show how male-female non strangers kept their distance. These man and woman are spouse but they walked quite distant, which is within personal distance (1.2 m). To this condition, the explanation from Gharaei & Rafieian (2013) about Iranian is understandable where people are most likely to keep their distance in public.



Figure 7. Proximity between male-male non-strangers.

Finally, in the figure above, it can be seen that two non-stranger males were talking to each other. Yet, they did not maintain intimate level of proximity. They talked within the level of personal, which is 1.2 m. In this condition, the room safety may be the case as stated by Prawitasari (2009). It is seen in the picture that although these two men are acquaintances, they could not sit well in a face-to-face condition where they can talk comfortably.



Figure 8. Proximity between female-female non-strangers.

Above is shown another proxemic distance among female-female non-strangers. They are friends who were having lunch in a canteen and we can see them standing within the distance less than 0.46 m, which is intimate distance.



Figure 9. Proximity between male-male non-strangers.

Another proxemic distance is shown by male-male non-strangers as seen in Figure 9 above. These men are also college friends who were seated for lunch in a canteen. Although there is space next to each other, they chose to sit in opposite position. And they keep their distance in personal level, which is within 1.2 m.

To make the results clear and concise, below is provided the table on the participants' proxemic distance:

Table 1. Acehnese proxemic distance.

No	Gender	Relationship	Proxemic distance
1	Male-male	Stranger	Social level (3.7 m)
2	Male-male	Non-stranger	Personal (1.2 m)
3	Female-female	Stranger	Personal (1.2 m)
4	Female-female	Non-stranger	Intimate level (≤ 0.46 m)

From the table above, it is seen that the farthest distance is used by male-male stranger which is within social level (3.7 m), while the closest distance is used by female-female non-strangers which is less than 0.46 m. Besides, the interaction between female-female non-strangers also involved physical contact. As seen in the earlier picture, it was hand-holding.

Conclusions

There are three conclusions that can be drawn from the results and discussion above. Firstly, most Acehnese use intimate to personal level of proximity when interacting, verbally and non verbally. However, this definitely depends on gender (Parkel & Leo, 2012; Ningrum, 1998). Secondly, there is a significant difference between-gender interactions namely male-male strangers, male-male non-strangers, female-female strangers, female-female nonstrangers, male-female strangers, and male-female nonstrangers. Finally, men keep more distance than women. Furthermore, the implication of this study shows that the result can be useful for outsiders who come to Aceh in managing their level of distance among Acehnese people, which profoundly depends on gender as also suggested by Ningrum (1998).

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