

Touch and
relationship
satisfaction in
romantic relationships
psychology essay



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Although touch behaviors have been examined in many different contexts, little research has been done on the gender differences in the expectations of touch behaviors in nonmarital, romantic relationships. Touch has been defined as being an important nonverbal communicator in romantic relationships and plays a vital role in establishing the status and current nature of a relationship. Using the nonverbal expectancy violations theory as well as past research, this work proposes a new avenue of research that has not previously been adequately connected. Specifically, this work proposes the examination of the gender differences in the expectations of touch and how expectancy violations of touch may alter relationship satisfaction for individuals in romantic relationships.

Nonverbal behaviors are essential in establishing and maintaining romantic relationships. They have the power to alter the feelings, perceptions, and emotions towards another individual in significant ways. Guerrero and Floyd (2006) state that, “relationships sometimes suffer when people send conflicting nonverbal messages, express negativity through nonverbal cues, or misinterpret one another’s behaviors” (p. 1-2). Also, if a relational partner is not receiving nonverbal expressions of liking and affection from their significant other, this can cause the partner to feel unvalued and can increase uncertainty about the state of their relationship (Floyd & Burgoon, 1999). Nonverbal cues are, therefore, relied on for attitudinal information in order to understand what a romantic partner is implying and meaning (Le Poire, Duggan, Shepard & Burgoon, 2002). These behaviors are used to show the nature and status of a relationship to one another, as well as others around them.

In romantic relationships, touch is one of the most important displays of affection (Floyd & Burgoon, 1999). This particular nonverbal communicator has been labeled the cue that “ influences the nature and quality of the relationship” (Guerrero & Andersen, 1994, p. 137-138). Couples rely on touch in order to initiate, resume, or end an intimate encounter (Mohen, 1993). Two behaviors that are associated with touch, first kiss and first sex, have been noted as important events for partners to show commitment in their relationship (Manusov, Docan-Morgan, & Harvey, 2008). In addition, evidence has shown that people touch and expect to be touched more in close relationships (Burgoon, Walther, & Baesler, 1992).

Because touch is such an important nonverbal communicator in romantic relationships, it is necessary to examine how touch defines an interpersonal relationship. Are there gender differences in the expected use of touch in romantic relationships? This article intends to shed light on the expectations of touch in romantic relationships and how violations of these expectations can affect relationship satisfaction. This article will extend the current knowledge of the nonverbal expectancy violations model to touch behaviors and relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships.

According to Floyd and Burgoon (1999), in established romantic relationships affectionate behavior should be more expected than it is among strangers. In these types of relationships, two individuals develop person-specific expectancies for their partner (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Nonverbal expectancies are acts that are seen as appropriate, desired, preferred, and most typical. These personal expectancies are based on an individual’s intimate knowledge of their partner, their relational history, and their

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experiences with that person. Attached to nonverbal behaviors are different relational messages, which are the communicative means by which romantic dyads define their interpersonal relationship (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999).

Burgoon and Hale (1984) concluded that there are as many as twelve nonorthogonal relational message dimensions that can be simplified into four categories: intimacy, dominance, composure, and formality. A single nonverbal behavior can have several different relational meanings, however, a few nonverbal behaviors, like touch, have consistently been used to only express liking, affection, and intimacy (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999). The way in which an individual evaluates the behaviors from their partner may have an effect on relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction is an individual's evaluation of a relationship which is based on their attitude and overall happiness in the relationship.

Relational Messages

In association with four relational messages of intimacy, dominance, composure, and formality are sub dimensions of nonverbal involvement. Coker and Burgoon (1987) found nonverbal cues of immediacy, expressivity, altercentrism, conversation management, and relaxation to be applicable to the construct of conversational involvement. To breakdown interpersonal constructs into finer-grained constituents, positivity is also added to the preceding five sub dimensions. Immediacy includes nonverbal behaviors that “ establish a sense of psychological closeness or distance” (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999, p. 108), such as touch and proximity. Expressivity includes vocal variety, facial expressions, or any such behavior that makes a

communication style more animated. Behaviors that signal attentiveness to
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another individual are related to altercentrism, and behaviors of conversation management promote smooth communication. Relaxation includes “ postural asymmetry, absence of adaptor gestures, and absence of nervous vocalizations” (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999, p. 108) and lastly, smiling, nodding, and facial pleasantness are behaviors of positivity (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999).

The relational messages of intimacy, dominance, composure, and formality frame the nonverbal cues that a partner sends. Burgoon and Le Poire (1999) state that these messages make an impact on current and future interpersonal judgments of a romantic partner, including judgments of rapport, likeability, honesty, and power. Relational messages of intimacy include themes of affection, immediacy, trust, receptivity, depth, and similarity or their opposites toward a relational partner. Intimacy is greatly associated with nonverbal cues of positivity, which express messages of warmth, affiliation, and rapport. Dominance is a composite of conversational control, assertiveness, power, and persuasiveness or their opposites, such as submissiveness and modesty. It can be expressed by both highly immediate and nonimmediate behaviors, as well as holding the conversational floor for a longer period of time and frequently interrupting another individual. Composure includes expressions of arousal and tension or relaxation, as well as composure that are tied to the relationship. For greater composure, behaviors of high immediacy, positivity, and relaxation are used. Finally, formality includes maintaining a polite and formal demeanor or allowing casualness into the relationship. Greater formality is expressed through “

nonimmediacy, inexpressivity, nonrelaxation, and absence of positivity” (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999, p. 109).

In a study conducted for better understanding individuals’ perceptions of relational messages, Burgoon and Le Poire (1999) found that higher perceived intimacy was associated with higher immediacy, greater expressivity, greater proxemic involvement, better conversation management, moderate relaxation, and higher positivity. Greater dominance was expressed by higher immediacy, greater expressivity, greater proxemic involvement, more fluent speech, greater relaxation, and greater positivity. Composure was associated with greater immediacy, greater expressivity, greater proxemic involvement, fluent speech, greater relaxation, and higher positivity. Finally, higher formality was conveyed through less immediacy, reduced expressivity, less proxemic involvement, less fluent speech, less relaxation, and less positivity.

Past research suggests that romantic partners expect their interactions with their partners to be more involved and pleasant, and thus the behaviors are more positively valenced (Guerrero & Jones, 2000). So what happens to relationship satisfaction when that expectation is violated? Willis and Briggs (1992) have noted that when only one relational partner engages in touch, the other individual is perceived as being nonintimate and cold. This negative perception of the other individual, which is the result of a nonimmediacy violation, could cause partner satisfaction to decrease.

Comparatively, Burgoon and Hale (1988) found that nonimmediacy violations for friends produced lower ratings on competence, character, sociability, and also produced lower ratings on attractiveness of the other individual. Also, it <https://assignbuster.com/touch-and-relationship-satisfaction-in-romantic-relationships-psychology-essay/>

has been shown that as relational satisfaction decreased, the behaviors are seen as more controllable, stable, and intentional (Manusov, 1990).

Therefore, it is apparent that this could be the same result for individuals in romantic relationships, and that this perception of the other individual could lead to a change in relationship satisfaction.

Nonverbals in Intimate Relationships

Guerrero and Jones (2000) suggest that when behaviors deviate so far from what is expected, they become unacceptable and result in large behavioral changes. These changes lead to substantial arousal change, dislike, and avoidance. Obviously, these behavioral changes in response to a relational partner would be detrimental to maintaining the relationship. In addition, the researchers found that romantic couples generally reciprocate the behaviors of their partners for both increases and decreases in intimacy. Therefore, if a partner is showing behaviors of less intimacy by not using touch, the other partner would use less touch behaviors as well. Overtime, the increase in the use of negative nonverbal behaviors, or the lack of using expected nonverbal behaviors, could alter each partners' relationship satisfaction.

Similar research has been done on touch behaviors in romantic dyads.

However, very few studies have focused on the expectations of touch and how touch expectancy violations affect relationship satisfaction for romantic relationships. Past research has included age differences, contextual differences, and gender differences for touch. Research has also focused on relationship-stage differences, with a focus mainly on marital relationships.

Studies have shown that married couples rely on nonverbal cues when

communicating intimately and sexually. Also, differences in expressing affection between premarital and marital period suggest that affection becomes less physical (Mohen, 1993). However, in serious, dating, and marital relationships, it was found that touch increases as the relationship develops and progresses (Guerrero & Andersen, 1994).

Gender Differences in Nonverbal Communication

Inevitably, various gender differences have been studied in nonverbal communication. Many studies find similar results, but there are mixed findings. Studies have shown that males and females differ in their use of nonverbal behaviors when comforting another individual (Dolin & Booth-Butterfield, 1993). Researchers have shown that women rate items concerning nonverbal communication higher than men, that nonverbal communication is perceived as more important for more long lasting relationships, and that individuals in casual-dating relationships perceive nonverbal behavior as not important (Prinsen & Punyanunt-Cater, 2009). Nguyen et al. (1975) found that unmarried men and women have different reactions to touch, however Hanzal et al (2008) have shown that men and women in marital relationships have comparable reactions to intimate touch. They also found that married women have more positive reactions to intimate touch than married men, and the trend reverses for unmarried couples. Because of the mixed research, it is necessary to take a closer look at the gender differences in the use of and response to touch behaviors in romantic relationships.

Sex differences in the perception, expectancy, and use of touch behaviors could be a main cause for nonverbal expectancy violations and inaccurate decoding of nonverbal cues. Women associated more touch with sexual desire and considered it less pleasant or indicative of warmth and love. Men also associated more touch with sexual desire, but viewed the behavior as more pleasant, playful, and indicative of warmth and love. The fact that both genders hold contradictory views on intimate touch could mean that both genders have differing expectations of touch for one another. This could lead to expectancy violations between the partners, which could alter relationship satisfaction. In fact, Hanzal et al. (2007) suggest that “ it is possible that sex differences in reactions to touch are reflective of differences in feelings about the significant other, or relationship in general” (p. 32).

Decoding Nonverbal Behaviors

Floyd and Burgoon (1999) state that negatively misinterpreted nonverbal behaviors are also valenced negatively. This means that errors in decoding the cues can play a major role in determining how a person perceives his or her romantic relationship. For example, if an individual in a romantic relationship does not hold his partner’s hand as often as he used to, the partner might think he is being distant and cold. The detachment that is now associated with the other’s behavior could cause the partner’s satisfaction to decrease. Carton et al. (1999) found that couples who make errors in decoding certain nonverbal cues reported a less well-being of the relationship.

Relationship Satisfaction

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It is obvious that nonverbal behaviors are important for understanding the actual meaning of a partner's message. The evaluations of these behaviors are linked to relationship satisfaction. Previous studies have shown that individuals in dating relationships are more aware of the nonverbal cues of others (Fichten, Tagalakis, Judd, Wright, & Amsel, 1992). Thus, if individuals are so aware of the nonverbal behaviors of their partners, the way the individual decodes their messages will influence their relationship satisfaction. Manusov et al. (2008) suggested that how positively or negatively one feels about their relationship may influence their evaluation of a behavior. For married couples, studies have shown that accuracy in decoding nonverbal affect was associated with a partner's marital satisfaction (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002). Therefore, when the intended meaning of a message is accurately decoded, then the relationship has a more positive context. Likewise, Koerner and Fitzpatrick (2002) found that high satisfying relationships provide a framework for more accurate understanding and decoding of nonverbal cues. On the other hand, a decrease in relationship satisfaction can affect the way individuals decode nonverbal cues. Noller and Feeney (1994) found that relationship dissatisfaction in marital relationships leads to distorted perceptions of a partner's message.

Relationship Turning Points

Manusov et al. (2008) argue that the ways one person interprets a nonverbal behavior can cause turning points in a relationship. These turning points are a product of an individual's interpretation that may not have occurred if a different analysis of the nonverbal behavior was made. Graham (1997)
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defines turning points as changes that happen in a relationship that “ trigger a reinterpretation of what the relationship means to [the] participants. These new meanings can influence the perceived importance of and justification for continued investment in the relationship” (p. 351). This supports the idea that the decoding nonverbal of cues plays a vital role in establishing the current nature of a relationship. For example, interpreting a nonverbal cue positively could cause a relationship to become more serious and intimate, and thus increase relationship satisfaction. However, if one decodes the cue oppositely, it could possibly send the relationship in the opposite direction. They have also shown that touch is one of the most frequent nonverbal cues that have been reported as triggers for relationship change (Manusov, Docan-Morgan, & Harvey, 2008). This further verifies that touch has a powerful impact on romantic relationships, as well as relationship satisfaction.

Many of their findings reflect how behaviors work to shift an individual’s view of their relationship with another person. Participants were asked to self report on a nonverbal behavior that they felt altered a relationship for them. After coding the entries, the researchers concluded that each participant’s recollected nonverbal behavior altered how they defined and viewed their relationship with the other individual. Their findings show that nonverbal behaviors are capable of altering relationship satisfaction. In addition, the results show that touch is one of the main causes for a perceptual shift of another person, as well as a main cause for relationship change (Manusov, Docan-Morgan, & Harvey, 2008).

Nonverbal Expectancy Violations Theory

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In order to examine the expectations of touch in romantic relationships, the nonverbal expectancy violations theory is applied to this study. The model states that people hold expectations and preferences about the nonverbal behaviors of other individuals. This is especially so in close, interpersonal relationships because of the known idiosyncrasies of the other individual. Based on the knowledge of the individual, a person will anticipate how the other will behave during interactions and will evaluate the other's behaviors. This evaluation, or valence, is the person's approval or disapproval of the other's nonverbal behaviors (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). For example, if a person expects their romantic partner to hold their hand and the partner performs that behavior, then the nonverbal behavior is positively valenced. In addition, the model is used to predict and explain terminal communication consequences.

If the actual (violation) behavior is more positively valenced than the expected behavior(s), a positive violation occurs and should produce more favorable communication outcomes than conforming to the expected (normative) pattern. Conversely, if the actual behavior is more negatively valenced than the expected behavior, a negative violation is said to occur and should yield more negative consequences than conforming to expectations (Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 65).

Violations committed by a well-liked person, such as a relational partner, are upheld to higher standards than behaviors used by a stranger. During interactions with their significant other, romantic couples assume that their partners will act differently and more satisfyingly than how they would

interact with another person. Therefore, if a relational partner avoids using an expected nonverbal behavior, it could cause the other partner to evaluate the behavior as a more serious negative violation. Also, by simply conforming to social norms, an individual may see that their relational partner has also committed a small, negative violation (Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

The accumulated research that has been done on this theory has supported a variety of conclusions. Evidence has supported that interactants will develop expectations about the distancing and immediacy behaviors of others, communicator behaviors and characteristics that contribute to interpersonal rewards mediate communication outcomes, and that violations are arousing and distracting. In addition, rewarding communicators frequently increase the most favorable communication outcomes by violating expectancies, and nonrewarding communicators frequently increase their optimal communication outcomes by conforming to distance expectancies for conversational distance. Finally, for eye gaze, evidence has supported that rewarding communicators achieve greatest attraction, credibility, and endorsement by engaging in nearly continuous gaze or normal gaze, while gaze aversion produces negative consequences (Burgoon & Hale, 1988). The nonverbal expectancy violations theory has also been used in comparison with other theories, such as the interaction adaptation theory (Le Poire & Yoshimura, 1999) and has been extended to immediacy violations and to interactions among strangers and friends (Burgoon & Hale, 1988).

Overall, this review has shown that touch is an important nonverbal communicator in romantic relationships and is essential for displaying one's level of affection. Past research has shown that various gender differences exist in the use of, response to, and the perception of touch behaviors. Research has also found that the misinterpretation of nonverbal behaviors causes a decrease in relationship satisfaction. However, research has mainly focused on married couples and has not focused on the expectations of touch in romantic relationships. The expectancy violations model advocates that when our expectations are met, the other person's behavior is judged positively and when our expectations are not met, the behaviors are judged negatively. Because of this model, the examination of how the violations of the expectations affect an individual's perception of relationship satisfaction is necessary. Logical reasoning would be to address the gender differences in the expectations of touch in romantic relationships as well as its affect on relationship satisfaction because of the past findings. This study will examine how the violations of the expectations affect an individual's perception of relationship satisfaction. The following research questions are posed:

Findings have shown that touch is an important nonverbal communicator in romantic relationships. It is known that various gender differences exist in the use and perception of touch behaviors. However, research has not examined the differences in the expectations of touch in romantic relationships. Because past research has focused mainly on the use of touch in marital relationships, it is necessary to observe the use of touch in dating relationships. The proposed research study will add to our understanding of how expectancy violations can alter relationship satisfaction for individuals in

romantic relationships. Examining the gender differences in the expectations of touch will allow individuals to be more understanding of their partner's behaviors.