TOUCHING BEHAVIOR

Susan Singley

Touching is a nearly universal nonverbal aspect of social exchange between people. Almost everyone touches others when communicating face to face, though the type and meaning of touching interpersonal relations is highly variable. The touching that occurs as part of a greeting between two people, for example, will differ in type and meaning from the touching that occurs alongside prolonged interaction. Additionally, touching in social situations can take on many forms, for instance it can be short like an arm tap (a quick touch and release) or be a touch and hold, such as hand holding or an arm-around type touch. This study was concerned with the differences in the touching behaviors characteristic of short (two minutes or less) interactions in dyads: male-female, male-male and female-female on a college campus.

The study of sex differences in social touching behavior was brought to light by Henley (1973) who found that in public places, men initiated touch with women more than women initiated it with men, and attributed public touching largely to a need to display control and dominance. This research instigated further study in the variable of maintaining social status in interaction, but has been recently criticized by those testing the dominance theory in cross-cultural research.

Females touched males with the same frequency that males touched females in a study that looked at touching behavior in mid-age dyads in the US, though type of touch and age were important variables. Female-female touch significantly exceeded male-male touch in frequency in this study (Hall & Veccia, 1990) a result also found in a study by Stier & Hall (1984). Additionally, male-female dyads did more touching than male-male or female-female dyads, overall. Male touching was most often with the hand, while females initiated more non-hand touching (Hall & Veccia, 1990).

The current study also focused on social touching in dyads. The researchers were interested in different types of social touching and the purpose of the study was to determine what types of touches were most characteristic of male-male dyads, female-female dyads and male-female dyads. Based on the findings of previous research, the researchers predicted that when a male was involved, social touching would involve the predominantly the hands; either handshakes or “high fives”. Another research prediction was that female-female dyads would engage in mainly non-hand touching such as hugs and kisses as opposed to hand touches. Additionally it was predicted that when a dyad included a female, more overall touching would occur than if no female was included.

The naturalistic observation method was used for this study in order to unobtrusively collect data, to ensure that the observed behavior was occurring naturally, and to get full access to any and all touching behavior that might occur. Dyads were observed in the Library Lanai at UH Hilo beginning at 9:45 a.m. and lasting approximately 1.5 hours, on a Wednesday while classes were in session. The four researchers were positioned casually at a picnic table on one end of the Lanai, in order to get a full view of the Lanai area. Observations were made for up to two minutes of an interaction, and if a third individual entered the interaction, it was not used. When an observer spotted two people interacting, the other observers were notified and all four began observing the interaction and took note of the time in order to limit the observation to two minutes. Any touching that occurred in a two minute observation of the dyad was recorded, noting the type of dyad (male-male, male-female or female-female) and exactly what type of touch it was.

Thirty-three total dyads were observed, 11 were male-male, 11 were female-female and 11 were male-female. Five distinct types of touching behaviors were observed: hug, handshake, arm tap, kiss, and foot tap. In some observed dyads, no touching occurred.

The findings were somewhat consistent with the research predictions. First, it was predicted that when a male was involved, touching would be mainly with the hand. Consistent with this prediction and with previous research (Hall & Veccia, 1990), handshakes were the most frequently occurring touch in male-male dyads, constituting 8 of the 9 total touches. In the other dyad that males were present in, the male-female dyad, hugs were the most frequently observed touch, constituting 6 of the 12 total touches.

The second prediction was that when a female was involved, the most common touches would be non-hand touches such as hugging and kissing. The findings were consistent with this prediction. In female-female dyads, the most common touches were hugs, (3 of 9 total touches), and no hand touching occurred at all. In male-female dyads, the most common type of touch was the hug (6). More kisses were observed in male-female dyads (3 kisses) than in female-female dyads (1 kiss).

Thirdly, it was predicted that when a dyad included a female, more touching of all types would occur than if it did not include a female, as supported by Hall & Veccia (1990) and Stier & Hall (1984). This was somewhat supported by the data. The male-female dyads touched the most (12 total touches), while female-female dyads did not touch more than male-male dyads. Instead, both types of same-sex dyads touched equally as much (9 touches).

The absence of any touch occurred most in female-female dyads (6 non touching interactions) occurring more than any particular type of touch. The absence of touch occurred in 3 of the male-male dyads and in 4 of the male-female dyads. Overall, the data were relatively consistent with previous research findings. Male-female dyads touched most, and most often by hugging. Male-male and female-female dyads touched with the same frequency, but male-male interactions were most likely to include a handshake, and female-female interactions were most likely to hug if they did touch, but actually were most likely to not touch. Across all 33 samples, the absence of any touching was most common, as 13 of 33 interactions involved no touching. Hugging was second most common, with 10 of 33 interactions involving a hug. The handshake was third, with 8 of 33 interactions involving a handshake.
EDITOR’S NOTE: This is a research paper using APA style methods that was written for Psychology 214, Research Methodology.

References

