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The effect of the ambiguity level of nonverbal contact on willingness to self-disclose.

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THE EFFECT OF THE AMBIGUITY LEVEL OF
NONVERBAL CONTACT ON
WILLINGNESS TO SELF-DISCLOSE

A Thesis Presented

By

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THE EFFECT OF THE AMBIGUITY LEVEL OF
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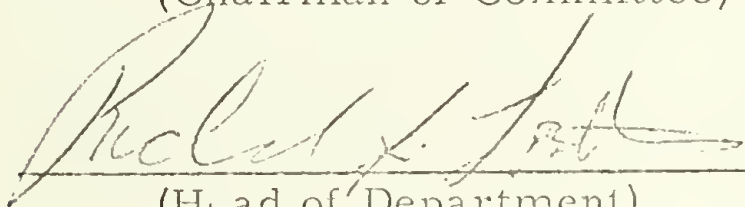
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KAY GUSTAFSON

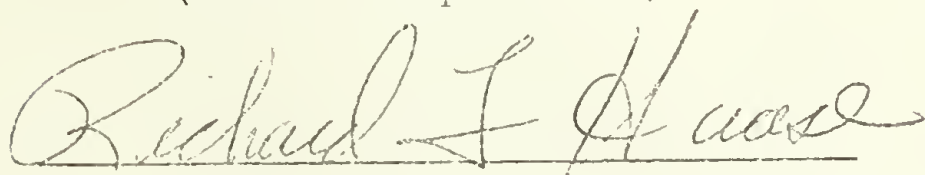
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Proxemics, the study of human use of space, had been used by anthropologists in studying cultural patterns and interactions. Hall (1959, 1966) has investigated the specific norms of interpersonal distance and physical contact of several diverse cultures and found them to be quite different between cultures but quite stable within cultures or at least within subcultures. Other investigators have found stable differences in the personal space (the boundary within which anxiety is produced if another enters), between the sexes, between schizophrenics and normals (Horowitz, Duff & Stratton, 1964) and between violent and nonviolent prisoners (Kinzel, 1969). The effect of different spatial arrangements on the interaction on a hospital ward (Sommer & Ross, 1958), on table conversations (Sommer, 1959, 1965), in group therapy (Winick & Holt, 1961) and in the counseling situation (Haase, 1970) has been investigated.

Implicit within these studies is the idea that physical accessibility is related to psychological or social accessibility. As a relationship develops in this culture, there seems to be a parallel increase in verbal and nonverbal self-disclosure. Mehrabian (1969) in a review of the area concluded that the distance between a communicator and his addressee is a decreasing linear function of the degree of liking of the addressee. As a liking between two people develops more intimate topics are discussed and others are explored more

fully, the normative interpersonal distance shrinks and more touch is allowed.

In their attempts to promote psychological openness and closeness in groups, many current encounter or T group advocates (Gunter, 1968; Schutz, 1967) utilize nonverbal communication as a major component of their technique. Despite the popularity of sensitivity exercises emphasizing touch, however, little research has been done of the effects of physical contact on the development of a relationship.

A small previous study (Gustafson, 1969) looked at the effect of physical contact during the playing of a game, Twister, on the S's willingness to self-disclose to her partner as measured by a questionnaire. Instead of the expected increase in willingness to self-disclose as the result of contact, the opposite was found. The non-contact group showed a greater willingness to self-disclose at all levels of intimacy. Two possible explanations for this result were suggested. One may have been a methodological effect of differential winning in a competitive situation rather than the effect of differential contact; the other is that physical contact may have resulted in a kind of psychological withdrawal or avoidance response related to the ambiguity of the meaning of the touch.

As a relationship develops there seems to be an expectation of self revelation at a certain rate. If one party starts disclosing faster

or at a more intimate level this may imply to the second party an escalation of the relationship for which he is not ready or which he does not intend. He may react by withdrawing to some degree or becoming more cautious. Some evidence in this regard comes from Leuchtmann (1969) who found that with some exceptions whom she called "high receivers", Ss did not choose to associate with a confederate who upon first meeting her disclosed personal information directly to her. A situation similar to that for verbal self-disclosure may exist for expectations of touch, which is a form of nonverbal self-disclosure. In American society, aside from ritualized contacts such as the handshake, touch is most often associated with either intimacy or aggression. With a stranger in a relatively ambiguous setting of a game where the possibility of physical contact is recognized but not focal, there may have been concern about its implying or encouraging either an intimate or antagonistic relationship which the S did not intend.

Felipe and Sommer (1966) who staged interaction sequences involving invasions of personal space under natural conditions, found that when a communicator assumed an inappropriately close position to another person, that person left earlier than he otherwise would have. Similarly in situations such as crowded buses or subways where people are forced into intimate spacial distances, defensive

devices are used to take the real intimacy out of intimate space. The basic tactic is to remain as immobile as possible and to withdraw when any part of the body touches another person (Hall, 1959). In this situation however the S had to actively participate and could not leave at will. Therefore unable to withdraw physically and avoid the contact and still play the game the S may have withdrawn or become more cautious psychologically as a kind of protective or control mechanism. This may be particularly relevant in the early stages of a relationship in which according to Schutz (1958) the inclusion and control dimensions are more salient than the affection dimension which gains more prominence later.

An important variable in the patterns of both verbal self-disclosure and physical distance and contact seems to be the sex of the people involved. In general the norms of this culture allow greater freedom of disclosure both verbal and nonverbal to women. Horowitz et al (1964) found no significant difference between the approach distances of females to a male or a female but using personal comfort as a criterion, males placed greater distances between themselves and a male acquaintance as compared with their distance from a female. Little (1968) found that in a relatively intimate relationship female-female interaction distances were less than male-male interaction distances. Sommer (1959) in a conversational task also found

that females choose to sit closer to a female confederate who was already seated in a particular chair than they would to a male confederate but that this was closer than the males would sit to confederates of either sex. McBride, King & James (1965) who measured S's GSR as the E positioned himself at nine different positions around the S and at three distances in each position, found that as the E came closer the S's GSR level rose but that at one foot from the S when the E was female the GSR was significantly less than when the E was male. Individuals of each sex also responded more to an E of the opposite sex than to an E of the same sex. Garfinkel (1964) reported that the avoidance, bewilderment and embarrassment effects produced by the violation of individual distances were most pronounced among males.

In regard to a new relationship at least, there thus appears to be a tendency for females to maintain smaller interpersonal distances particularly with another female and males to maintain larger interpersonal distances particularly with another male. Middle class American norms allow corresponding degrees of public physical contact (hugging, touching, kissing etc.) with the most allowed between women, less between a woman and a man and least between two men. It thus seems that ambiguous touch may have a stronger effect on males particularly if his partner is also male.

In verbal self-disclosure research it has also been found that females disclose themselves more fully than males and that both sexes are less discriminating in their disclosure to the same sex friend than in disclosure to an opposite sex friend (Jourard & Lasakow, 1958; Pederson & Higbee, 1969; Himmelstein & Lubin, 1966). Jourard & Richman (1963) found that females in addition to disclosing themselves more fully than males are disclosed to by others more than males.

The present study proposed to look at the effects of physical contact on the willingness to self-disclose in a non-competitive situation and to further explore the relationship between the ambiguity level of the meaning of the contact and the willingness to self-disclose. It was hypothesized that in a new relationship where physical distancing (avoidance of physical contact) is not an option, psychological distancing will occur to the degree that the meaning of the contact is ambiguous. The degree of ambiguity here means the degree to which the contact's meaning and implications for the future development of the relationship are not mutually understood through either ritualized social norms or explicit explanation of its purpose in the task. It also seemed clear that both the sex of the S and the sex of the target of his or her disclosure are important variables to consider. From the previous research using self-disclosure question-

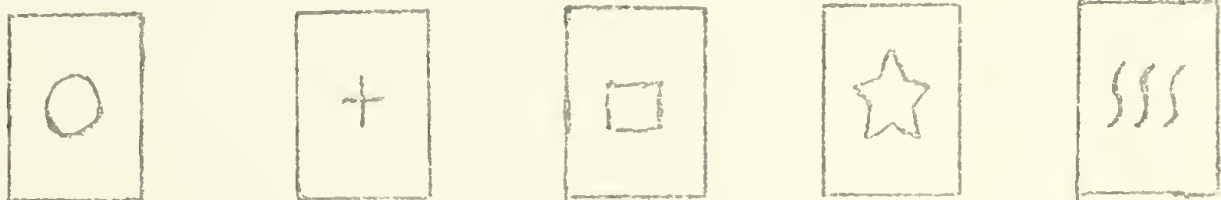
naires it was expected to again find greater disclosure from the females than from the males. Across contact ambiguity levels the effects of the sex of the S were less clear and therefore no predictions were offered.

Method

Subjects. The Ss were 24 male and 24 female undergraduate students at the University of Massachusetts. They were volunteers from psychology courses primarily beyond the introductory course.

Procedure. The experiment was presented as an ESP study. The S was seated at a table which was divided by a partition both above and below the table so he was unable to see his partner. The S was then instructed to select one of 5 designs, "record" his choice by stepping on the corresponding foot switch which he had been told was connected to electronic recording equipment, and attempt to transmit his choice via ESP to a partner behind the partition. After 15 seconds the partner will "record" his choice, and the S selected again. There were 20 trials.

The designs were the 5 used by Rhine (1937) in his ESP studies:



The foot switches were dummies.

The partner, a confederate, was the same person (a female graduate student) each time, however, the Ss were told that they were participating with a member of the opposite sex. This information was accepted as true by the female Ss according to post-experiment questioning.

There were 3 physical contact conditions. The no contact group completed the experiment as outlined above with no physical contact. The remaining 2 groups were told that being in contact with the other person is an important factor in psychic phenomenon. They were asked to put their hands through openings in the table partition and told that contact would be limited to the hands in this study and that their partner could, for example, feel their pulse or other things. For the non-ambiguous contact group, contact was limited to pulse feeling. The ambiguous contact group received both pulse feeling and stroking: 5 sec. pulse feeling, 3-5 strokes with the whole hand and approx. 5 seconds with the hand resting on the Ss hand during each trial.

After 20 trials, the S was given a questionnaire made up of 50 questions which have been rated on intimacy by Taylor & Altman (1966) and asked to indicate (yes or no) if he would answer these questions if they were asked by his partner. A copy of this questionnaire is included in the appendix. The Ss total score is the number answered no. The S was also asked the following questions:

- (1) How willing would you be to participate in a further similar experiment?

0	1	2	3	4	5
very					very
unwilling					willing

- (2) If you were to participate in a further similar experiment would you prefer the same or a different partner?

Results

An analysis of variance of scores on the self-disclosure questionnaire showed no significant effects due to sex ($F(1,42)=3.94, p > .05$) or contact condition ($F(2,42)=.47, p > .05$) and no interaction effects ($F(2,42)=.42, p > .05$). The only effect approaching significance ($p < .10$) was that due to sex with the males showing a slightly greater willingness to self-disclose. The mean scores were 5.71 for males and 9.62 for females where the score is the number of "no" responses out of 50 items. Thus the smaller the number the greater the willingness to self-disclose.

An analysis of variance of the ratings of willingness for further participation also showed no significant effects of sex ($F(1,42)=.07, p > .05$) or contact condition ($F(2,42)=2.84, p > .05$) and no significant interaction of the two variables ($F(2,42)=.36, p > .05$).

Discussion

No real conclusions are possible as a result of this study. The

only result even approaching significance tended in the direction opposite that expected. A consistent finding in the literature has been that of greater self-disclosure from females. Here, however, the males showed a slightly greater willingness to disclose themselves. The reason for this reversal is unclear. Perhaps the females were somewhat more intimidated by the nature of the experiment and apparatus or perhaps a female touching an unknown male is somewhat more culturally acceptable than a male touching an unknown female thus evoking more caution on the part of the female being touched. The evidence seems to favor the first possibility in that females were consistently less willing to disclose themselves even in the group involving no contact.

The lack of a significant effect due to the contact conditions here could indicate that physical contact is not an important influence on the rate of development of feelings of openness and intimacy in a relationship. It seems quite possible however that the effect of touch may vary with the stage of development of the relationship. It was hypothesized that in the early exploratory stages of a relationship, physical contact the meaning of which is not clear and mutually understood and desired would lead to greater psychological caution. Any test of this hypothesis presupposes the existence of the early stages of a relationship. In the present study however there was little sense of personal

contact involved. The S's consciousness of being a subject in an experiment seemed to dominate the situation. The Ss reported a great deal of skepticism about the purpose of the experiment and about the existence of the phenomenon even if the purpose of the experiment could be taken at face value. In response to the question asking if they would prefer the same or a different partner in an additional similar experiment nearly all Ss said it didn't make any difference to them as they had very little feeling for their partner never having seen or spoken to her or him. In many ways the partner was not really a person to them or a person only in the sense that anyone would be the same and therefore any applicability of the results of this experiment to a real interpersonal relationship seems very tenuous. In trying to control the situation to isolate the effects of physical contact, it seems that it has also been taken out of the context that makes it's effects meaningful. The physical contact seems to have been experienced in a way similar to the impersonal touch of an examining physician rather than as a nonverbal communication. The most powerful influence may have been the experience of being in an experiment purporting to be looking at a rather strange area rather than that of relating to another individual in a nonverbal way.

It would seem much preferable to examine the effects of physical contact in other than an experimental setting, i.e., a more sociological, participant observer approach or at least in a more natural

interpersonal situation. The opportunity to measure its importance and effects at several stages in a developing relationship also seems important. The extensive societal norms related to touch suggest that it is an important variable. The problem is finding ways to examine it's role in a meaningful context.

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Appendix A

Although this experiment was done using designs, ESP phenomena in ordinary life usually involve more personal topics. It is thus important to ascertain the types of areas people would be willing to explore and with whom. This is the purpose of the questionnaire before you.

You are NOT expected to give the information listed here, only to indicate if you would give a true answer if asked about each of the following topics by YOUR PARTNER in this experiment. Please mark either yes or no for each statement on the provided answer sheet.

1. Whether or not you have a nickname and what it is.
2. Your feelings about blind dates.
3. How much money you have in the bank.
4. What is more important to you, early marriage or a successful career.
5. Your opinion on the best way to solve racial problems.
6. The description of a person with whom you are or were in love.
7. Clubs or organizations to which you belong or have belonged.
8. Your favorite color.
9. Your feelings about weekly church attendance.
10. Your views on the present U.S. government—president, government, policy, etc.

11. Your personal religious views.
12. Your smoking habits.
13. How much money you owe.
14. Problems you have with sleeping, digestion, allergies, etc.
15. Who you would have (or did) vote for in the last presidential election.
16. Your opinion on whether or not abortion should be legal.
17. How much you spend for your clothes.
18. Whether or not you ever break rules.
19. Whom you like better, your father or mother.
20. Your opinion on marrying for money.
21. What you quarrel about with members of your family.
22. Whether or not you have ever put pleasure above duty.
23. How you feel about telling lies to get out of an uncomfortable situation.
24. The kind of movies that you like to see.
25. Your feelings about whether or not there should be a draft and who should be drafted.
26. Your love life.
27. Your school grades.
28. What you do to attract a member of the opposite sex whom you like.
29. Your highest ambition.
30. What special effort, if any, you make to keep fit, healthy and attractive, e.g. calisthenics, diet etc.

31. Whether or not you have ever let down a friend.
32. The size of your clothing (shoes, etc.)
33. If you have ever wanted a date and could not get it.
34. The most embarrassing situation you have ever been in.
35. Your tastes in clothing.
36. The kind of person you would like to marry.
37. The amount you drink at parties.
38. How you would like to spend your summers.
39. The kind of toothpaste you use.
40. Whether or not you want to have any children when you marry.
41. Whether or not you would marry against the will of your parents.
42. The name of the person with whom you are or have been in love.
43. The amount of sexual freedom you feel women should have.
44. What you dream about most frequently.
45. Techniques you have used to get on "the right side" of a teacher or instructor.
46. Your weight.
47. The number of brothers and sisters you have.
48. Your feelings when you lose a contest or game.
49. Your feelings about standards of sexual behavior before marriage.
50. What you are most afraid of.

