The Effect Dominance has on Touch Avoidance

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Abstract

This paper will give an overview of this informal study conducted on nonverbal dominance and touch avoidance. In this paper it describes what touch avoidance and dominance are defined as, how they can be applied, and measured. Also, provided in this paper is an overview of how the study was conducted with the results of the experiment. The paper also includes the effects that dominance has on touch avoidance in a student-teacher interaction. The hypothesis for this study was not supported. However, a large amount of information was obtained that be used in the future when measuring both touch avoidance and dominance.

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This informal study was conducted to better understand and analyze the relationship between nonverbal dominance and touch avoidance in teacher-student interactions. The purpose of this research is to better understand how a student’s level of touch avoidance toward a teacher will make the teacher be more dominant or submissive. This study is important because when students interact with teachers the interaction should be both productive and informative for both parties.

This study relates to numerous past studies conducted regarding how touch avoidance is perceived as dominance in the workplace, and in interpersonal relationships in general. Though workplace interactions are much different than that of a student-teacher interaction the variables are measured in the same way. The relationship between a teacher and student can be easily related to the relationship between a boss and subordinate coworker. Touch avoidance in the subordinate coworker would make the boss feel more dominant in interactions.

There are both theoretical and practical implications of this study. One theoretical implication of this study was that it should reinforce already existent findings on touch avoidance. Also, it will promote further research on touch avoidance in a classroom context rather than an organizational context or general interpersonal interaction. A practical implication of this study is that as a college student, it shouldn’t be feared upon to see a teacher as dominant. By realizing and better understanding touch avoidance and dominance in a student-teacher interaction, students and teachers both can learn and make these interactions more beneficial for both parties.

The problem proposed in this study is that a student who is high in touch avoidance views the teacher as more dominant. This is a problem because students should look at teachers as the most straightforward and influential way to obtain credible information regarding any matters that deal to that class. If a student views the teacher having a high level of dominance than it may be harder to get on the same level and fully grasp the information wanting to be obtained.

In this study it is important to become more aware of touch avoidance, how it differs across different demographics, and how a high or low level of touch avoidance can be perceived as more dominant or more submissive by other individuals. This is worthy of study because it may benefit students-teacher interactions in the future, and these interactions should be welcome and opened by both students and teachers, not feared upon and wasteful.

Consumers should be interested in this study, especially college students and teachers. When in college there will be lecture classes of several hundred students which is a big change from almost all regular high school classes. With classes of that size, students generally already see the teacher as very dominant because of the number of students being taught in one class session. If touch avoidance and dominance were better understood then it would create more of an equal field between the student and the teacher interactions. Also consumers should be interested in this study because there is not much information available on the relevance of touch avoidance and dominance in a classroom setting. The majority of past research on dominance has been put into an organizational context. Touch avoidance is usually examined with general interpersonal relationships, or in an organizational context. This study will provide further evidence to reinforce what is already available from past experiments as well as spark new ideas for further research and experiments on this subject matter. Finally, touch avoidance and dominance have both been heavily researched and experimented with in the past so results can only provide new material or back up existing findings.

The first chapter in the book, *The Nonverbal Communication Reader,* talks generally about the term nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication can be defined as the messages that are sent without any words in an interaction. This means that for something to be considered nonverbal communication it must possess or display a message. The message may not be intentionally sent in all cases but must be interpreted by a receiver for it to be nonverbal communication (Devito, Hecht, & Guerrero, 2008).

In a chapter from the book, *The Sourcebook of Nonverbal Measures*, on Touch Avoidance it provides very detailed information and the historical overview on the nonverbal measure of touch avoidance. Touch avoidance is defined as a nonverbal predisposition an individual has to either avoid or approach touch in interpersonal relationships. Touch avoidance is measured not by how often an individual actually touches or avoids touch, but by how an individual has an attitude and feels toward touch. It can be more commonly referred to as how open or closed a person is toward touch. The dimensions to use when measuring for touch avoidance are same-sex interactions and opposite-sex interactions. An individual’s touch avoidance is directly related to how they perceive observed touch and actual touch. Age, self esteem, sex, gender, and cultural differences are essential demographics to consider when measuring for touch avoidance among individuals. The actual measure itself as listed in the book claims that touch avoidance is usually higher among men than among women in same-sex touch. Also touch avoidance is higher among women than men in opposite-sex touch (Andersen, 2005).

In the textbook, *The Nonverbal Communication Reader*, the chapters on power and persuasion give all the information needed to fully understand the nonverbal measure of dominance. Dominance is a nonverbal communication style of how individuals are able to make decisions efficiently or inefficiently and can control interactions. Also, dominance goes hand in hand with the relative power an individual has toward others. Nonverbal dominance is closely related to power and status. Power is referred to as the influence one individual has on another. Status generally refers to an individual’s position on where they stand in a level of hierarchy, it is usually associated with the role an individual has within an organization. These terms are very similar, but an individual’s power and status overall displays the level of dominance they obtain. An individual that is viewed as dominant is most likely seen by subordinates as having higher status and power. It is easy to make the connection that the more dominant an individual is the more effective they are in persuading others. An individual’s physical appearance also communicates dominance to others through clothing and physical size. First impressions are made in the organizational context by whether or not the individual’s dress is appropriate and acceptable to the standards within that organization. Outside of the organizational context, individuals that wear a distinctive uniform such as a policeman or security guard, show more legitimacy and are seen as dominant. An individual that is taller in height and larger in overall physical size are seen as more dominant than individuals who are shorter and of smaller size. Other nonverbal cues that show dominance are kinesics, chronemics, and vocalics. Kinesics is how individuals communicate through body movement, facial expressions, posture, and gestures. Vocalics refers to the elements of the voice that are nonverbal, for example the vocal qualities of speech that are rhythm, tempo, pitch, and resonance. Chronemics is how individuals make use of and structure time along with the diverse meanings associated with the time. Chronemics shows dominance greatly in the organizational context because of how time is used by managers and subordinates is very valuable to the organization and should be benefitting it (Andersen, 2008).

A closely related study to this informal study is this one titled, *The Interactive Effects of Touch and Touch Avoidance on Interpersonal Evaluations*. This study was performed in June 1988. The scholars who performed this study analyzed interpersonal attraction and perceived homphily’s interactive effects of touch and touch avoidance. For the participants they used over 200 randomly selected students from a communication class. The scale the students had to fill out was made up of 18 different Likert-type measuring items. From there the scholars then conducted interviews where they randomly either initiated some form of touch or avoided touch at all costs. The scale they used was the Touch Avoidance Measure (TAM). In this study it was concluded that the level of touch avoidance an individual has reflects how they were affected by the touch. This is simply implying that touch avoiders respond negatively to touch from another individual and touch approaches respond more positively to touch from another individual. Though there findings from the study are constant with that of previous text and studies, there is a lot more research that must be done to fully understand how an individual’s touch avoidance is determined. Cultural norms, touch avoidance of the receiver, and gender of the toucher are a few factors that make research on this topic rather difficult (Beatty & Sorensen, 1988).

A study that is also related titled, *Interpersonal Distance, Body Orientation, and Touch: Effects of Culture, Gender, and Age*, supplied very beneficial information on touch avoidance. This study examined how culture, gender, and age effects interpersonal distance, body orientation, and touch. When the researchers examined the effect of culture on touch it backed up that culture plays a large role in touch avoidance. Cultures are said to be contact or non contact cultures in regards to their level of touch avoidance. The results from this study proved that cultures such as Greece and Italy touch more than cultures such as Netherlands and England. This means that when measuring for touch avoidance it important to recognize cultural differences as they have a great effect on it (Brinkman, Jones, & Remland, 1995).

The study titled, *The Measurement of the Construct of Dominance and its Relationship to Nonverbal Behavior*, was conducted in 1977. This study states in detail how dominance came about and was originally measured. With the results of this study, it is important to realize the different nonverbal behaviors that have a direct effect on how an individual’s dominance is viewed. Nonverbal behaviors such as posture, spacing, body lean, and eye contact are behaviors specifically expressed within this study. This study provides further evidence on how difficult it is to measure dominance because of other nonverbal behaviors an individual may possess (Snyder & Sutker, 1977).

A study done in 1978 titled, *The Development and Nature of the Construct Touch Avoidance*, gives a background on touch avoidance and how it can be measured. The study talks very generally about touch avoidance and that it should be measured along two dimensions, same-sex and opposite-sex interactions. The results in this study are accurate, but promote further research because of other nonverbal factors, especially cultural background which make results controversial. The study concludes that culture is has the strongest relationship and impact when measuring for touch avoidance (Andersen & Leibowitz, 1978).

Another study that was conducted in 1983 titled, *Nonverbal Communication and Deception: Differences in Deception Cues Due to Gender and Communicator Dominance*, is closely related to this study. This study conducted by Cody and O’Hair describes how deception can be seen through nonverbal characteristics, such as dominance. Such nonverbal behaviors as rate of speech, eye contact, and how long an individual pauses between statements or opinions are some behaviors that can portray a certain level of dominance in an individual. Their experiment was directed more towards lying as a key factor in deception, but still provides good information on dominance and how it should be measured (Cody & O’Hair, 1983).

An article produced in 2003 titled, *Dominance and Subordinance: A Dynamic and Invisible Phenomenon*, explains dominance and subordinance in the workplace. The authors of this article describe how dominance and subordinance is a phenomenon, in that it is something that is natural to an individual as if a person is born into it. Also in the article is says that a dominant person should always be at ease and if not it is due to the inconvenience of a subordinate. This article gives a different approach to dominance but should be thought of in an organizational context when dealing with people in management (Pierce & Wagner, 2003).

A study titled, *Psychological and Biological Differences in Touch Avoidance*, conducted in 1993 explained how touch avoidance was related to psychological and biological differences in individuals. In the study they used The Touch Avoidance Measure scale, which is used to give individuals a touch avoidance score for same-sex and opposite-sex touch. This scale has been well established for many years and is still used today by nonverbal scholars. The results of this study show that gender is a key factor when measuring touch avoidance, males showed more touch avoidance toward other males and females show less touch avoidance towards other males (Anderson & Martin, 1993).

The variables in this study, touch avoidance and nonverbal dominance, have a very large amount of past research and experiments done with them. There is new information on these variables still showing up in textbooks today, which is why they should still be analyzed. This study will measure the level of touch avoidance in randomly selected college students in the same classroom. The level of touch avoidance will be measured using The Touch Avoidance Measure scale, which has been used for many years in the past to measure touch avoidance. Also, dominance will be measured by using an already existent and credible semantic-differential rating scale, where the participant will score a recent interaction with a teacher. The scale consists of ten sets of behaviors that are opposites and must be chosen from a high degree to a low degree, for example, very dominant to very submissive. This study will show that the higher level of touch avoidance in a student, the more dominant a teacher will be.

**Method**

In this study, quantitative research was used to collect data. This section will outline the participants in the study along with the demographic totals and averages of those participants. Also provided are the variables that were measured in this study along with how these variables were measured. The variables are touch avoidance and dominance.

**Participants**

The participants in this study were forty randomly chosen students from a low level communication class. All of the participants were West Virginia University students. Students in the class were randomly passed a survey and asked to complete it.

In this study 58%(21) of the participants were males and 42%(19) of the participants were females. Of those participants, 48%(19) of them were freshman, 12%(5) of them were sophomores, 20%(8) of them were juniors, 18%(7) of them were seniors, and 2%(1) of them was neither a freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior. The ages of the participants in this study range from 18 to 24. 38%(15) participants were 18 years old, 25%(10) participants were 19 years old, 13%(5) participants were 20 years old, 15%(6)participants were 21 years old, 5%(2) participants were 22 years old, 2%(1) participant was 23 years old, and 2%(1) participant was 24 years old. In this study, participants were also asked to specify what race (ethnicity) they were. Of the participants, 78%(31) of them were white, 7%(3) of them were African American, 10%(4) of them were Latino/Hispanic, and 5%(2) of them were a race other than the choices listed. The last demographic question that participants were asked to specify was their religious affiliation. 2%(1) participant was Protestant Catholic, 35%(14) of the participants were Roman Catholic, 5%(2) of the participants were Evangelical, 2%(1) participant was Jewish, 55%(22) of the participants had a religious affiliation other than the ones listed on the survey. Also under this demographic question there was a choice for Hindu and Muslim, however, none of the participants in this study specified they were affiliated with them.

**Measurement**

**Touch Avoidance.** The scale used to measure touch avoidance in this study is called The Touch Avoidance Measure. This is a scale that is used to measure the level of touch avoidance among individuals. The scale consists of 18 different statements about touching behaviors to same-sex individuals and opposite-sex individuals. An example of a few statements are; Opposite sex friends enjoy it when I touch them, When I see two people of the same sex hugging it revolts me, People shouldn’t be so uptight about touching people of the same sex, and Intimate touching with members of the opposite sex is pleasurable. Those are several statements straight from the scale. Participants were directed to read each statement and indicate the degree to which each statement applies to them by circling a (1) for Strongly Agree, (2) for Agree, (3) for Undecided, (4) for Disagree, and (5) for Strongly Disagree. After this scale is completed, the responses to the statements are coded to same-sex and opposite-sex touch avoidance statements. After splitting up the questions, the responses for each are totaled it gives a TAM 1, which is same-sex touch avoidance score and TAM 2, which is the opposite-sex touch avoidance score for the individual.

**Dominance.** The scale used in this study to measure dominance is a Semantic-Differential Rating Scale. This scale is used to have an individual answer questions about how a teacher behaved during a recent interaction with the individual. The scale consists of two opposite adjectives on each side, with the numbers 1 through 7 in between the adjectives. For example the first line of the scale on the left says, Very dominant and then is followed by the numbers 1 through 7, then followed by Very submissive. The numbers represent the individual’s general impression from the recent interaction with the teacher. This means that by circling 1 the individual has a high degree of the adjective on the left, and circling 7 means the individual has a high degree of the adjective to the right, and 4 meaning neutral. Some other examples of the adjective comparisons are; Very dominant-Very Submissive, Very low status-very high status, very aggressive-Very meek, and Very silent-Very talkative. Once the individual has indicated the degree for each of the adjectives the responses are totaled and coded leaving the individual in one of four categories. The four categories that may result are dominant negative affect, dominant positive affect, submissive positive affect, or submissive negative affect.

**Results**

The higher level of touch avoidance in a student, the more dominant a teacher will be. In this study the hypothesis was not supported. To test the hypothesis a Pearson’s correlation was conducted. The correlation indicated that nonverbal dominance was not significantly related to touch avoidance (r= -0.289, p= 0.070). The significance test was two tailed and showed the results of how related these two variables were related (p value). The small relationship between nonverbal dominance and touch avoidance accounts for 8% variance. This is not a large enough percentage value and therefore my hypothesis was not supported.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to better understand the relationship between nonverbal dominance and touch avoidance, and how they affect a student and teacher during an interaction. In this study, two nonverbal variables were measured and then analyzed to understand the relationship they have on each other. When choosing the nonverbal variable for this study it was important to choose variables that had been previously studied so that there is plenty of evidence to back up the study. Touch avoidance was chosen because it has been experimented with in various studies from the past, and also because college students deal with touch avoidance daily. Touch avoidance is not something that is thought of in daily interpersonal interactions, but can make sense of most interactions when looking back on them. To communication studies scholars and students, touch avoidance should be a familiar term but others may not even realize that there is a term for how accepting or rejecting an individual is toward touch. The other variable examined in this study is nonverbal dominance. Dominance was chosen for this study because it has been experimented with in various studies in the past, and is part of individual’s lives every single day. Generally dominance is related to a work environment or context, meaning a person’s relationship with a boss or coworker. In most cases however dominance exists in close to every interpersonal interaction a person encounters.

In this study a large amount of research on the variables nonverbal dominance and touch avoidance was conducted and analyzed. Once a significant amount of research was conducted, a relationship had to be stated regarding how the two variables affect each other and in what context. This study examined the relationship between touch avoidance and nonverbal dominance in an interaction between a student and teacher. A survey was produced consisting of demographic questions such as age, sex, class rank, ethnicity, and religious affiliation. Also on the survey contained two scales that each measured the two variables being studied. The first scale on the survey was the Touch Avoidance Measure scale. This scale consists of eighteen questions about touch toward same-sex and opposite-sex individuals. The participant ranked each question by whether they strongly agreed, strongly disagreed, or somewhere in between. This scale gives results of the participant’s level of touch avoidance toward same-sex individuals and the level of touch avoidance toward opposite-sex individuals. The next scale on the survey was a semantic-differential rating scale used to measure the level of dominance the student felt the teacher possessed. This scale consists of a list of two opposite adjectives, for example very dominant and very submissive with the numbers one to seven between them. The participant then circled a number representing the overall impression from the interaction, one being very dominant, four being neutral, and seven being very submissive. Then the results showed whether the teacher was seen as dominant or submissive, and had either a positive or negative affect. This survey was completed by forty students that were all in the same low level college communications studies class.

After all the surveys had been completed and collected, they had to be put into code in order to be tested using a Pearson Correlation. A Pearson Correlation is a test that is ran to measure the relationship between two variables, and if that relationship is significant. In this study, the Pearson Correlation showed that the relationship nonverbal dominance had on touch avoidance was not significant. The correlation results showed a weak relationship between the two variables which accounted for 8% variance, which is very low and not considered significant.

The study shows that the hypothesis was rejected. There are a few possible reasons why the hypothesis was not supported. One reason why this study did not turn out as expected could possibly be due to several uncontrollable factors that make any kind of touch difficult to measure such as the level of touch avoidance in the receiver (teacher), the gender of the toucher, and also cultural differences (Beatty & Sorensen, 1988). Cross-cultural touch could be just as influential on both parties touch avoidance as same-sex and opposite-sex touch. Certain cultures are referred to as contact cultures and non contact cultures. Studies have proved that certain cultures like those of Greece and Italy touch more frequently and cultures such as England and Netherlands touch less frequently (Brinkman, Jones, & Remland, 1995). This could have altered the study because the results from the survey showed a wide variety of cultures among the participants. Also nonverbal dominance is likely to be the reason for the hypothesis not being supported. Dominance should be measured on several scales rather than just one. Since the level of dominance varies within different contexts it should be measure on many different nonverbal behaviors as well to make it more accurate. Such nonverbal behaviors as spacing, posture, gestures, eye contact, and body lean also contribute greatly to how dominance is viewed on an individual (Snyder & Sutker, 1977).

This new information can benefit us very much. The information found from these studies is credible and has been previously experimented. The uncontrollable factors of touch avoidance, cross cultural touch, and how numerous nonverbal behaviors directly affect an individual’s level of dominance all prove why touch avoidance and dominance are difficult but possible to measure. These studies all use scales and measures that are credible and the results are available to see within the study, which tells why each one is crucial when measuring these nonverbals both separately and together.

**Limitations**

In this study there were several things that should have been conducted differently. One thing that was wrong with this study was how dominance was measured. The scale that was used was not specific enough to the student-teacher interaction being measured. The Semantic-Differential Rating Scale that I used was too general. The study should have used a scale that was more specific in determining a level of dominance for an individual. Another thing that should have been done differently in this study was how the participants were selected and used in the study. If this study was designed to measure how touch avoidance affects dominance in a specific group of people, the results would have been clearer and more significant. For example, if instead of just using students-teacher interactions in general, using only same-sex or only opposite-sex interactions would have narrowed down the results drastically. By narrowing this down it would have created much more specific findings rather than not being able to determine between the interactions as same-sex or opposite-sex interactions. Also, if the all the participants in the study would have had the same type of student-teacher interaction it would have been better. If there was a staged interaction with the same teacher who acted the exact same toward each student individually it would have made the results of the surveys more accurate.

**Future Research**

For future studies there are numerous nonverbal behaviors and variables that can be researched. One variable that would be very beneficial to look at when measuring for touch avoidance is culture. Research has shown that certain cultures are more open and accepted to initiate and welcome touch. In contrast there are also cultures that are more opposed and unwelcoming toward touch. It would be interesting to have a study on how touch avoidance in Americans is either more or less than Italians. Culture in general is something that should be studied further because more and more minorities are in the United States each year looking to find jobs.

A nonverbal behavior that would be worth researching with nonverbal dominance is eye contact. In an organizational context researchers could study how more or less eye contact from a boss makes them more or less dominant to their subordinates. It would not be difficult to find research on this topic because the majority of the past experiments dealing with nonverbal dominance are all directly related to the organizational context.

One more study that would be interesting to research with touch avoidance and dominance is how it can relate to a romantic relationship. In dating couples, if the man is more touch avoidant would that make him more dominant? This study would provide very accurate results because it would need to have participants that are involved in a romantic relationship and not just any individual willing to participate in a study.

In conclusion, even though the hypothesis was not supported there was still beneficial information obtained. This study showed how difficult touch avoidance is to measure because there are so many demographics and other variables that can easily disrupt the results. The nonverbal variables of dominance and touch avoidance were proved to not have a strong relationship on one another. Nonverbal behaviors such as eye contact, posture, and gestures have a large impact on how dominance is portrayed on an individual. Culture is a key nonverbal to further research and experiment when attempting to measure touch avoidance. When experimenting with these variables, the more specific the results a researcher hopes to obtain the more successful the researcher should be with the experiment.

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