Nonverbal Immediacies: The Benefits of Nonverbal Immediacy Behaviors to Intimate Relationships

Gabrielle Gonzalez
University of Texas at San Antonio

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine if couples that are in longer relationships express nonverbal immediacy behaviors just as often as couples that are in shorter relationships do. Evidence of prior research regarding communication in romantic relationships discusses topics such as types of nonverbal immediacy behaviors, their effect on a relationship, and why they are detrimental in order for a relationship to blossom. A survey was given to test the hypothesis that couples who have been in a relationship longer are less likely to practice nonverbal immediacies to maintain a relationship compared to couples who have not been together as long. Respondents were divided into two categories, long-term and short-term relationships, and asked about the frequency of their usage of nonverbal immediacy behaviors with their partners. The major finding from this study was that couples in longer relationships do not express nonverbal immediacy behaviors as often as couples in shorter relationships do.

Keywords: nonverbal communication, intimate relationships, immediacy behaviors

Introduction

Communication is a vital component of everyday life. There are two main types of communication: verbal and nonverbal. Nonverbal behaviors include but are not limited to touch, eye contact, use of space, smiling, and facial expression. They become immediacy behaviors when we are in an intimate or romantic relationship and use them to let our partner know that we love and care for them, and they reciprocate. Over time, however we may get "comfortable" in our relationships, thus diminishing the effort we once made to communicate to our partner this love and care. This paper will examine types of communication, the five love languages and how they affect relationship satisfaction, as well as types of immediacy behaviors and how they affect intimate relationships. Following the Review of Literature, the method of survey development and analysis will be further explained, in addition to the results and conclusion.

Review of Literature

Regarding the classification of types of communication, Mandal (2014) identifies three categories: verbal-vocal, nonverbal-vocal, and nonverbal-nonvocal. Mandal focuses on nonverbal communication and its importance regarding social interaction. This includes body language, for example, as well as physical contact, appearance, eye contact, and more. Furthermore, nonverbal phenomena are based off the sensory channels such as seeing, hearing, smelling, and touching. His article mentions that nonverbal phenomena are the most important regarding interpersonal communication. Some examples of gestures that illustrate this are handshakes, bowing, and smiling to greet or farewell. The article also goes on to describe how body language illustrates one's emotions. Lastly, it states that nonverbal communication shows the evolution from animals to humans. We can see that nonverbal communication is a part of our daily lives and is essential to aiding us in communicating in both romantic and non-romantic relationships.

One of the most famous surveys done was that of Chapman's Love Language study. He was able to pave the way for Nichols (2018) and other communication researchers to dig deeper on the subject of our preferences to giving and receiving love in any relationship. Nichols (2018) and her co-contributors did a study by giving couples a questionnaire to discover their own love language, followed by a discussion on activities associated with each language and how relationships can be strengthened when individuals speak the love language of their partner. There was a "booster group" that was given a book following the discussion in addition to weekly reminders and tips to practice the languages over a 5-week period, as well as a "no booster group" that was not given a book or weekly reminders. During the sixth week, they were summoned back for results that showed that participants in the booster group improved in partner empathy and perspective taking. Findings also revealed that participants learned how to communicate better with their partners after taking the assessment and found their relationship to be strengthened.

In a different study, Bunt and Hazelwood (2017) hypothesized that couples with love languages that were aligned would report higher relationship satisfaction. Findings showed that relationship satisfaction was more dependent on self-regulatory behaviors. Essentially, these are behaviors an individual engages in

to guide their activities over time. Hence, a partner would self-regulate their preferred means of expressing love by a more receptive approach to their partner. This study found that self-regulation proved more beneficial to couples in romantic relationships. Case in point being that if one consciously puts effort into meeting their partner halfway or seeks to compromise for the benefit of the relationship, the relationship will succeed.

One common nonverbal immediacy is empathy, being able to understand the feelings of your romantic partner. Dijkstra, Barelds, Groothof and Van Bruggen (2014) discuss the role of empathy in intimate relationships and how it affects the quality of a relationship. Their article states that empathy forms a key aspect of emotional support, thus making it a strong point for relationship satisfaction. When a partner uses empathy, their significant other feels understood and cared for. Additionally, positive illusions play a key role in intimate relationships. This is because when an individual views their partner's empathy level more positively than their partner does themself, their relationship is statistically more likely to blossom.

Empathy can be shown in many ways, however, one we may not think of right away is simply listening. Floyd (2014) states that empathic listening is a great display of affection. This is because when we choose to listen to someone, we offer our time, our psychological presence, our cognitive attention, and our emotional response, all of which are ultimately temporary. The author claims that humans not only need to be loved, but they also need to be shown that they are loved. Floyd also mentions that nonverbal immediacy connotes a kind of psychological closeness to others. This includes smiling, eye contact, close proximity, open body posture, and use

of tone when speaking. These behaviors are nearly effortless and can prove detrimental in strengthening relationships.

Another nonverbal immediacy one may not immediately expect to be useful is expression of gratitude. Gordon (2012) and his co-authors discuss the correlation between gratitude and relationship satisfaction in this article. They found that people who feel more appreciated by their partners are more appreciative of their partners, are more responsive to their partner's needs, and are more committed, therefore likely to stay in their relationship over time. Findings from this study show that gratitude is important for the success of an intimate relationship. It is necessary for both sides, however, to be grateful in order for the relationship to truly blossom.

Eye contact is a nonverbal communicator that shows our partner we are engaged. Jarick, Laidlaw, Nasiopoulos, and Kingstone (2016) state that eye contact can both engage attention and increase arousal in an individual. Three different gaze trials were performed, and results showed that participants produced significantly longer time-estimates when engaged in eye contact, rather than looking at someone's profile or baseline. There is no doubt that one's ability to estimate time intervals is important for many cognitive, motor, and social behaviors. Eye contact requires resources and an individual's attention, thus making it intentional when one wants to approach someone.

Use of space is on the list of nonverbal communicators that lets someone know how we feel about them. Vacharkulksemsuk, Reit, Khambatta, Eastwick, Finkel, and Carney (2016) found in two field studies that "postural expansiveness" makes others more romantically appealing. These authors also determined that nonverbal behaviors

associated with long-term romantic partners include smiling, laughter, head nods, gestures, and leaning forward. The three main conclusions found in these studies were that: (1) an expansive body posture increases romantic attraction vs. a contractive one, (2) this is due to the fact that expansiveness exerts dominance and openness, and (3) these results hold true for both females and males, with males enjoying an advantage from expansive posture more than females.

Most of these behaviors are common in relationships that are not threatened in any way, but what about when a relationship *is* threatened? Peterson and DeHart (2013) claim that in response to a relationship threat, implicit self-esteem increases and therefore regulates connection. Additionally, this process is moderated by perceptions of an individual's commitment. In a study, while faced with a relationship threat, participants that had higher self-esteem appeared to be engaging in more positive nonverbal behaviors when they perceived their partner to be more committed.

So which behaviors are the most helpful in improving romantic relationships? Docan-Morgan, Manusov, and Harvey (2013) reported that the most common nonverbal behaviors that were transformative to individuals in a relationship were: facial expressions, eye behavior, touch, and the use of personal space. The use of silence, gestures, time, and attire were also secondary to these. Nonverbal messages are important because they can be a means for showing affection, expressing emotions, and aid in relationship maintenance and satisfaction. Vocal cues were found to be related to negative experiences, while touch was labeled in a more positive manner. Overall, eye behaviors were consistently a part of events that changed perception of a partner.

Throughout the research done for these various studies, scholars have chosen well rounded samples of both couples who are married and who are not. However, when completing research, one must consider the role that relationship length has in this study. For example, a couple may be more likely to practice nonverbal immediacies after just getting married, or maybe they have been married for 15 years and feel as if there's room for improvement. Time is essential when considering relationship strength. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H_1 Couples who have been in a relationship longer are less likely to practice nonverbal immediacies to maintain a relationship compared to couples who have not been together as long.

Methods

To test the hypothesis, a convenience sample of adults who are in exclusive intimate relationships was surveyed about their nonverbal immediacy behaviors in their relationships. The sample consisted of adults ranging in age from 19 to 74, with a mean age of 35 (*sd*= 14). Of the 123 participants, 67% (n=82) were female, 32% were male (n= 39), and .16% (n=2) identified as nonbinary. The shortest relationship length was 2 months (0.17 years), the longest relationship length was 57 years, and the mean length was 10 years (*sd*= 10.6 years). Regarding relationship status, 39.80% (n=49) were dating, 9.80% (n=12) were engaged, and 50.40% (n=62) were married. Lastly, 75.60% (n=93) were cohabiting with their partner while 24.40% (n=30) were not cohabiting with their partner. Table 1 below shows the ethnic characteristics of the study subjects.

Table 1
Ethnic Characteristics of Nonverbal Immediacies Study Subjects

Ethnicity	%	N
European American	35.15%	42
Latin American	48.78%	60
African American	4.88%	6
Asian American	4.07%	5
Other	8.13%	10
Total	100%	123

Subjects were given a survey with 23 questions. Six of the questions asked subjects to self-identify gender and other demographic characteristics listed above. The remaining 17 questions measured the various aspects of the dependent variable through self-reported usage of nonverbal immediacy behaviors in a romantic relationship. The specific nonverbal behaviors examined were eye contact, body language, physical touch, empathic listening, use of space, quality time, and gratitude.

Bunt and Hazelwood (2017) determined that relationship satisfaction was more dependent on self-regulatory behaviors, therefore couples are happier when they self-regulate their preferred means of expressing love by a more receptive approach to their partner. Hence, there were two questions regarding how comfortable the subject was when knowing their own love language or their partner's. Lastly, subjects ranked the perceived empathy of their partner, relationship quality, and relationship confidence (in a 10-year period). These directly affect relationship satisfaction due to the subject's point of view thus far in their relationship.

Each of these questions developed to measure the usage of nonverbal immediacy behaviors in a relationship used a Likert-type scale where 1 equals strongly disagree and 5 equals strongly agree. Measuring a subject's partner's nonverbal behavior, a subject's empathic listening, and dominance preference utilize mutually exclusive terms that subjects select. Relationship quality was measured on a scale from 1-5 with 1 being poor and 5 being extremely satisfactory. Relationship confidence was measured from 1-5 with 1 being not confident at all and 5 being completely certain the relationship would still exist 10 years from now. Additionally, perceived physical health was measured on a scale from 1-5 with 1 being never sick and 5 being always sick. This was to determine if there was a relationship between physical health and perceived relationship quality.

Results

Overall, the results supported the hypothesis that couples who have been in a relationship longer are less likely to practice nonverbal immediacies to maintain a relationship compared to couples who have not been together as long. On average, couples who have been together for under 10 years (N= 81, *M=4.05, sd=.52*) practice nonverbal immediacy behaviors more often than couples who have been together for over 10 years (N=42, *M=3.86, sd=.41*), *t(121)= 2.098, p=.038, w^2=.027*. The average relationship length for the entire sample was 10.20 years (*sd* = 11.11). Contrary to what Nichols (2018) and her co-contributors determined, there appeared to be no statistical relevance between

knowledge of love language and relationship quality.

Additionally, average relationship quality was compared to both long term and short-term relationships. On average, there was no relationship between relationship length and relationship quality. When determining if there was a statistically significant effect of gender on perceived

relationship quality, there was none. One-Way Analysis of Variance revealed a statistically significant effect of relationship status on average use of nonverbal immediacy behaviors, $F(2,120) = 5.33$, $p=.006$, $n^2=082$. Table 2 below describes the differences between groups based on relationship status.

Table 2

Comparison of subject's use of nonverbal immediacy behaviors based on relationship status

Relationship Status	N		Usage of nonverbal immediacy behaviors	
		M	*sd*	*S.E.*
Dating	49	4.15	.49	.07
Engaged	12	3.99	.41	.12
Married	62	3.86	.46	.06
Total	123	3.99	.49	.04

Post hoc tests with Bonferroni adjustment revealed that significant differences existed between married and dating couples ($M_{diff}=.296$, $p=.004$), but not between engaged and dating or engaged and married couples.

Lastly, a paired samples test was done to determine if relationship quality was affected by display of gratitude. Table 3 below shows that relationship quality ($M=4.2$, $sd= .67$) is significantly affected by expression of gratitude ($M=3.8$, $sd= .64$) with $t(122) = -5.478$, $p<.001$, $w^2=.190$.

Table 3

Subject's reported relationship quality due to expression of gratitude

	N	*M*	*sd*	*S.E.*
Gratitude	123	3.8	.64	.06
Relationship Status	123	4.2	.67	.06

Conclusion

These results suggest that couples in short term relationships are more likely to actively maintain their relationship by practicing nonverbal immediacy behaviors compared to couples in long term relationships. Results also show that couples who are dating were shown to have the most usage of nonverbal immediacies compared to couples who were engaged and married. These findings suggest that "young love" or "the honeymoon phase" may actually have some truth to them. While nonverbal immediacy behaviors are not limited to eye contact, body language, physical touch, empathic listening, use of space, and quality time, these are the most common. Gratitude and perceived empathy were also taken into consideration when determining relationship quality. Docan-Morgan, Manusov, and Harvey (2013) reported that the most common nonverbal behaviors that were transformative to individuals in a relationship were: facial expressions, eye behavior, touch, and the use of personal space. Additionally, the results suggest that there is no relationship between knowledge of love language and reported relationship quality. This may be due to subjects being more confident in their knowledge of their own love language as well as the love language of their partner, as well as reporting higher (or lower) relationship quality than their relationship actually is. Lastly, the results suggest that expression of gratitude proves beneficial to a relationship. As Gordon (2012) and his co-authors stated, statistically, people who feel more appreciated by their partners are more appreciative of their partners, are more responsive to their partner's needs, and are more committed, therefore likely to stay in their relationship over time. This directly affects the relationship between perceived relationship quality and relationship length.

Although the test results stated there was no significant relationship between the two, this could be due to negligent reporting of perceived relationship quality or even negligent reporting of frequency of expression of gratitude.

These findings should be understood within the context of limitations of this study. While the sample population was more sizable than expected, they were only tested for usage of nonverbal immediacy behaviors. As earlier studies suggested, relationship status may play a large role in the reason for usage of nonverbal immediacy behaviors, as well as relationship quality and satisfaction. While relationship length is objective, measurement for usage of nonverbal immediacy behaviors and relationship quality and satisfaction are subjective, leaving room for interpretation or embellishment from the survey participant. Additionally, the study was based on particular nonverbal immediacy behaviors, however they are not limited to only those that were studied. Further study may be required to generalize about expectations regarding the usage of nonverbal immediacy behaviors throughout the duration of a long vs short relationship and the outcomes of violations of those expectations.

Again, relationship length is quantitative while usage of nonverbal immediacy behaviors as well as relationship quality and satisfaction are qualitative. When doing such research, the researcher must begin with the perspective that survey participants may embellish the truth or have a skewed point of view. Odds are that subjects perceived their own behaviors to be more frequent than they actually are, or subjects may have had a lack of knowledge of the information being studied. Further studies might experiment couples blindly so that the data retrieved is objective rather

than subjective regarding usage of nonverbal
immediacy behaviors.

Works Cited

Bunt, S., & Hazelwood, Z. (2017). Walking the walk, talking the talk: Love languages, self-regulation, and relationship satisfaction. *Personal Relationships, 24*(2), 280–290.

Dijkstra, P., Barelds, D., Groothof, H., & Van Bruggen, M. (2014). Empathy in intimate relationships: The role of positive illusions. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 55(5), 477–482.

Floyd, K. (2014). Empathic Listening as an Expression of Interpersonal Affection. *International Journal of Listening*, 28(1), 1–12.

Gordon, A., Impett, E., Kogan, A., Oveis, C., Keltner, D., & Gordon, A. (2012). To have and to hold: gratitude promotes relationship maintenance in intimate bonds. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 103(2), 257–274.

Jarick, M., Laidlaw, K., Nasiopoulos, E., & Kingstone, A. (2016). Eye contact affects attention more than arousal as revealed by prospective time estimation. *Attention, Perception, & Psychophysics,* 78(5), 1302–1307.

Longua Peterson, J., & Dehart, T. (2013). Regulating connection: Implicit self-esteem predicts positive non-verbal behavior during romantic relationship-threat. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 49(1), 99–105.

Mandal, F. (2014). Nonverbal Communication in Humans. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 24(4), 417–421.

Nichols, N., Riffe, J., Kaczor, C., Cook, A.,Crum, G., Hoover, A., Smith, R. (2018). The Five Love Languages Program: An exploratory investigation points to improvements in relationship functioning. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension, 6*(3), 40–58.

Tony Docan-Morgan, Valerie Manusov, & Jessica Harvey. (2013). When a Small Thing Means so Much: Nonverbal Cues as Turning Points in Relationships. *Interpersona: An International Journal on Personal Relationships*, 7(1), 110–124.

Vacharkulksemsuk, T., Reit, E., Khambatta, P., Eastwick, P., Finkel, E., Carney, D. (2016). Dominant, open nonverbal displays are attractive at zero-acquaintance. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 113(15), 4009–4014.

Appendix

Nonverbal Immediacies Survey

The purpose of this survey is to investigate usage of nonverbal immediacies in exclusive intimate relationships. Please answer all of the following questions.

A. Please select which term identifies your gender.
    Female   Male   Other

B. Please select the term that identifies your ethnicity.
    European-American   Latin-American African-American   Asian-American
    Other

C. What is your age in years? _____

D. Please select your relationship status.
    Dating   Engaged   Married

E. What is your relationship length? (In years, but if not applicable, months) _____

F. Please select which best describes your living situation.
    I am cohabiting with my partner
        I am not cohabiting with my partner

Instructions: Please choose the appropriate number for each statement where 1 equals Strongly Disagree and 5 equals Strongly Agree.

1. When I am telling my partner something I am very upset or excited about, it is important they are looking at me when I am talking to them.
    Strongly Disagree   1   2
                3   4   5
                Strongly Agree

2. When my partner is turned away from me when I am talking to them, I assume they don't care about what I have to say.
    Strongly Disagree   1   2
                3   4   5
                Strongly Agree

3. I would consider myself someone who values physical touch.
    Strongly Disagree   1   2
                3   4   5
                Strongly Agree

4. I always make an effort to let my partner know I am listening to them when they are talking to me.
    Strongly Disagree   1   2
                3   4   5
                Strongly Agree

5. It is important to be within close proximity to my partner when we are in public.
    Strongly Disagree   1   2
                3   4   5
                Strongly Agree

6. I make an effort to let my partner know I am grateful for the things they do for me.
    Strongly Disagree   1   2
                3   4   5
                Strongly Agree

7. My partner and I actively make an effort to go on dates or spend quality time together.
    Strongly Disagree   1   2
                3   4   5
                Strongly Agree

Instructions: Please select the most appropriate answer.

8. I first notice my partner is upset by their:
    Vocal tone   Body language
            Facial expression   Use of space (i.e. distance)

Gary Chapman's (1992) Love Languages model states there are five common ways we best give and receive love. They are: words of affirmation, acts of service, receiving gifts, quality time, and physical touch.

9. I am confident I know how I best receive love.
   Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

10. I am confident I know how my partner best receives love.
    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

11. When I tell my partner my problems I:
    Want them to help me come up with a solution   Just want to vent

12. In my relationship, I would rather:
    My partner make the decisions
    I make the decisions

13. When my partner does something for me, I feel like I have to do something in return for them.
    Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

14. I consider my partner to be an empathetic person.

Strongly Disagree   1   2   3   4   5   Strongly Agree

15. How would you rate the overall quality of your relationship on a scale from 1 to 5? **With 1 being poor and 5 being extremely satisfactory?**
    Poor   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely Satisfactory

16. On a scale from 1 to 5 how confident are you that you will remain in your current relationship 10 years from now? **With 1 being not confident at all and 5 being completely certain?**
    Not confident at all   1   2   3   4   5   Completely certain

17. On a scale from 1 to 5, **with 1 being never and 5 being always**, how often do you fall ill or become sick?
    Never 1   2   3   4   5   Always

Thank you for your participation!