

## Evaluative Reaction to Interpersonal Touch in a Counseling Interview

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A counseling analogue study investigated the effects of the use of touch gestures by counselors on client evaluative responses to the counseling experience. Specifically, a 2 (touch vs. no touch)  $\times$  2 (male vs. female client)  $\times$  2 (male vs. female counselor) between-subjects design was used. Results indicate that clients who were touched evaluated the counseling experience more positively than no-touch control subjects. However, the magnitude of the effect of touch was affected by the sex composition of the counseling dyad, with stronger effects occurring when clients were touched by an opposite-sex counselor. The results are discussed in terms of conceptual implications and with respect to applied relevance for therapeutic practice and the training of counselors.

Nonverbal behaviors are receiving increased attention from researchers interested in context variables that may influence a client's progress in counseling. Readers of professional journals encounter a growing number of theoretical (e.g., Argyle & Dean, 1965; Patterson, 1976) and empirical attempts to explain the way nonverbal gestures are interpreted and to predict how such behaviors may affect the counseling process (e.g., Hill & Gormally, 1977; Tepper & Haase, 1978). Within this literature, certain nonverbal modalities (e.g., eye contact) have been focused upon with some regularity, while others have been relatively neglected (e.g., tactile contact).

It is surprising that touch, a powerful nonverbal stimulus, has rarely been studied in the counseling context. At present, we know little about how tactile contact may affect the feelings and behavior of clients. The lack of research may stem partially from ambivalent opinions concerning the utility of touch in counseling. Although current humanistic models (e.g., Jourard, 1968; Rogers, 1942) assume that some forms of touch may facilitate the development of

openness and sharing, in the traditional psychoanalytic perspective touch has been designated as taboo (e.g., Wolberg, 1967). These contrasting views cannot presently be resolved because of the lack of empirical evidence demonstrating the therapeutic consequences of tactile gestures.

Extant research on the effects of physical contact has focused primarily on the responses of animals and human infants (e.g., Harlow, 1971; Spitz, 1946), and in studies that have explored reactions to touch among human adults, the contexts bear little resemblance to the counseling setting. Nevertheless, the latter studies suggest that for adults the effects of touch may be either positive or negative. For example, Kleinke (1977) found that touch increased compliance behavior, and Fisher, Rytting, and Heslin (1976) observed that females who were touched experienced more positive affective and evaluative reactions than no-touch controls. However, Walker (1971) reported that communication by means of touch made subjects feel anxious, and Henley (1973) observed that touch may be perceived as highlighting the lower status of the recipient. Further, the same touch may be experienced positively by one sex and negatively by the other (Fisher et al., 1976; Nguyen, Heslin, & Nguyen, 1975; Whitcher & Fisher, 1979).

The few studies that have examined the

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effects of tactile contact in settings more analogous to counseling also indicate that depending on conditions, the effect of touch may be positive or negative. For example, Aguilera (1967) investigated physical contact between patients and staff in a psychiatric hospital and found that touching elicited approach behaviors from patients and improved their attitudes toward the staff. However, a recent study (Whitcher & Fisher, 1979) demonstrated sex differences in affective responses to therapeutic touch in a hospital setting. Touch between nurses and surgical patients precipitated positive responses in females but negative reactions in males. Finally, in the only study directly relevant to counseling on an outpatient basis, Pattison (1973) examined the effect of touch on client attitude and depth of self-exploration in a counseling interaction. The results revealed that females who were touched engaged in more self-disclosure than control subjects, but no significant relationship was found between touch and client perception of the counseling experience.

A review of the variable reactions to touch observed in past research suggests that whether tactile stimulation is experienced positively or negatively depends on the meaning and evaluation inferred by the recipient. Touching a person can mean many things, for example, an expression of caring, a desire for intimacy, sexual attraction, or dominance. Further, any of these messages can be expected to elicit a negative reaction if it is perceived as inappropriate to the relationship between individuals. On the basis of conceptual (e.g., Argyle & Dean, 1965; Patterson, 1976) and empirical (e.g., Nguyen et al., 1975) work on nonverbal communication, Fisher et al. (1976) suggested that a touch will be experienced as positive to the extent that it (a) is appropriate to the situation, (b) does not impose a greater level of intimacy than the recipient desires, or (c) does not communicate a negative message.

With these parameters in mind, the present study was undertaken to further investigate touch as an important nonverbal mode of communication. Specifically, the experiment explored the effects of tactile contact in a counseling interview conducted

in a university counseling center. To contribute to the extant counseling literature on touching, the experiment was designed to yield data relevant to a number of questions not adequately addressed in past research. For example, the only study to assess the effects of touch in an outpatient counseling context (Pattison, 1973) used female subjects, so the response of males to tactile stimulation in that setting was not determined. Interestingly, research demonstrating differential reactions of males and females to a constant touch (Fisher et al., 1976; Nguyen et al., 1975; Whitcher & Fisher, 1979) would suggest the possibility of sex differences, which could have practical and theoretical consequences. Further, in the Pattison (1973) study, although differences between touch and control groups were not significant on the evaluative measures, there were consistent trends indicating a potential relationship between touch and client perception of counseling. Such a finding could have important implications and deserves further investigation. In addition, no past research has looked at the extent to which the effects of touch may be moderated by individual differences in tactile history or prior attitude toward seeking help for personal problems. Thus, the design of this experiment included gathering data on these two variables to assess their influence on the therapeutic effect of tactile contact.

To examine these experimental questions, subjects were randomly assigned to touch or no-touch conditions for a counseling interview. Since the counseling context is one that is perceived by most individuals as supportive, we anticipated that the touch stimulus would meet the criteria specified by Fisher et al. (1976) for predicting positive responses. Thus, it was expected that both males and females would experience the touch as a positive message of care and concern, as appropriate to the situation, and as a comfortable level of intimacy. Further, we predicted that individuals who were touched would make more favorable evaluations of the counseling experience than would control subjects.

Although we expected that all touch groups would rate the counseling experience more positively than no-touch groups, we

also anticipated that there would be differences among touch groups in terms of the magnitude of the effect of touching. This prediction was based on the notion that in our culture same-sex intimacy is prohibited more for males than for females (Deaux, 1976). Thus, we hypothesized that while the strength of the effect of touch would be *equal* when males and females were touched by an opposite-sex counselor, the effect would be smaller in situations in which male counselors touched male clients than when female counselors touched female clients. It should be noted, however, that in no case was it expected that subjects in touch conditions would evaluate the counseling experience less positively than control subjects, only that the degree of positive response would vary as a function of the interaction of the sex of the counselor with the sex of the client.

## Method

### *Subjects and Preexperimental Testing*

Five hundred undergraduates completed the Body Accessibility Scale (Jourard, 1966) and an Attitude Toward Counseling Scale in two separate mass testing sessions. These measures were included for use as covariates in the data analysis.

The Body Accessibility Scale was used to assess individuals' readiness to permit others to physically contact their bodies. The index consists of a drawing of a human body demarcated into 18 regions, on which subjects indicate which parts of their bodies have been touched by their mother, father, and closest friend of the same and opposite sex. Specifically, this is done by indicating if each region is never touched, if contact occurs but only rarely, or if contact is a regular part of the relationship. The weighted entries are summed to yield a total score. The higher the total score, the greater the readiness of a person to permit physical contact from others.

The Attitude Toward Counseling Scale consisted of 14 7-point bipolar adjective scales taken from the evaluative dimension of the Osgood Semantic Differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). Specifically, the stems "seeking the help of another to deal with personal problems" and "counseling with a professional as a means of dealing with personal problems" were each followed by seven scales (e.g., good-bad, pleasant-unpleasant). Analyses performed on pilot data indicated the measure to be psychometrically sound. Test-retest reliability over an 8-week interval was .82, and the alpha internal consistency for the 14 scales was .88.

Six weeks after the initial testing, the researcher announced the experiment to four large classes of stu-

dents, many of whom had been pretested on the measures described above. He explained that he was seeking volunteers to participate in a study of career counseling techniques. One hundred twenty students (60 males and 60 females), randomly selected from among those who volunteered, were contacted by telephone and scheduled for an interview. Twelve students failed to keep their appointments, leaving an actual sample of 108 individuals (53 males, 55 females).

### *Design and Overview of Procedures*

To test the effects of touch, sex of subject, and sex of counselor on client evaluative response to the counseling interview, a 2 (touch vs. no touch)  $\times$  2 (male vs. female subject)  $\times$  2 (male vs. female counselor) between-subjects design was used. Subjects randomly assigned to touch-no-touch and sex of counselor conditions participated in a 25-minute interview related to career issues. The career focus was selected because it was assumed to be of interest to most students. Four doctoral students in counseling (two females, two males) conducted the interviews with subjects in both conditions. All were naive to subjects' tactile histories and prior attitudes toward counseling and to the specific hypotheses being tested.

### *Detailed Description of Experimental Procedures*

Prior to running the experiment, the counselors were trained to conduct the interview and to execute the touch manipulation. The training sessions involved demonstrations of the procedure and a number of role plays of the interview to insure that the touch manipulation was administered uniformly and that the behavior of counselors was otherwise similar in the experimental and control groups.

The interviews took place at the university counseling center. Each evening before the sessions, the experimenter provided the counselors with a list of the first names of their "clients" and the manipulation to be employed in each case. When subjects arrived for their appointment, each was given a statement to read which ostensibly discussed the purpose of the study (i.e., assessing techniques in career counseling) and which encouraged their active participation. Then the experimenter directed the subject to the office in which the counselor was waiting.

In all interviews, the counselors followed a script which engaged the subject in discussion and reflection on career interests, plans, and aspirations. In the experimental groups, in addition to this basic format, subjects were touched by the counselor at several points during the interaction. First, the counselor shook the hand of the client firmly without losing eye contact or hesitating in the introduction. Then, while moving into the room, the counselor placed his or her hand on the client's back. During the session the counselor touched the client three additional times on the hand or lower arm. Each of these touches lasted 4-5 sec and was paired with an interruption, to ask for clarification, to

reflect, or to summarize.<sup>1</sup> At the close of the interview, the counselor placed his or her hand on the client's back as they walked toward the door. Finally, the counselor shook the client's hand firmly and concluded the interaction.

In the no-touch groups, while the counselors followed the same basic script, they were explicitly instructed *not* to initiate any bodily contact with the client. The only exception allowed was to touch the client's hand briefly in response to a client-initiated handshake, if this occurred.

Immediately after the interview, subjects completed the dependent measure (described in detail below), which was designed to assess evaluative response to the counseling experience.

### Measure of Client Evaluation of the Counseling Experience

This measure consisted of 12 7-point bipolar adjective scales adapted from the evaluative dimension of the Semantic Differential (e.g., good-bad, valuable-worthless; Osgood et al., 1957). Subjects rated their counseling experience along these dimensions. Psychometric analysis of the scales was performed in pilot research.<sup>2</sup> Test-retest reliability established over a 6-week period was .89, and the alpha internal consistency for the 12 scales was .85. On the strength of these coefficients and the established validity of the Semantic Differential (Kerlinger, 1973), the measure was judged psychometrically sound.

After completing the dependent measure, subjects were debriefed, paid \$3 for their participation, and requested not to discuss the experiment with students who might be subjects at a later date.

### Results

The data were analyzed using two multiple regression procedures. First, an analysis was carried out on that portion of the sample for which there were no missing cases for any of the variables ( $n = 81$ ).<sup>3</sup> In this procedure, body accessibility and attitude toward counseling were treated as covariates and were entered in the analysis as the first two predictor variables, followed by the remaining independent variables (i.e., touch, sex of client, and sex of counselor).

This analysis revealed that neither body accessibility nor attitude toward counseling emerged as a significant covariate ( $F_s < 1$ ). In addition, the interaction of each with touch was not significant ( $F_s < 1$ ). This information made possible the deletion of both of these variables from subsequent consideration. Further, although the analysis was performed on only a subset of the entire sample ( $n = 81$ ), the results indicated

Table 1  
Cell Means for Touch  $\times$  Sex of Client  $\times$  Sex of Counselor Interaction

Clients	Counselors			
	Male		Female	
	Touch	No touch	Touch	No touch
Male	63.13 <sub>b</sub>	61.20 <sub>b</sub>	72.44 <sub>a</sub>	62.08 <sub>b</sub>
Female	69.80 <sub>a</sub>	62.53 <sub>b</sub>	70.23 <sub>a</sub>	66.75 <sub>a,b</sub>

Note. Means with common subscripts do not differ at  $p < .05$ , as indicated by the Tukey (*b*) procedure.

a significant main effect for touch,  $F(1, 70) = 4.09$ ,  $p < .05$ , and a significant three-way interaction involving Touch  $\times$  Sex of Counselor  $\times$  Sex of Client,  $F(1, 70) = 6.85$ ,  $p < .05$ . These were the only significant effects. The main effect finding revealed that individuals who were touched evaluated the counseling experience more positively than control subjects. However, the interaction suggested that the strength of this relationship was affected by the sex composition of the counseling dyad. Tukey post hoc comparisons on interaction cell means indicated that the strongest positive effects occurred when female counselors touched male clients ( $p < .01$ ) and when male counselors touched female clients ( $p < .05$ ; see Table 1). In situations in which the counselor and the client were of the same sex, while the main effect for touch prevailed, the size of the effect was reduced. In effect, the smallest gain occurred in interviews in which male counselors touched male clients.

In a second multiple regression performed

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that similar interruptions occurred in control conditions but were not followed with physical contact.

<sup>2</sup> In the pilot study, 48 students (21 males, 27 females) enrolled in a summer course in educational psychology viewed the same videotaped counseling session once at the beginning and once at the end of a 6-week period. After each viewing, the students evaluated the interview using the set of 12 bipolar adjective scales, which comprised the dependent measure. Psychometric analyses on this data indicated that the scales form a satisfactory measuring instrument.

<sup>3</sup> For the remaining 27 cases, either a body accessibility score or an attitude toward counseling score or both were missing.

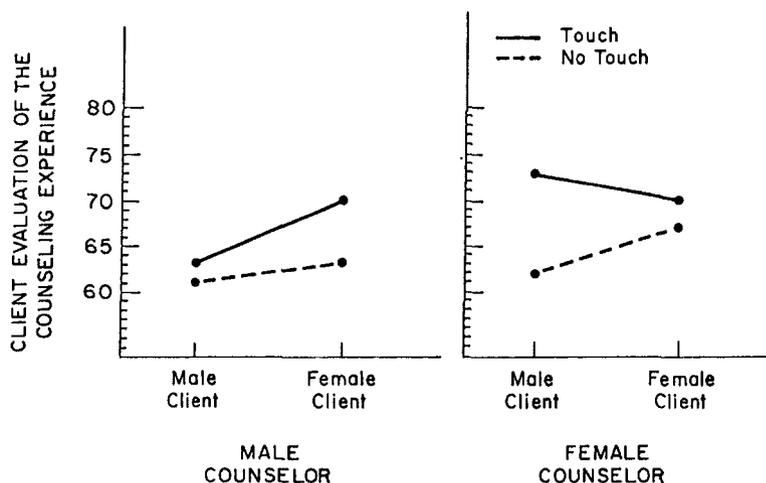


Figure 1. Three-way interaction: Touch  $\times$  Sex of Counselor  $\times$  Sex of Client.

on the data for the full sample ( $n = 108$ ), touch clearly emerged as the best predictor of variability in the dependent measure,  $F(1, 100) = 7.87, p < .01, r^2 = .07$ . Specifically, clients who were touched rated the counseling experience more positively than no-touch controls. The results again revealed a significant three-way interaction of Touch  $\times$  Sex of Counselor  $\times$  Sex of Client,  $F(1, 100) = 6.32, p < .02, r^2 = .13$  (see Figure 1), indicating that the magnitude of the touch effect was influenced by the sex composition of the counselor/client dyad. As in the first analysis, there were no other significant effects.<sup>4</sup>

### Discussion

To provide some conceptual and applied data not available from earlier work, the present study explored the effects of touch in a counseling setting. The overall pattern of results confirms the major hypothesis put forth in the introduction, that is, that touch in a counseling context would precipitate positive responses in both males and females. In addition to a main effect for touch, the data reveal a significant three-way interaction of touch with sex of counselor and sex of client. These findings support the additional hypothesis which predicted that since same-sex physical contact is more socially acceptable among females than males (Deaux, 1976), the strength of the touch effect would be smaller in situations

in which male counselors touched male clients than when female counselors touched female clients. Further, it is important to note that while results were affected by the sex composition of the counseling dyad, the effect of touch was not influenced by individual differences in tactile history or prior attitude toward counseling.

The present findings corroborate earlier research demonstrating positive effects of tactile stimulation. For example, our results are consistent with research by Aguilera (1967), which found that physical contact between nurses and psychiatric patients resulted in more favorable attitudes toward the nursing staff, and with several studies that have shown that touch precipitated positive interpersonal evaluations (Boderman, Freed, & Kinnucan, 1972; Fisher et al., 1976). Further, the present experiment confirms the tentative findings of Pattison (1973), since the data clearly indicate that client evaluation of the therapy experience differed as a function of touch.

In addition to complementing earlier work, this research adds to the extant literature on touch. First, the findings provide a look at the effects of tactile stimulation in a context in which the message conveyed by touch is relatively unambiguous. This

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that analyses performed to test for idiosyncratic effects associated with the specific counselors revealed no significant differences.

contrasts significantly with past research in other settings (e.g., laboratory settings, library, hospital) in which contextual factors did not afford as clear an indication of the meaning of touch. Further, the results demonstrate the effects of touch in a counseling environment and represent the first attempt to explore possible sex differences in response to touch in this context. Moreover, this study is the first to show that touch between counselor and client is positively related to the client's attitude toward the counseling experience. Finally, this is the only experiment to date that has assessed reactions to touch in relation to individual differences in tactile history and prior attitude toward counseling.

It is important to note that while the present study is consistent with past research that demonstrated that touch can be beneficial, the results did not show the pattern of sex differences reported in some earlier studies. In research conducted in other settings, but with similar tactile stimulation, Fisher et al. (1976) and Whitcher and Fisher (1979) found that touch elicited positive responses in females but negative reactions in males. The present finding of positive responses in both sexes suggests that the context importantly affects male and female reactions to a physically constant touch. While additional research is needed to definitively identify the specific context characteristics that caused this difference, a tentative explanation can be offered. Specifically, the counseling setting is one which is perceived by most individuals as highly supportive. Our results suggest that this contextual factor facilitated positive reactions to touch in both females and males.

The fact that the strongest effect for tactile stimulation occurred when clients were touched by an opposite-sex counselor merits special consideration. One possible explanation is suggested by past research (Jourard, 1966), which found that for both sexes, opposite-sex touching occurs more frequently than same-sex physical contact. This finding was replicated in the present study, where for both males and females, the mean level of contact with a friend of the opposite sex was nearly triple the means for

such contact with parents or with a friend of the same sex. To the extent that this predominance of heterosexual touching indicates a preference for opposite-sex physical contact, this may in part explain the stronger positive responses observed in the mixed-sex counseling dyad.

An alternative explanation is that when the person touching was of the opposite sex, both male and female clients may have interpreted the touch as sexual in nature. However, both theory and previous research tend to argue against this possibility. Specifically, according to the taxonomy of touch behavior developed by Heslin (Note 1), the touches used in the present study are appropriate for expressing caring and warmth but not typical of touches used to express sexual interest. Further, a study by Nguyen et al. (1975) indicates that touches to the hand and/or shoulder area, whether applied by a same- or opposite-sex other, are perceived as nonsexual. It should be noted however, that the Nguyen et al. work was not done in a counseling context. Thus, while we cannot completely rule out an explanation based on sexual cues, it appears implausible that clients assigned a sexual meaning to the touch under the present conditions.

A third possible explanation is offered by research which suggests that evaluations are more heavily weighted when they are given by opposite-sex than by same-sex others (Cherry, Note 2). Specifically, if touch in this context was perceived as implying a positive evaluation of the client by the counselor—since opposite-sex evaluations are more salient—touch from an opposite-sex other would be expected to produce stronger positive responses. This explanation, although intuitively reasonable, is speculative. Further research is needed to examine the meaning assigned to touch from same- and opposite-sex others in the present context.

Of conceptual interest, the present findings are in accord with Patterson's (1976) arousal model of interpersonal intimacy and can be interpreted in terms of that formulation. According to Patterson, changes in intimacy produce arousal change, which may be a signal to evaluate the environment.

The change in arousal may be labeled as positive or negative depending on the context in which it occurs. To the extent that a positive label is engendered, it is assumed that favorable reactions will occur.

In the present situation, while arousal was not measured directly, it seems reasonable on the basis of past research (e.g., Geis & Viksne, 1972) to assume that touch precipitated a change in level of arousal and that contextual factors permitted a positive label for this change, which resulted in favorable evaluative reactions. The significance of contextual factors in facilitating a positive or negative label for a touch-induced shift in arousal is revealed by earlier research (e.g., Whitcher & Fisher, 1979). These studies indicate that in other contexts (e.g., a hospital), arousal change produced by touch was negatively labeled by some individuals, resulting in negative effects. The fit of Patterson's (1976) model to the data suggests that it may be useful as an interpretive framework for past research on touch and as a predictive framework for future work.

Moving to practical implications, the present research demonstrates that the use of touch gestures may facilitate the counseling process by increasing the likelihood that the interaction will be positively evaluated. Further, the results point up the possibility of setting aside some of the reservations that practitioners experience when they think about physically contacting a client, since under no conditions did communication by touch lead to negative reactions. However, while the effect of touch in this experiment was consistently positive, it is obvious that under certain conditions (e.g., overtly sexual intent), touch in counseling could have negative effects (cf. Fisher et al., 1976).

With respect to the training of counselors, the present findings suggest that introducing nonverbal communication as a concomitant of relevant graduate programs could produce beneficial results. The positive responses of clients to touch suggests that training that focuses exclusively on verbal skills is inadequate for preparing counselors to engage a client most effectively. In effect, the findings indicate that clients will benefit from counselors who are equally comfortable

communicating in nonverbal as well as verbal modes.

Although the present results indicate that counselors can effectively use touch to enrich the counseling experience, there are a number of issues that represent boundary conditions to the generalizability of the findings. First, in this experiment the therapist-client interaction focused on career concerns. Similar research involving touch needs to be conducted in situations in which problems of a more intimate nature are the focus of interest. It remains to be seen whether or not touch will have positive effects in a counseling experience that involves very personal self-disclosure and therefore increased vulnerability of the client.

In addition to exploring the effects of touch with different counseling issues, future research needs to assess whether the present findings will replicate in more prolonged counseling. The results of this study would appear most directly applicable to brief counseling. Also, there is the question of the effect of touch in counseling with populations other than the college sample used in this study (e.g., severely disturbed clients). Further, while the present study gives an indication of the kinds of touches that are positively perceived, additional experimentation is needed to ascertain the most efficient patterning of tactile gestures (e.g., at what point in the counseling process is touch most effective?). Finally, future research needs to examine the effects of touch in counseling on other response dimensions (e.g., behavioral responses).

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