Tactile Contact and Evaluation of the Toucher

DAMIEN ERCEAU
NICOLAS GUÉGUEN
LSHS, Université de Bretagne-Sud
Lorient, France

ABSTRACT. The authors investigated the effect of touch on a person’s evaluation of the toucher in a field setting. In the context of selling a 2nd-hand car, the authors instructed a male seller to slightly touch (or not touch) a man who was interested in the car. After the participant left the seller, a female confederate solicited him, asking him to evaluate the car seller on various dimensions. The results showed that for each dimension that the participants evaluated, the touch condition was associated with statistically higher positive evaluations of the toucher than the no-touch control condition.

Keywords: social influence, social perception, tactile contact

A PERSON’S BRIEF TACTILE CONTACT with another person in a solicitation context increases compliance with a request: When touched, passersby agreed more favorably to a request to give a dime (Kleinke, 1977), to respond to a survey (Hornik, 1987; Hornik & Ellis, 1988), or to sign a petition (Willis & Hamm, 1980). Investigators have performed most of the research testing the effect of tactile contact on behavior in the United States. According to Hall (1966), Americans belong to a culture of noncontact, and culture influences
tactile contacts. In a contact culture such as France, researchers (Field, 1999; Jourard, 1966) also found that touch has a positive effect on compliance. Guéguen (2002) found that women on a street agreed more favorably to respond to a survey when touched by a female solicitor. Guéguen and Fisher-Lokou (2002) found that touch led passersby to accept more favorably a request to look after the dog of a confederate who wanted to go into a pharmacy where animals are prohibited. Guéguen and Fisher-Lokou found the effect of touch on compliance with a request in two different cultures. In the present study, we were interested in why such an effect occurs. Several researchers have explained this positive effect on compliance by arguing that touch facilitates a positive evaluation of the toucher. Researchers have confirmed such a hypothesis empirically in American culture. Fisher, Ryting, and Heslin (1976) tested the affective and evaluative consequences of receiving an interpersonal touch in a situation in which library clerks touched students in a university library when the clerks checked out their books. After the librarian-participant interaction, the experimenter approached the participant and asked him or her to answer a questionnaire that was intended to evaluate the personnel and the facilities of the library. The participant evaluated the librarian-clerks by using four 7-point binary adjective items (positive/negative, helpful/not helpful, friendly/unfriendly, good/bad). The results showed that participants who were touched rated the clerk significantly more favorably than did those who were not touched. Researchers have replicated such results in various studies. Steward and Lupfer (1987) found that college students who were touched by their instructor during their individual conferences rated the instructor more positively on the dimension of patience and understanding. Hornik (1992) found that waiters or waitresses who touched patrons in a restaurant received higher evaluations (good/poor) than did those who did not touch the patrons.

Researchers have tested the effect of touch on the touchee’s perception of the toucher only in a noncontact culture. To date, researchers have carried out no empirical study to test this effect in a contact culture. Moreover, in the aforementioned studies, the researchers largely focused the evaluation of the toucher on professional attributes and not on personal attributes. Consequently, in the present study, our objective was twofold: to test the generality of such findings in a contact culture (France), and to focus on personal attributes. We hypothesized that tactile contact led the touchee to perceive more favorably the personality of the toucher.

Participants were 40 men in a parking lot of a shopping mall where a second-hand car market occurred on Sunday mornings. In this experiment, a male confederate wanted to sell a second-hand car. According to a random distribution, when someone came to look at the car and solicited the confederate-seller for further information, the seller touched the participant on the forearm for 1 s while inviting the participant to look inside the car. After the social interaction stopped, a young female confederate followed the participant for 1 min and solicited him or her to answer a questionnaire about the car-seller whom he or she had just met.
The confederate solicitor asked the participant to evaluate the seller with the help of five measures (friendly, sincere, honest, agreeable, kind), all using a 7-point Likert-type scale. The confederate solicitor also used two propositions: one to evaluate the commercial interaction with the seller (“I feel there will be little risk in negotiating with this seller”) and the other to evaluate the seller (“This seller is someone whom I could appreciate in my circle of friends”).

We analyzed the difference between the two groups by using Student’s \(t\) test. Furthermore, when using multiple statistical tests with the same data set, we increased the probability of Type I Error. Accordingly, Bonferroni’s adjustment was appropriate to compensate for the increased probability of such error. One method that we used consisted of dividing the alpha level (0.05) by the number of separate pair-wise comparisons. In this experiment, the alpha level with Bonferroni’s adjustment was equal to .007, and the \(t\) value for double-sided testing (\(df = 38\)) was 2.844. The results showed that the touchees perceived the touchers as more friendly than they did the nontouchers (\(M_{\text{touch}} = 6.65, \text{SD}_{\text{touch}} = 0.67; \ M_{\text{nontouch}} = 5.2, \text{SD}_{\text{nontouch}} = 1.06; \) respectively), \(t(38)\) two-tailed = 5.18, \(p < .0001\), Cohen’s \(d = 1.68\). Similarly, the touchees perceived the touchers—relative to the nontouchers—as more sincere (\(M_{\text{touch}} = 6.45, \text{SD}_{\text{touch}} = 0.99; \ M_{\text{nontouch}} = 4.68, \text{SD}_{\text{nontouch}} = 1.13; \) respectively), \(t(38)\) two-tailed = 5.32, \(p < .0001\), Cohen’s \(d = 1.73\); more honest (\(M_{\text{touch}} = 6.05, \text{SD}_{\text{touch}} = 1.19; \ M_{\text{nontouch}} = 4.50, \text{SD}_{\text{nontouch}} = 1.05; \) respectively), \(t(38)\) two-tailed = 4.36, \(p < .0001\), Cohen’s \(d = 1.42\); more agreeable (\(M_{\text{touch}} = 6.65, \text{SD}_{\text{touch}} = 0.75; \ M_{\text{nontouch}} = 4.95, \text{SD}_{\text{nontouch}} = 1.19; \) respectively), \(t(38)\) two-tailed = 5.41, \(p < .0001\), Cohen’s \(d = 1.76\); and more kindly (\(M_{\text{touch}} = 6.65, \text{SD}_{\text{touch}} = 0.74; \ M_{\text{nontouch}} = 5.25, \text{SD}_{\text{nontouch}} = 1.05; \) respectively), \(t(38)\) two-tailed = 4.66, \(p < .001\), Cohen’s \(d = 1.51\). For the propositions, we also observed a positive effect of touch.

We found a statistical effect of touch with the proposition, “I feel there will be little risk in negotiating with this seller” (\(M_{\text{touch}} = 6.30, \text{SD}_{\text{touch}} = 1.08; \ M_{\text{nontouch}} = 3.65, \text{SD}_{\text{nontouch}} = 1.04; \) respectively), \(t(38)\) two-tailed = 7.9, \(p < .001\), Cohen’s \(d = 2.563\); and with the proposition, “This seller is someone that I could appreciate in my circle of friends” (\(M_{\text{touch}} = 5.6, \text{SD}_{\text{touch}} = 1.47; \ M_{\text{nontouch}} = 3.7, \text{SD}_{\text{nontouch}} = 1.38; \) respectively), \(t(38)\) two-tailed = 4.22, \(p < .001\), Cohen’s \(d = 1.37\).

The present results show that tactile contact has a highly positive impact on the evaluation of the toucher. The effect sizes calculated were large (Cohen, 1988). In some ways, these results confirmed previous research in this area of evaluation (Fisher, Ryting, & Heslin, 1976; Hornik, 1992; Steward & Lupfer, 1987). Furthermore, we performed these studies in a noncontact culture. It seems that researchers could generalize this positive effect to a culture in which tactile contacts in social interaction are more frequent (Field, 1999; Jourard, 1966). In the few studies in which the effect of tactile contact on the evaluation of the toucher has been measured, the researchers have focused the dependant variables on professional attributes. In the present study, our results confirmed that tactile contact led the touchee to perceive more favorably the toucher when we used personal attributes as dependant variables. Such an effect could help researchers to understand the
positive effect of touch on compliance with a request. Research on altruism has shown that a person’s positive evaluation of the solicitor enhances the person’s helping behavior (Takemura, 1993). Therefore, it is possible that a participant’s positive impression of the solicitor is activated by touch, which predisposes the participant to help the toucher more favorably. Future research may provide information on whether the efficacy of touch is mediated by a positive perception of the solicitor.

**AUTHOR NOTES**

**Damien Erceau** is a doctoral student in social psychology at the University of Bretagne-Sud in France. His research interests focus on the effects of tactile contact on compliance to requests and evaluation. **Nicolas Guéguen** is a professor of social psychology at the University of Bretagne-Sud. His research interests focus on compliance behavior, nonverbal communication, and courtship behavior.

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