

Tactile Contact and Spontaneous Help: An Evaluation in a Natural Setting

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TOUCH HAS A POSITIVE EFFECT on compliance with a request made by the toucher. Kleinke (1977) showed that touch increased compliance with a request for a dime. Brockner, Pressman, Cabitt, and Moran (1982) found that touch led participants to return the dime that the toucher had supposedly lost in a phone booth. Hornik (1987) observed that touching increased response rate to a street survey, and Nannberg and Hansen (1994) found that respondents completed more items when they were touched. Hornik (1992) found that touching customers in a store increased their amount of shopping and their willingness to taste some products. When no request was directly addressed to the participant, touch also had a positive effect. Goldman and Fordyce (1983) tested the effect of nonverbal behavior of a confederate who accidentally dropped several questionnaires on the ground. They found a positive effect on the participant's altruism. However, in their experiment, touch was combined with other nonverbal variables (the confederate looked at the participant straight in the face when beginning to pick up the questionnaires), and the effect of touch alone was not tested. Paulsell and Goldman (1984) also observed greater helping behavior toward the confederate who dropped several survey forms. However, in this later experiment, different locations of the body were touched by the confederate, and no comparison with a nontouch control condition was made. To our knowledge, the effect of touch on spontaneous helping behavior was not tested empirically. This aspect was evaluated in the present experiment.

The participants were 17 men and 43 women. A confederate approached them as they were standing alone at a bus stop located near the center of an average city in France. A 20-year-old man acted as confederate. He was correctly dressed for a young man of that age. He solicited the participant while holding in one of his hands a portfolio and in the other hand a package of data-processing diskettes and

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a plan of the city. He asked the participant to help him to find a famous place in the town located not far away from the bus stop. After the participant had indicated the direction, the confederate thanked him or her. In half of the cases, the confederate touched the participant on the arm briefly (1 s). Then, the confederate turned his back to the participant to move toward the direction indicated by him or her. As soon as he had gone 2 m, the confederate seemingly accidentally dropped the diskettes on the ground. Contrary to the procedure used by Goldman and Fordyce (1983), the confederate bent down to collect the diskettes, which had scattered all around him, without looking at the participant. An observer located not far from there evaluated whether the participant helped the confederate. If he or she helped, then the time latency of his or her intervention was measured. When the participant gave his or her assistance, the confederate evaluated proportionally the number of diskettes that the participant collected relative to the number of diskettes that had fallen to the ground.

In the nontouch control condition, 63.3% of the participants helped the confederate (58.1% of the men and 65.2% of the women) against 90.0% in the touch condition (85.7% of the men and 91.3% of the women). The overall difference between the two conditions was significant, $\chi^2(1, 60) = 5.96, p < .02, d = .31$. However, no difference according to the participant's gender was found in the control condition, $\chi^2(1, 30) = 0.15, ns$, or in the touch condition, $\chi^2(1, 30) = 0.22, ns$. We observed that the latency of help—measured in seconds—was not significantly different, $F(1, 45) = 2.37, p > .10, d = .45$, in the touch condition ($M = 2.18, SD = 0.58$) from that in the nontouch control condition ($M = 2.43, SD = 0.49$). Results regarding gender were not significant, $F(1, 45) = 1.97, p > .30$, either in the control condition ($M = 2.67$ for men and $M = 2.36$ for women, $SDs = 0.52$ and 0.48 , respectively) or in the touch condition ($M = 1.88$ for men and $M = 2.27$ for women, $SDs = 0.85$ and 0.50 , respectively). No interaction effect between gender and the experimental conditions was found, $F(1, 45) = 3.37, p > .07$. With regard to the importance of help—measured by the proportion of the number of diskettes collected compared with the number of diskettes that had fallen to the ground—our results showed that, in the touch condition, participants collected 38.1% of the diskettes, whereas in the control condition, they collected 36.3% of the diskettes. The difference between these two rates was not significant ($p > .30$). As for previous measures, neither the main effect of gender nor the interaction between gender and the experimental conditions was significant ($p > .20$ for both).

The results indicated that touch had a significant positive effect on altruism even when help was not asked of the participant. Several studies have shown that touch facilitates a positive evaluation of the toucher (Hornik, 1992; Wycoff and Holley, 1990). Research on altruism has shown that a positive evaluation of the solicitor enhances helping behavior (Takemura, 1993). It is then possible that the positive impression of the solicitor activated by touch predisposes the participant to help the toucher more favorably. A further interesting question for future research is whether the efficacy of touch is mediated by a positive perception of

the solicitor. Surprisingly, no gender effect was found in the present experiment. Research has shown that men of the United States were more resistant to the effect of physical contact especially when the toucher was a man (Roese, Olson, Borenstein, Martin, & Shores, 1992). A possible explanation of the present experiment's absence of gender effect is that our research was conducted in France. Studies have shown that French people are more familiar with tactile contact than are American people (Field, 1999). Perhaps, this familiarity led the men of France to react more positively to the tactile contact of a stranger.

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