

The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Interpretation of Nonverbal Immediacy

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Abstract

This study looked into a relationship between participants' self-esteem and the meaning they received from nonverbal immediacy behaviors. Nonverbal immediacy is a group of behaviors that communicates closeness and liking. It also investigated the interaction of gender, self-esteem, and interpretation of nonverbal immediacy behaviors. The Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale was administered to 164 students before they watched a video of a person displaying immediacy behaviors, recording the relationship meanings they observed through Burgoon and Hale's (1987) Relational Communication Scale. The results supported the first hypothesis, indicating that the high self-esteem group was significantly more positive in their interpretation of the nonverbal immediacy behaviors than the low self-esteem group. The study's results did not support the second hypothesis, which predicted a significant relationship between the interaction of gender and self-esteem, and interpretation of immediacy. However, a relationship between gender and self-esteem was found, with males scoring higher on the Self-Esteem Scale than females.

The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Interpretation of Nonverbal Immediacy

Some people see themselves in a very favorable light, while others are humble to the point of self-deprecation. Most western philosophers agree that humankind, as a whole, tends to see itself in an unrealistically positive light (Huntley, 1940). Previous research suggests that a person's self-esteem correlates with many different things, including purchasing and consumption habits (Mandel & Smeesters, 2008), the culture he or she is native to (Baranik et al., 2008; Ogawa, Gudykunst, & Nishida, 2004), communication experiences, level of perceived commitment in romantic relationships, relational communication, and amount of verbal and interpersonal aggressiveness (Rill, Baiocchi, Hopper, Denker, & Olson, 2009, Diamantopoulou, Rydell, & Henricsson, 2008; Rancer, Kosberg, & Silvestri, 1992). As self-esteem relates to so many behavioral outcomes, it is not a reach to suspect that it would affect the interpretation of the nonverbal behavior of others, particularly as a function of relational communication. Previous researchers have found evidence of a solid relationship between self-esteem and one particular nonverbal: eye contact (Droney & Brooks, 1993; Greene & Frandsen, 1979; Lagomarsino, Gallagher, Yankalunas, Brooks, & O'Brien, 1998). However, like Andersen, Andersen, and Jensen (1979), I believe that examining a wider range of behaviors, using a holistic approach, and investigating how they interact to formulate results is most profitable.

Nonverbal immediacy is a construct describing a group of behaviors that occur simultaneously or in rapid succession that communicate particular relational messages characterized by approach or avoidance (Mehrabian, 1971). Because of the insufficiency of research on this approach to nonverbal immediacy interpretation in relation to self-esteem, the researcher makes use of research on each of the topics, to obtain the best possible picture of the

factors involved. The purpose of this study is to discover the relationship between the interpretation of immediacy and the self-esteem of the receiver.

Self-Esteem

Self-esteem consists primarily of self-concept and self-judgment (Huntley, 1940). Baranik et al. (2008) point out that self-esteem includes both self-liking and self-competence. It is a person's attitude towards himself or herself, whether positive or negative (Darley, 1999; Rosenberg, 1965). Rill et al. (2009) argue that self-esteem includes more what a person believes other people think about himself or herself, rather than how that person actually feels about himself or herself. Moreover, Baumeister (1997) suggests that self-esteem develops based on two different sources: feedback from others and personal experiences of success and failure. Rancer et al., (1992) use a definition that includes self-worth, self-like, and perceived competence.

Self-esteem can be divided into two basic levels: high and low. In nearly every study presented on self-esteem, researchers use this basic bipolar separation as the determining characteristic for group selection (Darley, 1999; Mandel & Smeesters, 2008). Also, the average self-esteem scores are above the midpoint of the scale, so the "low" scores are really only relatively low (Baranik et al., 2008; Baumeister, 1997). In this study, the researcher will follow in the footsteps of Rosenberg (1965) by identifying high self-esteem as signifying that a person considers himself or herself to be "good enough;" not that he or she is better than others, but simply sufficient for his or her own satisfaction. Hence, high self-esteem means self-acceptance to some extent, but also includes the normal desire to continue improving, learning, and developing as a person. In contrast, low self-esteem would indicate that the person considers himself or herself to be "not good enough," or insufficient (Rosenberg, 1965). High self-esteem

differs from low self-esteem in many ways; low self-esteem correlates closely with depression and internalized problems, high openness to persuasion, and anger and hostility as well, while high self-esteem is more highly correlated with happiness and fewer suicidal thoughts (Baranik et al., 2008, Diamantopoulou, Rydell, & Henricsson, 2008; Rancer et al., 1992; Rill et al., 2009). People with high self-esteem have more consistent views of the self, while people with low self-esteem have less self-knowledge (Baumeister, 1997). Also, self-esteem correlates positively with romantic relationship commitment, but negatively with verbal aggressiveness and argumentativeness (Rancer et al., 1992; Rill et al., 2009). When eye contact (which is a nonverbal element in immediacy, discussed later) is employed in American society, it is often interpreted as showing high self-esteem. This is probably because most Americans consider a refusal of eye contact to be related to feelings of awkwardness, inadequacy, and insecurity, which often reflect low self-esteem (Baumeister, 1997; Droney & Brooks, 1991; Rosenberg, 1965).

Rosenberg's (1965) extensive research on the subject showed several things about the person with low self-esteem that are pertinent to this study. He found that people classified in the low self-esteem category tended to rank high on shyness, reluctance to initiate conversation, and ease of embarrassment when reviewed by others. In addition, those with high self-esteem were far more likely to be considered respectable, likeable, and pleasant to be around, than were those with low self-esteem. A person must remember, though, that self-esteem actually occurs on a scale from high to low, and that it realistically represents the degree, as opposed to a classification, to which a person is positive towards himself or herself (Baranik et al., 2008). Also, no significant differences in actual competence on laboratory tasks have been found, indicating that self-esteem is not indicative of success or achievement beyond confidence

(Baumeister, 1997). The final difference to be noted on this topic, and perhaps the most pertinent, is that people with low self-esteem tend to be more critical, not only of themselves, but also of others, than people with high self-esteem (Baumeister, 1997).

Males and females differ noticeably in the way they typically score on measures of self-esteem. Females tend to score significantly lower on measures of global self-worth (Diamantopoulou et al., 2008). The reasons for this have been widely considered but without much consensus. One reason might be that self-esteem correlates strongly with masculinity traits (Lundy & Rosenberg, 1987). Also, further studies have found that women seem to relate more to the worthiness aspects of a given self-esteem measure, while men relate better to the competence aspects, including success and failure (Mruk, 1995).

Immediacy

Mehrabian (1971) used the term immediacy to refer to his construct that people will move closer either physically or psychologically to things or people they like, and will move further away from things (or people) they dislike or would rather avoid. He included two different kinds of immediacy, verbal and nonverbal. This concept of the relationship between liking and behavior is not limited to interest versus disinterest, or any sort of physical attraction, but also includes the desire to be more or less involved with the discussion and people with whom the person is currently engaged. Jones and Wirtz (2007) specify that immediacy fundamentally indicates approach as opposed to avoidance. While Mehrabian's theory originally assumed that immediacy results from interest or liking, most work on this topic since has pursued the idea that liking and interest result from another's displays of immediacy (Richmond, McCroskey, & Johnson, 2003). Immediacy also creates feelings of closeness (Andersen, Andersen, & Jensen, 1979).

For the purposes of this study, investigation was limited to nonverbal immediacy. Many different nonverbal behaviors are classified as a part of immediacy (Andersen, Andersen, & Jensen, 1979, Jones & Wirtz, 2007). Nonverbal immediacy refers to a group of behaviors that occur simultaneously or in rapid succession to communicate particular relational messages. The use of gaze, as well as body orientation directly towards the speaker, touching, facial and vocal animation, and reduced distance are some particular categories of behaviors that can contribute to the communication of immediacy (Jones & Wirtz, 2007, Mehrabian, 1971). Mehrabian (1971) also added that all immediacy behaviors include some sort of heightened sensory engagement during communication. These behaviors can communicate both a person's passing opinions and more stable ways of thinking (Mehrabian, 1971). Also, communicators who are more immediate are viewed more positively than those who are less immediate (Richmond et al., 2003).

Men and women tend to differ in their use of immediacy; a large portion of this difference is attributed to the socialization of males versus females (Jones & Wirtz, 2007; Mehrabian, 1971). Women are more nonverbally immediate, better at reading nonverbal communication in general, and more responsive to displays of immediacy (Jones & Wirtz, 2007; Richmond et al., 2003). Richmond et al. (2003) sought to create a valid measure self- and other-perceived immediacy and found a phenomenon they could not explain in their results, specifically because surveyed women consistently marked both themselves and others as more nonverbally immediate than did the surveyed males. Upon review of the data, they suggested either of two plausible explanations- that women are more sensitive to nonverbals, or that they just think they are, and that more investigation would be required to understand the degree to which either might be the case. One additional finding related to the differences between men

and women include the findings by Edwards (2000) on relational meaning. According to this study, men are more inclined to receive messages of control, while women tend to accept messages of intimacy more readily.

Messages are how people create shared meanings. According to Burgoon and Hale (1984), communicators share not only objective facts or ideas, but also messages about the nature of the relationship that provides context for the communication. These messages include judgments about the people, the relationship itself, and the self in the context of the relationship (Burgoon & Hale, 1984). Therefore, how people view others is communicated through relational messages. One of the most common relational meanings conveyed by immediate behaviors is rapport (Jones & Wirtz, 2007). In addition, immediacy can convey warmth and caring (Jones & Wirtz, 2007). Immediacy can also show relational value cues, or indicators of how much one person is valued by another as a social equal, (Tyler, 2008). Burgoon and Hale (1984) identified attraction, a key component of the meaning of immediacy, as the degree of affection and inclusion. In a study by Meyers and Ferry (2001), general immediacy behaviors correlate best with the pleasure and affection motives for interpersonal communication. This same study also found that immediacy behaviors correlate negatively with the escape and control motives for interpersonal communication. Liking, camaraderie, intimacy, and responsiveness are other interpretations or reasons for using immediacy behavior. Overall, previous research indicates that a large range of relational meanings is shared through immediacy.

In summary, this research suggests that self-esteem influences nearly every part of a person's life, including the way he or she thinks critically about others' intentions and behaviors. It also shows that immediacy can affect how he or she perceives others; and that the reception of the relational meanings of immediacy nonverbals may differ depending on a variety of factors.

Examining the relationship between self-esteem and immediacy is logical, as is considering the possibility of gender's influence as a variable. Therefore, based on this research, the researcher advanced two hypotheses regarding the interpretation of nonverbal immediacy.

H1: Receivers with high self-esteem interpret nonverbal immediacy more positively than receivers with low self-esteem.

H2: There is an interaction between the variable gender and the variables self-esteem and interpretation of nonverbal immediacy.

Methodology

Participants

The study included a convenience sample of 164 undergraduate students from a small, private, church-related, southern university. The sample included 55% males and 45% females from multiple ethnic groups: .6% Asian, 20.7% Black, 10.4% Hispanic, 66.5% White, 1.2% Other and .6% did not report ethnicity. The participants' ages ranged from 17 to 35 with the median age being 19. The study included 52.4% freshmen, 15.2% sophomores, 18.9% juniors, 12.8% seniors, and .6% other.

Materials

The first portion of the survey collected demographic data and assessed the participants' self-esteem using the Self-Esteem Scale developed by Rosenberg (1965). The original scale was a 10-item Likert scale that offers four response categories. This survey kept with this format offering the following response categories: strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Baranik et al. (2008) obtained an estimated Cronbach α of .86 from the United States citizens in their study. The estimated Cronbach α for this study was .87.

The second portion of the study used parts of the relational communication scale developed by Burgoon and Hale (1987). The researcher used only the portions of Burgoon and Hale's (1987) 32-item relational communication measure that related to similarity/inclusion (e.g., "She tried to establish good relations"), nonimmediacy (e.g., "She created a sense of distance between us"), intimacy (e.g., "She wanted me to trust her"), and arousal/intensity of involvement (e.g., "She acted bored by the conversation"). This resulted in a 17-item Likert scale with five response categories: strongly agree, agree, not sure, disagree, and strongly disagree. The researcher modified the scale out of a desire to make it most appropriate for the purposes and methods of this study design. There was no estimated Cronbach α reported for the original scale. The estimated Cronbach α for this study was .80. Attached is the complete research instrument in Appendix A.

The other material for this study was a video of a female confederate sharing an irrelevant anecdotal monologue while displaying nonverbal immediacy behaviors (eye contact, open/relaxed body posture, body orientation towards the viewer, facial and vocal animation, etc.). The video was produced with communication department video equipment by the researcher and a volunteer student cameraman recommended by the department staff, who also oversaw production. The female confederate was a professor in the theater department at the university, chosen for her youthful appearance and acting experience. Several clips were produced in the filming session; the video used was chosen for its superior representation of immediacy and quality of appearance. The length of the video used is thirty-six seconds.

Procedure

The university's Human Subjects Research Review Committee (IRB) approved the methodology of this study. Participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality, and

participation consent was obtained by a verbal explanation of the voluntary nature of participation, as well as including the following statement in the instructions: “Choosing to complete the survey signifies your informed consent to participate in this study.” Participants were given the opportunity to opt out either by refusing the survey directly, or leaving the survey blank. The experimenter conducted this study in three introductory level classes (U.S. History to 1877, U.S. History since 1877, and Introduction to Psychology) and one elective upper-level class (Sport Psychology). The survey was conducted at either the start or the end of the class, per the instructor's preference. To start the data collection, the researcher explained the survey procedures and passed out the surveys. Participants completed the first portion of the survey, stopped to watch the video, and then resumed the completion of the survey. The participants deposited their surveys on a desk as they finished.

Design

The researcher used an independent samples *t*-test to analyze the study results for the first hypothesis. The independent variable was self-esteem, and respondents were classified as either high or low, in relationship to the median. The dependent variable was interval data- scores on a relational meaning test. Therefore, the experimenter compared the mean scores of the two levels of self-esteem. The researcher also utilized a one-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) to compare the mean positive relational meaning for the males with high self-esteem, males with low self-esteem, females with high self-esteem, and females with low self-esteem. Based on these results, the researcher completed multiple post hoc tests to discover further implications of the data.

Results

In regards to the first hypothesis, an independent samples *t*-test was performed comparing the mean positive relational meaning for participants with low self-esteem ($M=56.44$, $SD=7.02$) to that for participants with high self-esteem ($M=59.41$, $SD=8.06$). This test was found to be statistically significant, $t(153)=-2.41$, $p < .05$, indicating that participants with high self-esteem interpreted nonverbal immediacy more positively than participants with low self-esteem. Thus, the study supported the first hypothesis. The strength of the relationship between self-esteem and positive relational meaning, as indexed by η^2 , was .04.

In reference to the second hypothesis, a one-way between-subjects analysis of variance (ANOVA) compared the mean positive relational meaning for the males with high self-esteem, males with low self-esteem, females with high self-esteem, and females with low self-esteem. This test was not found to be statistically significant, $F(3,151) = 1.98$, $p > .05$, indicating that this study did not find a meaningful effect of the combined variables gender and self-esteem on positive relational meaning. The second hypothesis was not supported.

When the second hypothesis was not supported, the researcher chose to look further into the variables involved through post hoc-testing. First, the researcher considered the interaction of self-esteem and gender. An independent samples *t*-test was performed comparing the mean self-esteem score for males ($M=33.87$, $SD=4.571$) with that for females ($M=31.22$, $SD=5.033$). This test was found to be statistically significant, $t(161)=3.509$, $p < .01$, indicating that males reported significantly higher self-esteem scores than did females. The strength of the relationship between gender and self-esteem, as indexed by η^2 , was .07.

The experimenter also wished to consider the relationship between gender and relational meaning after the second hypothesis was not supported. An independent samples *t*-test was

performed comparing the mean positive relational meaning for males ($M=58.48$, $SD=7.35$) with that for females ($M=57.61$, $SD=8.172$). This test was not found to be statistically significant, $t(154)=1.24$, $p>.05$, indicating that no meaningful effect of gender on positive relational meaning was found.

Discussion

This study found that participants with higher self-esteem viewed nonverbally immediate behaviors more positively than did participants with lower self-esteem. This is in agreement with the findings of Droney and Brooks (1993), Greene and Frandsen (1979), and Lagomarsino et al. (1998), concerning the relationship between eye contact (an element of immediacy) and self-esteem. Put in other words, nonverbal immediacy, which naturally occurs when one takes interest and desires closeness, is more favorably received by people who place higher value on themselves. First, this finding indicates that self-esteem is a potentially important factor contributing to the way a receiver's perspective can change the relational messages perceived. Secondly, it indicates that the relationship between immediacy interpretation and self-esteem is a significant one for further review by researchers in the field of immediacy. For the field of communication as a whole, this highlights the interdependency of communication research and psychology research as it pertains to the effect of human behavior and beliefs on human communication; self-esteem is a concept developed and studied in psychology, but it is evidently related to an important communication concept.

Also, it is therefore apparent that a person who sees himself or herself favorably will be more positively inclined towards those who affirm that favorable disposition, i.e.- by indicating interest and approach. This person will consequently receive more positive relational messages from favorable people. For the study of self-esteem, this finding is both quite intuitive and vital

to the continued study on the subject. It is also important to recognize that it shows a greater effect for people with high self-esteem, while those with low self-esteem respond more ambiguously to nonverbal displays of closeness and interest. In addition, this provides further evidence that people with low self-esteem tend to be more critical of and defensive about others (Baumeister, 1997).

Secondly, the study showed that males and females did not differ noticeably in the way they viewed nonverbal immediate behaviors. This is surprising, given the previous research suggesting that the experience of immediacy for males is different from females, in both interpretation and expression (Jones & Wirtz, 2007; Mehrabian, 1971; Richmond et al., 2003). The conflicting findings certainly beg further consideration and perhaps replication to isolate the source of this discrepancy. The final finding worthy of mention in this discussion is that males had significantly higher self-esteem scores than females did. This is in keeping with previous research on the relationship of gender and self-esteem (Diamantopoulou et al., 2008; Lundy & Rosenberg, 1987; Mruk, 1995)

Overall, the present study achieved the goals of the experimenter. However, it included several limitations. First, the researcher decided to include the demographics at the beginning of the survey, as opposed to at the end. The latter is sometimes preferable, as demographics can seem tedious to the participants at the start of a survey whereas, at the end participants might appreciate the simple questions in contrast to the more thought-provoking portions. In addition, the sound quality on the video used to display immediacy was better in some of the survey rooms than in others. This should not have had a great effect on the project, since the verbal aspect of the video was designed to be as unobtrusive as possible. However, this did create some variability in the study. In the future, it might be prudent to use a silent video to eliminate the

verbal effect. Also, the video utilized a young professor from the theater department, and this might have communicated a difference in power between the speaker and the participants. The researcher attempted to limit that effect, by having the professor dress casually and use a backpack, but this might have had a slight effect on the study, if any of the participants recognized the performer. In some of the classrooms, the students were allowed to leave as soon as they completed the study; this means that some of the participants might have rushed through the survey to leave class. The researcher attempted to lessen this effect by sharing permission to leave only as the participants turned in the survey, instead of in the starting instructions. Also, as with any study involving self-esteem, social desirability bias was a factor. This researcher attempted to limit its effect by assuring anonymity and confidentiality as much as possible and by sincerely requesting in the initial instructions complete honesty.

In the future, this topic of research might be further investigated by replicating the study for comparison at a larger or secular school. Differences might occur in these replications as a larger school might afford greater demographic diversity of participants, and a secular school might contribute greater ideological diversity. It might even be interesting to see how this study would operate in a non-academic situation or perhaps as a part of a graduate program. Participants in a graduate or non-academic environment might be more inclined to consider themselves of equal status as the adult in the video.

The lack of relationship between interpretation of immediacy as well as relational meaning and gender was a very interesting problem for the researcher. As such, she suggests that to consider further the interaction of gender, a pair of videos with a male and female actor respectively might be used to consider same-versus-opposite gender communication. In this

way, further research could possibly explain the lack of findings between these variables in this study.

The final suggestion the researcher would make for continued research is the consideration of negative relational messages for inclusion. As the previous research and fundamental theory indicates that immediacy communicates positive meanings, this study excluded items of dishonesty, task orientation, dominance, and formality from its scale of relational messages. Now that this study has shown receivers with high self-esteem receive more positive messages, it would be interesting and potentially relevant to see if receivers with low self-esteem receive more negative messages from normally positive expressions.

This study contributed to our knowledge in two primary areas, self-esteem and interpretation of nonverbal immediacy. It affirmed the trend that males tend to score higher than females on measures of self-esteem, and also, as hypothesized, that participants with high self-esteem tend to perceive nonverbal immediacy more positively than participants with low self-esteem. Ultimately, this experiment is a small-scale study that will hopefully be a springboard for further research, by both this researcher and others.

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Appendix A:
Interpreting Nonverbals

DIRECTIONS: The following questionnaire concerns your interpretation of nonverbal messages. All responses are voluntary, confidential, and anonymous. Choosing to complete the survey signifies your informed consent to participate in this study.

SECTION I: Circle or write the appropriate answer. Please answer each question.

1. Gender: Male Female 2. Age: _____
3. Classification: Freshman Sophomore Junior Senior
4. Ethnicity: Asian Black Hispanic White Other
5. Marital Status: Single Married Divorced Other
6. Major: _____

SECTION II: Circle the letter that indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scale:

SA= strongly agree A= agree D= disagree SD= strongly disagree

- | | |
|--|-----------------|
| 7. I feel that I am a person of worth, at least on an equal basis with others. | SA A D SD |
| 8. I feel that I have a number of good qualities. | SA A D SD |
| 9. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I am a failure. | SA A D SD |
| 10. I am able to do things as well as most other people. | SA A D SD |
| 11. I feel I do not have much to be proud of. | SA A D SD |
| 12. I take a positive attitude toward myself. | SA A D SD |
| 13. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself. | SA A D SD |
| 14. I wish I could have more respect for myself. | SA A D SD |
| 15. I certainly feel useless at times. | SA A D SD |
| 16. At times I think I am no good at all. | SA A D SD |

Stop. Do not turn the page until instructed to do so.

SECTION III: You should now have finished watching the video. Think about the woman in the video. Some of the questions may seem similar; this is necessary. Circle the letter that indicates the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement using the following scales:

SA= strongly agree A= agree NS= not sure D= disagree SD= strongly disagree

- | | | | | | |
|---|-----|---|----|---|----|
| 17. She was different than me. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 18. She tried to establish good relations (rapport). | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 19. She emphasized agreement between us. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 20. She wanted the discussion to be casual. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 21. She was very unemotional. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 22. She created a sense of distance between us. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 23. She seemed to have higher status than me. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 24. She did not care if I liked her. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 25. She wanted me to trust her. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 26. She expressed attraction toward me. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 27. She seemed to desire further communication with me. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 28. She made the conversation seem intimate. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 29. She considered us equals. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 30. She felt very relaxed talking with me. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 31. She acted bored by the conversation. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 32. She made the conversation seem superficial. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 33. She was frustrated with me. | SA | A | NS | D | SD |
| 34. Do you know the woman in the video? | Yes | | | | No |