



Give Me Some Space: How is Nonverbal Behavior Influenced by Gender and Weight?

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Introduction

Previous research suggests that nonverbal behavior may indicate bias among individuals. While body language and facial expression are important in studying a person's preferences in social situations, social distancing can also reveal similar preferences. In general, it is believed that people utilize personal space for protection or in order to avoid unpleasant feelings and conflict (Dosey & Meisels, 1969). Likewise, research reveals that individuals hold bias for and act differently towards others based on the similarities they share (Bottero, 2005). In terms of weight, it is evident that stigma exists in society and personal social interactions, because smaller individuals tend to avoid close proximity to larger individuals (Puhl & Brownell, 2001). There is a significant amount of anxiety and discomfort within the interactions between obese and non-obese people, often leaving intrapersonal exchanges problematic (Brownell, Puhl, Schwartz, & Rudd, 2005). Further, due to the evolutionary and cultural constructs within our society that reinforce the notion that women are submissive and unthreatening, leaving little room for potential danger, and men tend to dominate social situations (Luxen, 2005). Therefore, it is possible that both an individual's gender and weight may influence the amount of personal space they maintain in proximity to others

Research Purpose

The present study aims to investigate whether personal distance in public settings is directly influenced by the gender and weight of individuals.

Hypothesis

1. Individuals would stand closer to those who are moderately similar in weight than those who are completely similar in both gender and weight, moderately similar in gender, or completely dissimilar.
2. Individuals would stand closer to smaller women, than smaller men, bigger women, or bigger men.

Participants

Data were collected from 120 participants (63 women and 57 men; 63 smaller and 57 bigger individuals) at the Huntington Mall in Huntington, WV.

Procedure

To estimate the distance between individuals in line, the researcher measured floor tiles using a tape measurer. Each tile was approximately 20 inches in length, allowing the researcher to use the tiles as a guide and better estimate the approximate distance between all individuals.

Results

Data were analyzed using a 2 (participant gender: woman or man) x 2 (participant weight: smaller or bigger) between-subjects analysis of variance. Hypothesis one predicted that individuals would stand closer to those who were moderately similar in weight than those who were completely similar in both gender and weight, moderately similar in gender, or completely dissimilar. This hypothesis was supported. All observed groups did not stand equal distances from each other $F(3,116) = 39.96, p = .0000001$. Post Hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that individuals who were completely similar stood closer together than those similar in gender, similar in weight, and completely dissimilar. Additionally, individuals who were completely dissimilar stood further apart than those who were completely similar, similar in gender, and similar in weight. For additional descriptive statistics, see Table 1. The second hypothesis predicted that individuals would stand closer to smaller women, than smaller men, bigger women, or bigger men. This hypothesis was also supported. Actors did not stand equal distances from all targets, regardless of target gender and race $F(3,116) = 4.36, p = .006$. Post Hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that individuals stood closer to smaller women and men than bigger men. For additional descriptive statistics, see Table 2.

Table 1

Distance in Terms of Similarity

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Highly Similar	27.38 _{ad}	5.09
Similar in Gender	32.63 _{bd}	7.88
Similar in Weight	35.00 _{bd}	6.73
Completely Dissimilar	44.04 _{bc}	5.48

Note. The subscripts indicate the significant differences between data sets. ^d*M* indicates the similarity between the data sets with same subscript and the significance difference it has in comparison to ^c*M*.

Table 2

Distance in Terms of Individual Characteristics

	Smaller		Bigger	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Women Targets	31.62 _a	9.28	35.38 _b	6.91
Men Targets	31.15 _a	8.86	37.74 _b	7.62

Note. Subscripts indicate significant differences at $p = .006$

Potential Limitations

The limited amount of participants and single location for data collection prevents the findings from being generalizable to an average population. A greater number of participants would allow the research to make an inference that reflects a broader population. In addition, the location in which the data were collected could have skewed results. In this particular study, the individuals had more space to utilize while standing in line. Therefore, collecting data in multiple locations could create greater reliability and remove the variable of allowed space. In addition, the method in which the researcher determined the space between each individual may have limited the validity of the results. Measuring the tiles on the floor from afar leaves room for measurement error.

References

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