

Status and sex: Some touching observations*

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An observational study of touching in public was made, with attention to status variables (sex, race, age, SES) and settings. Results support the hypothesis that touch privilege is a correlate of status. The dual nature of touch as a sign of both status and solidarity is compared with Brown's formulation of the similar use of terms of address.

Though there is an extensive literature on nonverbal communication (Duncan, 1969), relatively little attention has been paid to the communication of status or power, especially by the experimentally oriented. At the same time, many studies in this literature have reported findings of sex differences in terms of status relationships between men and women. Furthermore, there is sparse experimental literature on the social (as opposed to the sensory) aspects of touch, and what there is tends to emphasize sexual connotations (see, for example, Montagu, 1971, and Morris, 1971).

This paper presents an observational study of touching in public, with attention to several status dimensions, as a test of the hypothesis that touching is a status correlate in American society. A major thesis of the paper is that women are subjected to reminders of their inferior status in our society (Hacker, 1951) with nonverbal cues that symbolize the power of the communicator. This hypothesis arises from the consideration of interactions between pairs of persons of differing status, picturing who would be more likely to touch the other (put an arm around the shoulder, a hand on the back, tap the chest, hold the wrist, etc.): e.g., teacher and student; master and servant; policeman and accused; doctor and patient; minister and parishioner; adviser and advisee; foreman and worker; businessman and secretary. It is, of course, often considered an affront, insubordination, for a person of lower status to touch one of higher status.

Goffman (1956), in his intriguing essay, "The Nature of Deference and Demeanor," wrote of the "touch system" in a research hospital, and observed, "The doctors touched other ranks as a means of conveying friendly support and comfort, but other ranks tended to feel that it would be presumptuous for them to reciprocate a doctor's touch, let alone initiate such contact with a doctor [p. 74]."

What psychological investigation of touching there has

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been provides some evidence in support of the thesis that females are touched by others more than males are (Jourard, 1966; Jourard & Rubin, 1968). Studies of child-mother interaction have reported greater touching of female children than of males, at least from age 6 months on (Clay, 1968; Goldberg & Lewis, 1969; Lewis, 1972).

Psychologists have also advanced sexual explanations of touching. Jourard & Rubin (1968) take the view that "touching is equated with sexual intent, either consciously, or at a less-conscious level [p. 47]." Lewis (1972) writes, "In general, for men in our culture, proximity (touching) is restricted to the opposite sex and its function is primarily sexual in nature [p. 237]."

The first hypothesis of this study was that persons of higher status will touch persons of lower status more frequently than vice versa, in the areas of age (older persons being of higher status), race (whites being of higher status than other races), socioeconomic status, and sex (males being of higher status). It was further hypothesized that touch would be reciprocated more frequently by higher-status persons touched by lower-status ones than vice versa, the failure to reciprocate indicating an acceptance of the legitimacy of the touch, and reciprocation indicating a reassertion of power. Different settings were utilized without specific hypotheses, except that there might be differences in touching patterns in different settings.

METHOD

A young white male research assistant,¹ naive as to the thesis of this paper, spent some 60 h observing incidents of touching in public in the city of Baltimore and nearby. He recorded sex, age, race, and approximate socioeconomic status of persons observed touching (intentional touch with the hand). In addition, the setting and presence or absence of reciprocation of touch were noted. Cases of mutual touch, where initiation of touch was not observed, were recorded but not included in the analysis.

RESULTS

Of the total 113 observations,² 12 were discarded either because the recording of one of the variables was questioned or because initiation of touching was not observed. Of the remaining 101 observations, 88 were of whites interacting, 9 were of blacks, 1 was of Asians, and 3 were of interracial interaction. There were, therefore, insufficient data to examine race as a status variable correlated with touching. Analyses were made both of data combined across races and of the 88 cases of whites touching whites, separately. Analyses of the total 101 observations will be reported, and where there is any discrepancy in the two sets of results, they will be reported. Otherwise, it may be assumed that both sets of data gave similar results.

Chi-square tests were made on the data because of its nominal order of measurement. Expectancies for sex

Table 1
Instances of Touching Categorized by Sex and Age Relationships of Toucher and Touched

Sex of Toucher	Sex of Person Touched	Toucher Older†	Toucher and Touched Same Age*		Toucher Younger‡	Total
			Over 30	Under 30		
Male	Female	10	5	23	4	42
Female	Female	7	2	7	1	17
Male	Male	8	3	6	0	17
Female	Male	11	5	7	2	25
All Categories		36	15	43	7	101

†Older or younger by 10 years or more

*Within 10 years of age

combinations were calculated from the percentage of males (49%) and females (51%) in the population (U.S. Bureau of Census estimates, 1968). (The use of marginals to generate expectancies would assume the proportions in the marginals to be a given, whereas those frequencies themselves were under question. It can be noted, however, that testing expectancies by the marginals also gives significant results.) Expectancies for instances of older touching younger were assumed to be equal to those of younger touching older; similarly, higher SES touchers were given equal expectancy to that of lower SES touchers. Observations of older and younger same-age pairs, or of different SES categories of the same type, were assumed to be affected by the O's choice of environments, and were left out of analysis.

Table 1 shows the sex and age breakdown of touching incidents. The comparison of the older vs younger touchers yields a chi square (one-sample test) of 19.56, with one degree of freedom and a probability less than .001. For the differences in frequencies for the four sex combinations (all cases), $\chi^2 = 18.76$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$. There is no interaction between sex combination and age category in this table.

Considering only those cases in which all other recorded demographic data are equal except sex, the predominance of males touching females is even greater: 23 cases, compared with 5 in each of the three other categories ($\chi^2 = 25.59$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$). When observations involving children (15 and younger) and not involving children are separated, the adult cases yield $\chi^2 = 14.20$, $df = 3$, $p < .01$. Cases in which children are involved, however, show a pattern of little difference by sex combinations. Of only four cases in which a child was observed to initiate touch with an older person, all were touching females; and of only three cases observed of children touching each other, all were touching females.

Judgments of socioeconomic status were extremely difficult to make with accuracy, and only those in which there were clearly observable differences (e.g., waitress-customer) were included in this analysis; many fell into the same-status category. There were 14 cases in which the toucher was judged to be of higher status, and 5 in which the toucher was judged to be of lower status. The chi square one-sample test applied to this difference gives a value of 4.26, $df = 1$, $p < .05$. The analysis failed

to indicate significance when applied to white interactors only, with 12 higher-status touchers and 5 lower-status ones.

Reciprocity of touch was confidently recorded in 88 cases; the hypothesis of different distributions by status categories, according to presence or absence of reciprocation of touch, however, was not strongly supported by the data. When observations were limited to those involving only white adults of approximately equal age, there was a significant difference between the instances of women's nonreciprocation of men's touch (11 cases) and men's nonreciprocation of women's (6 cases), $\chi^2 = 4.17$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$. Similarly, nonreciprocation by younger persons of the touch of older ones (across sex categories) is significantly more common (9 cases) than nonreciprocation by older persons touched by younger ones (1 case), $\chi^2 = 6.4$, $df = 1$, $p < .02$.

The settings variable was divided into two grand categories of indoors (bank, stores, restaurant, doctor's office, college buildings) and outdoors (shopping plaza, beach, college campus, outdoor concert, and party), since tables involving single settings would contain cells with small Ns. There were 69 cases for which such classification can be made. Others either have unspecified settings or ones not easily classified (e.g., going in and out of doors). Table 2 shows the distribution by sex combinations for the two types of settings: there are clear differences, following the previously observed pattern, for outdoors, but little differences in the distribution for indoors. This table yields $\chi^2 = 11.93$, $df = 3$, $p < .01$. There were no significant differences in distributions between settings for the other status dimensions.

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that higher-status persons will more frequently touch lower-status ones—when status is derived from socioeconomic status, age, or sex is supported by the results. The comparison of touching among the sexes when all other status variables are equal is particularly striking. It shows that all else equal, men touch women at an even greater rate; when other things are unequal, as for instance when women have other status advantages in the absence of the sex one, there is more chance of women initiating touch. The hypothesis that higher-status persons would more frequently reciprocate received touch is supported only in a qualified manner.

Differences between indoor and outdoor settings provide an

interesting contrast: the pattern of sexual status shows up only in the outdoor setting, with indoor interaction being more evenly spread over sex combinations. This finding cannot be unequivocally interpreted, but it may be that indoors, power is more easily communicated by cues other than touching, such as subtle eye movements, gestures, voice shifts, etc., while outdoors, only grosser physical acts, like touching, suffice. Another possible explanation is that outdoor interaction, being more public, necessitates stricter attention to power structure, while indoor interaction, especially in the relatively impersonal yet public settings visited, is more informal and encourages the relaxation of the power relationship.

The hypothesis that touch communicates status is not necessarily in conflict with an alternative interpretation, that it communicates closeness. Touch may be regarded as a nonverbal equivalent of calling another by first name (Brown & Gilman, 1960); that is, used reciprocally it indicates solidarity; when nonreciprocal, it indicates status. Likewise, as with naming and other expressions of intimacy (Brown, 1965), movement toward increased intimacy is initiated by the person of higher status. Furthermore, as with the status norm described in Brown (1965, pp. 56-57), there is evidence that the form used toward subordinates or members of a lower class is found in reciprocal use among the members of that class: Clay (1968), Hore (1970), and Lewis & Wilson (1971) all report greater physical contact among mother-child pairs in lower classes than in higher ones.

The greater frequency of touching between the sexes, when compared to within sexes, may suggest either a component of heterosexual attraction or one of inhibition of tactual expression between members of the same sex. The hypothesis that touching indicates no more than sexual attraction when it involves the two sexes is sometimes offered as a complete explanation of why men touch women more. But in this case the question must be asked why women don't touch men more than they do, since sexual attraction could be said to be involved in that instance as well. In the absence of any clear reasons to believe that women are less sexually motivated biologically than men, a lesser expression of sex must be laid to an inhibition on the part of women to display sexual interest in this manner. At this point, we are back where we started: the question becomes one of why one sex group feels free to express its motivation tactually and another does not. The status difference, which is a common variable underlying the differential utilization of touch in other status dimensions, most parsimoniously explains the difference in touching between the sexes.

It may well be argued that there are many types of touch, and that touching between and among different status and solidarity levels may be delineated in much more precise fashion, with attention to frequency, heaviness, duration, and form of touch, as well as part of the body touched. The present study does indeed use a gross measure, partly because of the necessities of natural observational study, and partly as a beginning to rough out the areas of interest in a field which demands much broader study. It should be noted also that this study has looked only at observable status variables, but the similar use of touch in power relationships (highly correlated with status, but not necessarily identical) is also implied.

The study of nonverbal communication in relation to socioeconomic status and power should not be belittled. Argyle et al (1970) have shown that nonverbal cues have over four times the impact of verbal ones when the two are combined. The use of these unspoken cues to support the social order and control social behavior has been too little studied, but it may easily be hypothesized that they serve as a first line of control which is little understood by either those they affect or by psychologists. The study of nonverbal communication has special relevance to the study of sex roles, since Argyle et al also report that female Ss were relatively more responsive to nonverbal (compared with verbal) cues than were men.

Table 2
Instances of Touching Categorized by Sex of Toucher and Touched and by Nature of Setting

Sex of Toucher	Sex of Person Touched	Outdoors	Indoors
Male	Female	19	9
Female	Female	4	10
Male	Male	1	9
Female	Male	8	9
All Categories		32	37

In summary, the results support the hypothesis that touching is a status variable, with higher-status persons having touch "privilege" over lower-status persons, and that this system applies in sex, age, and socioeconomic status relations. One may be at first appalled to consider that something so human, so natural, as touching, should be perverted into a symbol of status and power. But further reflection reminds us that this is the story of other simple facts of our being, unrelated to status, such as clothing, shelter, and food.

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NOTES

- The author wishes to thank Martin Katzenstein for collecting the observation data.
- The 113 instances of touching observed in some 60 h of observation give an average of slightly less than 2 touches per hour. Jourard (1966), in his first study, reported observing 2 touches in 1 h of observation of a coffee shop couple in Gainesville, Florida (compared with 180 in San Juan, 110 in Paris, and 0 in London), and 4 touches in 2 h of observation in a Florida hospital. One is tempted to suggest an American touching-in-public constant of around 2 touches per hour. The present author shrinks, however, from having a constant named in her honor, in the hope that these were bad days.

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