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GENDER & CULTURAL COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

Gregorio Billikopf
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In my seminars on interpersonal negotiation skills, communication, conflict management and mediation skills we often speak about cultural and gender differences. Do Hispanics really make less eye contact than non-Hispanics? Do men or women expect or require more eye contact as a general rule? Do men touch women more than women touch men in casual conversation? Proxemics (personal space), haptics (touch), and kinesics (body and face) are names given for studies in these topics that attempt to answer such questions.

An increased understanding of these issues is important for improving our day to day interactions with others. It would be a mistake to take the results of these research-based studies and stereotype behaviors. It is much better to keep in mind that these sorts of differences exist and be sensitive regarding possible differences, as we deal with others. In an article, [Cultural Differences? or Are we really that different?](#) (1999), I made the point that people within any given culture show greater differences than people between cultures.

Mediators may be especially interested in some of these topics. For instance, when parties hold grudges towards each other, increasing eye contact between them may polarize them further. But once individuals permit more humanity in each other, increased eye contact may act to increase positive feelings among the parties (Billikopf, 2009). Similar comments may apply to proxemics (Knapp & Hall, 2010).

2009 Survey

With the help of several agricultural trade journals, my electronic forums and my Webpage, I put forth a short survey to help answer some questions on proxemics and related matters. Although this was intended as an informal study, after deleting duplicates I ended up with more than 3,800

responses. I collected data for about two years up to mid-2009. Agricultural and non-agricultural subjects from around the world participated. Most of the questions were Likert-scale type questions (i.e., ranging from completely *agree* {1} to completely *disagree* {5}).

While I obtained mostly statistically significant results (Pearson Chi-Square), readers should keep in mind that this study is based on self-reports rather than on observation. Having said this, Knapp & Hall (2010) suggest that self-reports have shown validity.

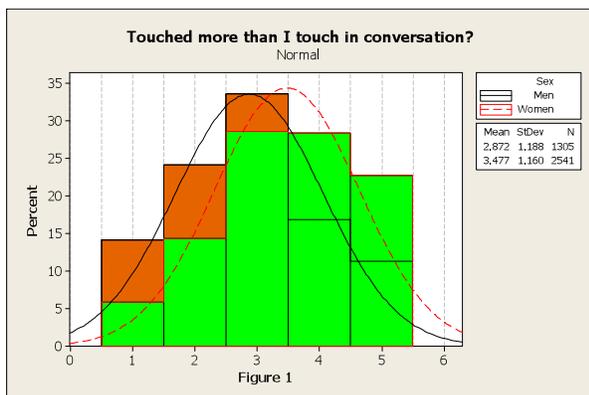
Results

Both men and women report a keen awareness of whether *they touch others* when they speak. Even so, men, in contrast to women, seem to be more cognizant of their touching behavior ($p < 0.001$). Both men and women also report an acute awareness of whether they have *been touched* by another when they speak. Men seem slightly more cognizant than women about being touched ($p < 0.01$). Europeans/Caucasians are the most likely to notice they were touched, followed by mixed ethnicity populations and Hispanics. Native populations and Middle Easterners were the least likely to notice they were touched ($p < 0.001$).

Neither men nor women report that *women* invade their personal space very frequently. Men are a bit less likely (in contrast to women) to feel that a *woman* has invaded his personal space ($p < 0.01$). Also, neither men nor women report that *men* invade their personal space very frequently. Men are more likely than women to feel that a *man* has invaded his personal space ($p < 0.001$), however. Both men and women feel that *men* invade their personal space more frequently than women do.

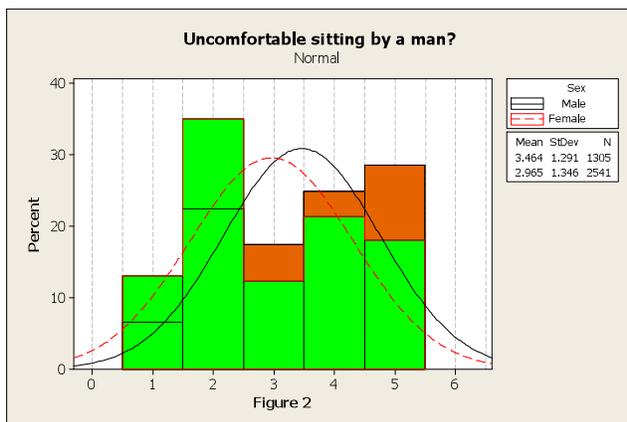
At the one extreme, Hispanics (followed by Europeans/Caucasians) are least likely to feel that women invade their personal space. At the other extreme, Middle Easterners (followed by Africans/Blacks) are the most likely to feel women invade their personal space ($p < 0.01$).

Men generally report that *women* touch them more than they touch women in friendly conversation. Women confirm this observation by stating that they touch men more than men touch them ($p < 0.001$, Figure 1). The literature endorses these results (Knapp & Hall, 2010; Wood, 2011). Studies show that women tend to touch in a more affiliative manner while men tend to use touch as an expression of power (Wood, 2011).



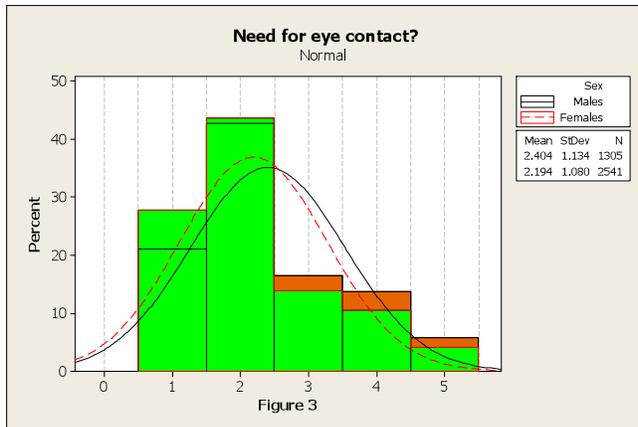
Neither men nor women generally report feeling uncomfortable sitting by a *woman* when using public transportation or in the movie theater. There is no significant difference, in terms of discomfort, between how men and women feel about sitting by a woman. Yet both men and women report a preference for sitting by a woman ($p < 0.001$). Some respondents wanted to clarify that this difference has nothing to do with the person's sex, but rather the fact that women tend to occupy less space than men. In contrast, there is more ambiguity of feelings for both men and women about sitting by a man (Figure 2), although men (in contrast to women) generally seem to feel less discomfort about having to sit by other men ($p < 0.001$).

The literature (Knapp & Hall, 2010) notes that: (1) women tend to stand closer to other women when conversing, compared to the distances between men—and that both men and women stand closer to women; (2) taller people stand further away than shorter individuals regardless of sex. I believe this last point should be taken into consideration in carrying out studies regarding ethnic and sex differences in personal space studies. Also, there are specific differences in terms of greetings and good-byes.

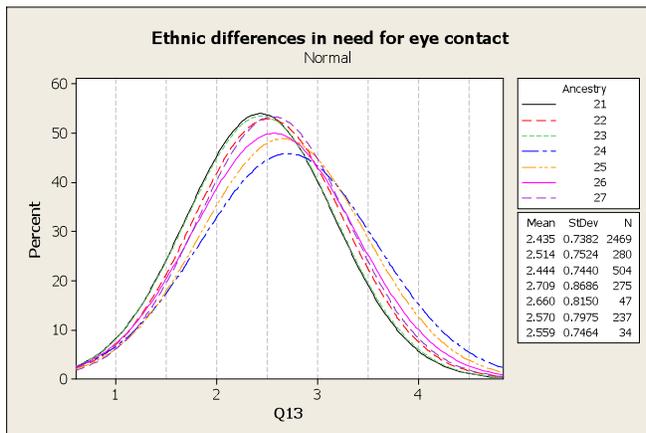


Both men and women report making an effort not to touch the man or the woman who is sitting next to them in public transportation or at a public event. Women try harder than men not to touch the person next to them, especially when that person is a man ($p < 0.001$). The same tendency exists when the person next to them is a woman, but not enough to be statistically significant. Respondents were also asked for the reason they avoided touching the person next to them. Being polite was a bit more important to men, while avoiding being uncomfortable was more important to women. A greater number of men did not care if they touched the person next to them compared to the women's responses to these same questions ($p < 0.001$).

A greater number of women, in contrast to men (Figure 3, where 1 indicates a stronger preference for eye contact), report that they require eye contact when carrying out conversation ($p < 0.001$). This makes sense because women generally tend to use eye contact to build affiliation while men may also use it to exert power (Wood, 2011). From an ethnic perspective, Europeans/Caucasians as well as Hispanics reported the greatest needs for eye contact; and Africans/Blacks and Middle Easterners reported the least need for eye contact during conversation ($p < 0.001$).



A greater number of men, in contrast to women, report that they notice an invasion of space from someone of a different culture, race or ethnicity ($p < 0.001$). This question was resented by a number of respondents who felt they were being accused of being discriminatory.



A greater number of men, in contrast to women, consider themselves punctual ($p < 0.001$).

Some final thoughts

There are differences between the sexes as well as cultures that are worth studying. Becoming aware of some of the areas in which people differ can help us become more attentive and effective communicators. A number of respondents made the point of explaining that in some behaviors (such as eye contact, touch, etc.) they are not typical of their gender or ethnicity. Turning differences into stereotypes may cause more harm than good. When it comes to effective interpersonal communication it is critical to think about *individual* differences rather than population differences (see [Cultural Differences?](#) 2009).

We can, however, take some steps to notice other people's preferences and make our own clear. If I need someone's undivided attention I may want to ask this person for a good time to talk. One friend mentioned how our cell phones—whether we are checking our e-mails or texting—

often make it so we are less than present for others. We can try to reduce distractions that send others the unintended message that we really are not all that interested in listening.

References

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Short version

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