

The Relationship between Dyadic Conversations and Conversation Distances

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ABSTRACT: Research has shown that there is a significant relationship between dyadic conversations and conversation distances among college students. To further determine this relationship, a total number of eighteen undergraduate students from an Experimental Psychology Lab course randomly observed three dyads (pairs) of male-male, female-female, and male-female students conversing with each other on the campus of a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in the Southeast. The participants estimated and recorded the distances, in inches, between the faces of individuals in these three dyads. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) performed on the data, and subsequent post-hoc analysis using the Tukey HSD, indicated a statistically significant relationship between dyadic conversations and conversation distances. Male dyads do stand significantly farther apart when in conversation, that both the female dyads and the mixed (male-female) dyads. Results are discussed in terms of proxemics theory.

KEYWORDS: *The Relationship between Dyadic Conversation and Conversation Distances*

I. INTRODUCTION

Dyadic communication is defined as a structured, face to face interaction between two people, where the duo exchange ideas, beliefs, and values through verbal and nonverbal conversation (Hall, 1990). People surround themselves with a personal space that they claim as their own, and they tend to become uncomfortable when other people invade their space. Our personal space helps us feel comfortable when we communicate with other people. Why does it seem that the distance between the two conversationalists relies on the gender of the person opposite them? Proxemics and social norms could be huge determinant in conversation distances.

Proxemics is the study of human uses of space and the effects that population density has on behavior, communication, and social interaction (Hall, 1990). Proxemics is one among several subcategories in the study of nonverbal communication which includes: intimate distance, personal distance, social distance, and public distance (Hall, 1963). Intimate distance is that which is used for very confidential communications. This zone of distance is characterized by zero to two feet of space between two individuals. An example of intimate distance is two people hugging, holding hands, or standing side-by-side. People in intimate distances share a unique level of comfort with one another. Those who are not comfortable with someone who approaches them in the intimate zone will experience a great deal of social discomfort or awkwardness. Personal distance is used for talking with family and close friends. Although it gives a person a little more space than intimate distance, it is still very close in proximity and may involve touching. Personal distance can range from two to four feet. Like intimate distance, if a stranger approaches someone in the personal zone, he or she is likely to feel uncomfortable being in such close proximity with the stranger. Social distance is used in business transactions, meeting new people and interacting with groups of people. Social distance has a large range in the distance that it can incorporate. From four to twelve, it is clear that social distance depends on the situation. Social distance may be used by students, co-workers, or acquaintances. Public distance is measured at twelve or more feet between persons and is usually observed in formal lecture settings (Hall, 1990).

Social norms are the rules of behavior that are considered acceptable in a group or society. People who do not follow these norms may be shunned or suffer some consequence (Elsenbroich & Gilbert, 2014). Being a part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) community is often not readily accepted by society in the United States. Those who profess to be homosexual or transgendered are often ridiculed, bullied, and sometimes cast out by family members and the community at large. Since men are viewed and expected to be masculine,

anything that seems to even closely resemble feminism is seen as homosexual and frowned upon (Adolfson, Iedema, & Keuzenkamp (2010). This assessment may well be why men tend to stand further apart when conversing with each other because standing too close may look intimate, which might indicate homosexuality. Females are not viewed as negatively as men are when it comes to homosexuality, but even though they tend to stand closer than two men, they still do not stand close enough to indicate intimacy. This assessment could explain why two females would stand closer to each other during a conversation while two men create more distance. Intimacy between males and females are not frowned upon in society, which could explain why the distance between the opposite sexes during conversation is immensely closer than that of the same sex (Elsenbroich & Gilbert, 2014). It should also be noted that the distance between each pair (dyad) is based on the nature of the relationship between those two individuals in conversation. Generally, those who are dating will stand closer while conversing than those who are not in any type of relationship. Accordingly, it was therefore hypothesized that there is a significant relationship between dyadic conversations and conversation distances among college students..

II. METHODS

Participants

A total number of eighteen (N=18) undergraduate college students who were enrolled in an Experimental Psychology lab class at a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) served as participants (Pp) in this study. There were 13 females and 5 with ages ranging from 20 to 25 years old. All participants were either Psychology majors or minors.

III. PROCEDURE

All participants were asked by the Professor of the course to randomly observe three separate dyads (pairs) of individuals, who were standing and engaged in conversation, and estimate and record the distances (in inches) between the faces of each pair. The dyads were: male-male, female-female, and male-female. The observations were done unobtrusively and were limited to areas on the university campus (e.g., quad, library, café, student center).

IV. RESULTS

The data were analyzed by a ONE-WAY Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) which indicated that there was, indeed, a statistically significant difference in conversation distance between the three dyads [$F(2,51) = 58.42$; $p < .01$]. See Table 1. A Tukey post-hoc analysis, with an HSD of 4.02, further revealed that two males ($M = 30.2$) do stand significantly farther when in conversation than do two females ($M = 19.05$) ($p < .01$). Two males ($M = 30.2$) also stand significantly farther when in conversation than do a male and a female ($M = 12.55$) ($p < .01$). In addition, two females ($M = 19.05$) do stand significantly farther than a male and female ($M = 12.55$) when in conversation ($p < .01$). See Table 2.

Table 1

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Summary Table

Source	SS	DF	MS	F
Between Groups	2,874.34	(K – 1) 2	1,437.17	58.42*
Within Groups	1,254.49	(N – K) 51	24.60	
Total	4,128.83			

* $p < .01$

Table 2
Group Mean Comparisons

I (M-M) 30.2	<u>VS</u>	II (F-F) 19.05	= 11.15*
I (M-M) 30.2	<u>VS</u>	III (M-F) 12.55	= 17.65*
II (F-F) 19.05	<u>VS</u>	III (M-F) 12.55	= 6.5*

*Significant

V. DISCUSSION

The hypothesis guiding this study was supported. There is, indeed, a significant relationship between dyadic conversation and conversation distances. Why are there significant differences between male-male, female-female, and male-female dyads? According to Little, Ulehla, and Henderson (1968) and Dean, Willis and Hewitt (1975) the physical distances at which interactions with others take place are determined by some interacting factors. The sensory acuity of the individuals involved sets upper and lower bounds, but within those limits, the subject matter of the conversation as well as the extent of acquaintance of the participants, and the setting of the transaction, each contribute to the distance at which a specific interaction will occur. In addition, Hall (1964) found that for a given culture, typical interaction distances can be specified simply on the basis of the formal nature of the transaction (e.g., casual personal versus social-consultative).

Sommer (1959) has also demonstrated that the pattern of leadership, the amount, and the type of conversation can be predictably modified by varying the interactional distance. Indeed, Little, Ulehla, and Henderson (1968) note that the setting of the transactions and the content of the interaction significantly influence the distance judged appropriate for a given interaction, but the degree of the friendship of the dyad members was by far the more potent variable. They further note that shared beliefs and attitude congruence are potent forces in inducing friendship. It is a reasonable assumption, therefore, that if members of a dyad are purported to share similar beliefs or values, then their interactions, would be seen as taking place at closer distances than if they differed in those beliefs or values (Little, 1968).

In identifying the four zones for interactions (intimate, personal, social, public), Hall (1990) asserted that the selection of a zone for a particular transaction was dependent upon the degree of the intimacy of the relationship for the individuals involved. Studies in which interaction distance has been manipulated as an independent variable have shown that being approached at a close distance can lead to heightened emotionality, withdrawal from the interaction, dislike for the others if both parties are male, and reduced ability to persuade a subject (Dean, Willis, & Hewitt, 1975).

As supported by previous research findings and Hall's proxemics theory, it is very common for male-male dyads to stand farther apart when conversing with each other, and male-female pairs to stand closer due to the appropriate interaction factor between the participants. Studies show that participants conversation distances change according to their ethnic traditions, their level of intimacy, their prior relationship, their business together, and the available physical space and circumstance. Men tend to stand farther apart because they are just less engaged in conversation with other men than they are with women. Although female-female conversation distances are naturally closer than males -- because it is easier to engage in conversation -- they are subject to be the closest with males because of potential intimacy. The present study, therefore, does support by previous research which indicates that male-male dyads stand farther apart and male-female dyads stand the closest. Thus, there is, indeed, a significant relationship between dyadic conversations and conversation distances.

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