Perceptions of Nonverbal Communication: A Comparison of Corporate and Undergraduate Samples

Brandy Olson

Faculty Sponsor: Betsy Morgan, Department of Psychology

ABSTRACT

Research shows that the difference between men and women's body postures caus-
es others to perceive their power levels differently. Due to an increase in women's
labor force participation, perceptions of the gender differences in body language
have generated much research interest. This study examined gender and the percep-
tion of power as related to nonverbal behavior with particular emphasis on a com-
parison of an undergraduate sample with a corporate sample. The hypotheses for
this research were that participants would associate dominant body language with
males more so than with the females and that professionals would rate females as
more dominant than professionals would. Fifty five undergraduates (20 male, 35
female) and thirty-four professionals (14 male and 20 female) rated either a photo
of a man and woman both in submissive positions or a photo of a man and woman
both in a dominant position. Both the students and the professionals perceived the
stimulus individuals sitting in the dominant positions as more dominant than the
stimulus individuals in the submissive position. It was also found the male partici-
pants perceived the female stimulus person as less dominant than the male stimulus
person.

INTRODUCTION

As observers, we watch others' nonverbal communications to, in part, determine their sta-
tus within the context of a relationship (Burgeon, 1991). Men tend to use "high status cues",
such as expanded limb positions and relaxed posture, to portray dominance (Carli, Loebner,
& LaFleur, 1995). Women, on the other hand, tend to use "subordinate cues", such as con-
striction of arms and legs, head canting, and upright postures, to portray submissiveness
(Carli, Loebner, & LaFleur, 1995). These differences in nonverbal communication are social-
ly learned and generally remain unnoticed unless someone breaks the socially accepted
norms (Brown, Dovidio, & Ellyson, 1990). Due to the increase in women's labor force par-
ticipation, nonverbal behavior in a work context (particularly in regards to dominance and
submission) has generated much research interest. This study examined gender and the per-
ception of power as related to nonverbal behavior with particular emphasis on a comparison
of an undergraduate sample with a corporate sample.

The difference between men and women's body postures causes others to perceive their
power levels differently. Burgeon (1991) found that males were seen as dominant when they
had tense posture and close proximity with others. Proximity did not affect the amount of
female's perceived dominance. It was also found that an open, relaxed posture was seen as

informal in females, but was seen as dominant in males. This research suggests that the same behavior done by a woman and a man might be interpreted differently. According to the "expectation states" theory the differences in male and female nonverbal communication are caused by the expectation one has for their own and others' performance within a group (Ridgeway, Berger, & Smith, 1985). Gender is a categorical cue, which is a cue about an individual's performance outside the group. Other categorical cues might include age and race. The male gender is generally seen to have a greater contribution to the group based on this one categorical cue. Because others' have a high expectation of the male gender, men use dominant task cues such as more dominant body language and taking the head position at a table.

Wilson and Lloyd (1990) found evidence for the "expectation states" theory. They found that the school of affiliation affected individuals use of dominant or submissive body language. Undergraduates from the school of science, regardless of gender, used dominant body language, while the undergraduates from the school of arts used submissive body language. Wilson and Lloyd interpreted these findings to indicate that the students from the school of sciences felt themselves superior to the students from the school of arts, and would use dominant body language when asked to pose for a student from the school of the arts. Undergraduates from the school of the sciences expected more from themselves and less from the students from the school of the arts. This expectation influenced the type of task cues used when posing for a picture. Overall, these findings suggest that contextual cues are at least equally important as gender.

Other research suggests that body language is primarily related to status and not to gender. Hall (1996) found that people in high status positions touched others more than did individuals in low status positions. Individuals in the differing status positions also used different types of touches. For example, individuals in low status positions frequently used the handshake. This touch is less personal than the spot touch, such as a brief touch to anther's shoulder or arm, that individuals with high status preferred. Baglan and Nelson (1982) found that certain types of nonverbal communication were considered appropriate for individuals in high status positions, but were considered inappropriate for individuals in low status positions. For example, participants thought that it was more appropriate for a higher status individual to intrude on anther's personal space, and it was more appropriate for a high status individual to assume a relaxed posture, than it was for a low status individual. Overall, the research on nonverbal behavior suggests that the perceived appropriateness of an individual's behavior will influence the judgments made by others towards that person and the communication made with a person.

The current study examined males' and females' perception of dominant and submissive body language and the social consequences of using body language stereotypically associated with the opposite gender. This study used both corporate and undergraduate samples. Previous experiments on this topic have been done primarily with undergraduates. The hypotheses for this research were that participants would rate the males as more dominant than the females (in both the dominant and submissive positions), and that the professionals would rate the female in the dominant position as more dominant than the undergraduates would.

METHOD

Participants

The sample consisted of 55 (20 male and 35 female) undergraduate students There were also 34 professionals in the sample (14 male and 20 female) . The students ranged in age from 18 to 30 with a mean age of 20.23. The corporate sample ranged in age from 22 to 60, with a mean age of 42.01. The undergraduate students were volunteers from the General Psychology class at University of Wisconsin La Crosse, who received an extra-credit point for their participation The business people were from a company whose headquarters are in Madison, Wisconsin and their responses were collected in Madison.

Materials

Two questionnaires were used; each participant randomly received one of the two ques-tionnaires. The questionnaires differed only in the picture that was handed out with it. One questionnaire contained a picture of a male and a female in a dominant position, whereas the other questionnaire contained a picture of a male and a female in a submissive position. The participants were asked to rate the individuals in the pictures on a variety of traits such as likeability, dominance, and confidence. The participants rated the pictures on these traits using a four point Likert scale. The subjects were also asked to complete a demographic questionnaire, which asked about their age, gender, education level, and family life.

Procedure

The participants were each handed an informed consent as they entered the testing room. After the informed consent was collected the participants were given the survey to complete. When the participants completed the survey, the survey was collected, the participants were debriefed, thanked for their time and left.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the mean ratings across the entire sample for both conditions stratified by the gender of the stimulus individual. Below results are reported first by gender, then by position and gender, then undergraduates are compared to the corporate sample, and, finally, post-hoc analyses on likeability are reported.

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Table 1: Mean ratings and standard deviations in both conditions by gender of stimulus individual.

	Submissive Stimulus N=46	Dominant Stimulus N=43
Female Stimulus Individual		
	M=1.71 SD=.69	M=2.28 SD=.96
Male Stimulus Individual		
	M=2.13 SD=.81	M=2.72 SD=.91

* Individuals in the pictures were rated on a four point Likert scale of dominance where a "4" indicated high dominance.

Gender and Dominance

The hypothesis that the dominance ratinys of the males would be higher than the females (in the submissive position and the dominant position) was supported. A two-tailed, paired samples t-test found a significant difference between the mean ratings of dominance for the male (M = 2.42) and the mean ratings of dominance for the female (M = 1.99) (t = 4.40, p < .05) A two- tailed, paired samples t-test was done with participants' ratings of individuals in the submissive position. A significant difference was found between the mean rating of the female in the submissive position (M = 1.72) and the mean rating of the male in the submissive position (M = 2.13) (t = 3.61, p < .05) A two- tailed, paired samples t-test comparing the mean rating of dominance of the female in the dominant position with the mean rating of dominance of the male in the dominant position was done. A significant difference was found between the mean rating of dominance of the female in the dominant position (M = 2.28) and the male in the dominant position (M = 2.72) (t = 2.75, p < .05)

Dominance by Gender and Position

A 2X2 ANOVA was done to look at the effects of position (dominant or submissive) and gender of participant, on the students' ratings of dominance of the female. A significant main effect of position was found. There was a significant difference between the students ratings of dominance of the female in the dominant position (M = 2.35) and the female in the submissive position (M = 1.69) (F = 9.48, p < .05). A 2X2 ANOVA was also done to look at the effects of position (dominant or submissive) and gender of participants, on the undergraduates' ratings of the dominance of the male. No significant differences were found. The mean rating of the dominance of the male in the dominant position was 2.70; and the mean rating of dominance of the male in the submissive position was 2.29.

Professionals vs. Undergraduates

Contrary to expectation, there were no significant differences detected between the professional sample and the undergraduate sample.

Likeability Ratings

In post-hoc analyses, the likeability of the stimulus individuals was analyzed. A paired samples t-test across all subjects was done to compare the likeability ratings of the man and the woman. There was a significant difference between the likeability ratings of the female (M = 2.60) and the likeability ratings of the male (M = 3.20) (t = 2.91, p < .05). A paired samples t-test was also done comparing the likeability ratings of men and likeability ratings of the woman in subjects who viewed the dominant picture. There was a significant difference between the likeability rating of the male in the dominant position (M = 3.02) and the likeability rating of the female in the dominant position (M=2.60) (t = 3.46, p< .05). A paired samples t-test was also done comparing the likeability ratings of men and the likeability ratings of woman in subjects who viewed the submissive picture. There were no significant difference in the mean ratings of the female in the dominant position (M = 3.28) and the male in the dominant position (M = 3.37) (t =.75, p < .05)

DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that the dominance ratings of the males would be higher than the females in the submissive position and the dominant position was supported. The finding that males in the dominant position were rated as more dominant than females in the dominant position are similar to the results found by Burgeon (1991). Burgeon found that an open, relaxed posture was seen as informal in females, but was seen as dominant in males. This research suggests that the same behavior done by a woman and a man might be interpreted differently.

The finding that the male in the submissive position was rated as more dominant than the female in the submissive position is supported by the expectation states theory. The "expectation states" theory states that the differences in male and female nonverbal communication are caused by the expectation one has for his/her own and others' performance within a group (Ridgeway, Berger, & Smith, 1985). Although both the male and the female were in the submissive position, the male may have been seen as more dominant because participants have higher expectations of a male's role and abilities in real-world situations.

The hypothesis that the professionals would see the female as more dominant (in the dominant position) than the students was not supported. According to Baglan and Nelson (1982), individuals see it more appropriate for a high-status individual to have a dominant posture than a low-status individual. This researcher theorized that participants from the corporate sample would be more likely to come into contact with a female who used dominant posture, and would thus find it more acceptable for a female to use dominant posture. The female in the dominant position may not have been viewed as dominant because of the expectancy violation this position created when it was associated with the female gender (Burgeon, 1991) According to Burgeon a female sitting in a dominant position is unexpected by individuals which leads to the interpretation of this behavior as noninvolvement.

Burgeon's (1991) expectancy violation theory may also be used to explain the higher likeability rating of the male in the dominant position compared to the likeability rating of the female in the dominant position. It is socially acceptable for men to use the dominant position but it is not socially acceptable for women to use the dominant position. This may be because the dominant position restricts social exchange between individuals and women are socialized to be communicative. Women who break the social norms by using a posture that interferes with communication may be seen as less likable than men who use socially acceptable body language and women who use socially acceptable body language.

In conclusion, males are seen as more dominant than females regardless of body language. Also, the male was rated as more likeable than the female across all conditions. These findings indicate that the categorical cue of gender still plays a large role in the formations of perceptions of others. None of the tests comparing the ratings of corporate sample and the undergraduate sample were significant. This may indicate that life experience does not impact views of body language as much as context does. Further research on this topic should continue to explore the social acceptability of men and women using different body postures. The status of the stimulus people could be manipulated to see if there might be an interaction between status and gender which effects the perceived social acceptability of different nonverbal communication styles.

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