Nonverbal Communication: Proxemics and Tactility in Latin America

Article *in* Journal of Communication · January 1976

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Proxemics and Tactility in Latin America

by Robert Shuter

A study of interpersonal interaction in three cities shows that the image of Latinos as members of one large "contact" culture does not always hold true.

Investigators have reported that Latinos—be they Costa Rican or Colombian, from Central or South America—interact at a close distance and frequently touch one another during interpersonal encounters (4,7). In his classic study of proxemics—"the way individuals handle microspace"—Edward Hall argues that since Latinos are raised in a contact culture, they interact at a much closer distance than do North Americans, often evoking hostile feelings in Anglo communicators (5, p. 1003). In fact, Hall writes that North Americans visiting Latin America will find themselves "barricaded behind desks, using chairs and typewriters to keep the Latino at what is to us a comfortable distance" (4, p. 209). Though he does not indicate the countries he examined and provides no quantified data, few have tested Hall's findings (2,6).

In an interesting study conducted by Forston and Larson (3), no significant difference was found in the distance and angle at which North Americans and Latinos interact. However, they did discover that the variance and range among Latin Americans was significantly greater than among North Americans. Although the authors failed to report the nationality of the Latinos studied, the finding indicates that there may have been significant proxemic differences between the represented Latin American cultures.

While no systematic studies on tactility of Latin Americans have been reported, several authors have speculated on their contact orientation. Ashley

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The author is indebted to Diana Shuter and Charles Siseman for functioning as raters in a difficult and often hazardous study and offers a special thanks to Dr. Daryl Downing, Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Marquette, for providing valuable statistical suggestions.

Montagu concludes that "tactility runs the gamet from absolute non-touchability, as among upper class Englishmen, to almost full expression in Latin Americans" (7, p. 160). Similarly, Desmond Morris indicates that Latin American males freely touch, hold, and embrace one another in public, behaviors frequently met with astonishment and derision by those from noncontact societies (8, p. 121). Furthermore, Baxter reports that the Latinos he observed often "held each other by the hand or arm or one member stood with his arm around the waist of the other" (2, p. 451). Like most generalizations about nationality and contact, however, these findings are speculative, unsupported by quantified data or convincing anecdotal evidence.

Conducted in Costa Rica, Panama, and Colombia, this study explores whether Latin Americans, regardless of sex and nationality, have similar distance and contact orientations.

We posed two research questions: (1) Do Costa Ricans, Colombians, and Panamanians differ significantly in the distance and angle (axis) at which they interact and the extent to which they engage in contact? and (2) Do male/male, male/female, and female/female pairs differ significantly with respect to proxemics, axis, and contact?

For the study we chose three cities—San Jose, Costa Rica; Bogota, Colombia; and Panama City, Panama—and, with the aid of local informants, we

selected homogenous neighborhoods within each city whose socioeconomic conditions closely resembled each other.

Within the selected neighborhoods we observed the behavior of interactants in suitable dyads in numerous public settings such as parks, shopping facilities, and street corners during three time periods—8:00 to 10:00 a.m., 1:00 to 3:00 p.m., and 7:00 to 9:00 p.m.—for 17 to 21 days in each city. Since most individuals were not working during these afternoon and evening hours, street corners and outdoor markets were usually filled with people at these times.

Two-person groups selected for observation consisted of individuals who (1) appeared to be at least eighteen years old, (2) were engaged in face-to-face conversation, (3) were free from physical barriers that might impede their movement, (4) were not involved in instrumental activity, like waiting for a bus, and (5) were unencumbered by packages or other objects that might limit their capacity to touch, hold, or embrace.

The raters were instructed to record the sex of the interactants and the distance and angle (axis) at which they communicated. Completing these judgements, raters noted each time individuals engaged in contact while conversing. To achieve comparability between two person groups with respect to contact, raters recorded the interactants' tactile responses for a three-minute interval, deleting from the sample pairs who terminated the interaction before the time period elapsed. Each rater used a stop watch to ensure accuracy.

To record the frequency and type of contact in which individuals engaged, we used five categories of tactile behavior: embrace, touch, spot touch, hold, and spot hold. These categories represent a significant departure from Hall's (5) vague, overlapping contact scale. An embrace is operationally defined as one or both persons in a dyad extending and wrapping arms around the other individual's upper torso. Unlike embrace, touch is a brushing rather than grasping or wrapping behavior occurring between interactants during any open hand to body contact, while hold is limited to grasping an individual's limb or other bodily part. Further, to measure the length of time the contact is displayed, hold and touch are divided into two categories, with spot touch and spot hold lasting no longer than two seconds and touch and hold exceeding this time limit.

To assess the distance and angle at which individuals communicate, we used a modified version of Hall's (5) notation system. Distance was recorded to the nearest half foot. Ratings were made as though the interactants were face-to-face and of equal height, thus rating the nose-to-nose distance between communicators.

Axis or angle measurements were based on the shoulder orientation of the subjects. Each dyad received a rating between zero and twelve on a scale that corresponded to the hours on a clock. For example, a direct face-to-face encounter received a score of zero, an encounter where an individual's shoulders were at a slight angle, corresponding to a one o'clock position, received a score of one, and so on, including a back-to-back orientation (twelve o'clock position) which received a score of twelve.

Raters received intensive training in estimating distance and using the axis

and contact scales before leaving the United States, until the raters' reliability ratings on each of the three variables exceeded .85. After the study was completed reliability scores were again computed to determine the effectiveness of this training. Reliability ratings were .87 for distance, .97 for contact, and .85 for axis.

A multivariate analysis of variance was performed to determine if the sex of the interacting pairs and/or the culture of the particular country had any affect on the distance and axis at which subjects interacted.

While there was no significant interaction between the culture and the sex of the interactants on both variables, the F test did reveal significant differences. Accordingly, a univariate analysis of variance was conducted for distance and axis scores. When there were significant differences in sex and/or culture, Scheffe's Multiple Comparison Technique (9) was used to determine the level of that significance.

The analysis of variance on axis scores reveals two significant results. As shown in Table 1, the mean axis score for Costa Ricans is significantly smaller than that for Colombians or Panamanians, indicating that Costa Ricans interact at a more direct axis than do members of the other cultures. Further, although the Panamanian mean score is smaller than that for Colombians, the means are not significantly different.

The mean axis score for female pairs is significantly smaller than the same rating for male pairs. While the mean score for male/female dyads is smaller than that for males and greater than that for females, the individual means do not differ significantly. Consistent with previous research (1,6), females converse more directly than males regardless of culture.

Analysis of variance for distance scores reveals significant differences among the countries and sex of the interactants. The mean distance score for Costa

Table 1: Means on axis measurement

Sex pairs	Costa Rica	Panama	Colombia	
Male-male	.70	1.93	1.59	$\bar{y}$ = 1.46
	(42)	(40)	(45)	(N = 127)
Male-female	.95	1.55	1.04	$\bar{y}$ = 1.22
	(47)	(44)	(43)	(N = 134)
Female-female	.31	1.36	1.18	$\bar{y}$ = 1.02
	(49)	(40)	(44)	(N = 133)
	$\bar{y}$ = 0.67	$\bar{y}$ = 1.62	$\bar{y}$ = 1.30	
	(N = 138)	(N = 124)	(N = 132)	

$\bar{y}$ = mean for two ratings
N = number of dyads observed

Table 2: Means on distance measurement

Sex pairs	Costa Rica	Panama	Colombia	
Male-male	1.32	1.59	1.56	$\bar{y}$ = 1.50
	(42)	(40)	(45)	(N = 127)
Male-female	1.34	1.49	1.53	$\bar{y}$ = 1.46
	(47)	(44)	(43)	(N = 134)
Female-female	1.22	1.29	1.40	$\bar{y}$ = 1.30
	(49)	(40)	(44)	(N = 133)
	$\bar{y}$ = 1.30	$\bar{y}$ = 1.46	$\bar{y}$ = 1.51	
	(N = 138)	(N = 124)	(N = 132)	

$\bar{y}$ = mean for two ratings
N = number of dyads observed

Ricans proved to be significantly smaller than that for Panamanians or Colombians (see Table 2). Though Colombians have a smaller mean distance rating than do Panamanians, the scores are not significantly different. Costa Ricans, then, interact significantly closer and more directly than do individuals from the two Latino cultures to the south.

Like the axis results, the mean distance score for female pairs is significantly smaller than that for male and male/female dyads. Also, male/female pairs have a lower mean distance score than do males and a greater one than females; however, the difference between individual means is not significant. Thus, females interact substantially closer than do male and male/female dyads regardless of culture.

Two measures of contact were investigated: (1) the frequency of contact between interactants during a three-minute interaction, and (2) the percentage of observed pairs that engaged in contact behavior.

Analysis of variance for contact scores also reveals significant differences. For example, Colombians have a significantly lower mean contact score than do Costa Ricans or Panamanians (see Table 3). Further, though the Panamanian mean is lower than that for Costa Ricans, the scores do not differ significantly. Accordingly, there is a progressive decline in the frequency of contact between interactants as one travels from Central to South America, with Costa Rica the most tactile culture followed by Panama and then Colombia.

With regard to sex, female pairs have a significantly higher mean contact score than do male or male/female dyads. Also, the mean score for males is greater than that for male/female pairs, but the means are not significantly different. In sum, female pairs are the most tactile followed by male and then male/female dyads.

The chi-square test was used to determine if there were significant proportional differences among sexes and cultures with respect to two types of contact, namely touch and hold (see Table 4). Since in this sample dyads engaged in

Table 3: Mean number of contacts

Sex pairs	Costa Rica	Panama	Colombia	
Male-male	1.46	0.22	0.06	$\bar{y}$ = 0.51
	(33)	(38)	(36)	(N = 107)
Male-female	0.65	0.59	0.00	$\bar{y}$ = 0.44
	(37)	(37)	(33)	(N = 107)
Female-female	4.33	3.53	0.39	$\bar{y}$ = 2.75
	(32)	(35)	(34)	(N = 101)
	$\bar{y}$ = 1.95	$\bar{y}$ = 1.34	$\bar{y}$ = 0.14	
	(N = 102)	(N = 101)	(N = 103)	

$\bar{y}$ = mean for two ratings
N = number of dyads observed

minimal embracing, spot touching, and spot holding, the embrace category was eliminated, and touch and spot touch were combined as were hold and spot hold.

A greater proportion of Costa Rican pairs touch than do Colombian or Panamanian dyads; nevertheless, the only significant difference is between Costa Rica and Colombia (Table 4). Though the percentage of Panamanian pairs who touch is higher than that for Colombians, these scores do not differ significantly.

The results are similar for hold, with Costa Rica having the highest proportion of holders followed by Panama and Colombia, seemingly a nonhold society (Table 4). In addition, though the proportion of Costa Rican and Panamanian pairs who hold do not differ significantly, each of these percentages is significantly greater than that for Colombian dyads.

Like the results on frequency of contact, the proportion of interactants engaging in touch or hold decreases as one travels southward in Latin America. Similarly, when comparing the percentage of sex pairs that touch across cultures, the same diminishing southward trend is noted, with the proportion of male and male/female dyads differing significantly from country to country.

The data also reveals that the percentage of female dyads observed touching and holding is greater than that for male and male/female pairs. While the proportion of females observed holding differs significantly from that of the

Table 4. Percentage of interactants observed touching and holding[a]

	Touching			Holding		
Sex pairs	Costa Rica	Panama	Colombia	Costa Rica	Panama	Colombia
Male-male	61.5	16.7	6.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
Male-female	41.2	23.5	0.0	5.9	5.9	0.0
Female-female	75.0	53.3	30.8	41.7	26.7	0.0

[a] Surprisingly, all interactants observed holding also touched. One explanation is that hold, a personal and intense contact, is limited to more intimate relationships and thus accompanied by touching.

other sex pairs, the percentage of women who touch is only significantly greater than that for male/female dyads. Also, the proportion of male pairs that touch is higher than that for male/female dyads and lower with respect to holding; however, the percentages do not differ significantly. Not only are female interactants more tactile than the other sex pairs but they hold as well as touch and have a more varied contact repertoire than do the other dyads.

The results indicate that interactants stand farther apart, the frequency of contact diminishes, and fewer touch and hold as one travels from Central to South America.

In fact, Costa Rica and Colombia, the northern and southern most countries in the sample respectively, differ more substantially from each other in terms of distance and contact than do the remaining comparisons. Only the axis scores violate this trend, with Costa Ricans interacting most directly followed by Colombians and then Panamanians.

This geographical pattern is revealed dramatically in the contact data. While the available research indicates that Latin Americans are highly tactile, this may only be true of Central Americans, as evidenced by the high contact orientation of Costa Ricans and the seemingly noncontact nature of Colombians.

It was also observed that interactants in South America appear to gesture less often than do Central Americans. The difference between Costa Ricans and Colombians is striking, with the former gesturing frequently, sometimes wildly, and the latter remaining passive and unexcitable, rarely using exaggerated hand or arm movements to punctuate an idea. Although this finding is impressionistic, it indicates along with the other results that Central America may consist of high involvement cultures and South America of lower involvement cultures, the more southern interactants preoccupied with maintaining appropriate social distance in public social situations. However, further research must be conducted in other Central and South American republics before reaching a definitive assessment of regional differences.

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