

## Dare to Stare? Compensation for Comfort in Body Language

Ameer Almuaybid, Lisa Kelly-Harriman, Kristin Sommer, Ph.D., & Frank Bernieri, Ph.D.

Oregon State University & City University of New York

In which picture is the pair making *EYE-CONTACT*?



### Compensation Theory

Patterson (1973) assumes there are approach and avoidance forces in nonverbal behaviors that balance mutual comfort of dyads. This is called the compensation theory. Argyle & Dean (1965) found that the less eye contact a dyad made, the closer they were to each other. Coutts & Ledden (1977) also found that the closer a dyad got to one another, the less eye contact they made.

According to the compensation theory in nonverbal immediacy behavior, *we hypothesize that when an unacquainted dyad interacts, less eye contact will be made as they get closer to each other.*

### Method

Participants were 184 undergraduate students at Oregon State University. Five minute interactions between dyads were video-taped. There were 47 female-male, 37 female-female, and 8 male-male dyads. Using these videos, eye-contact and interpersonal distance were then assessed. Interpersonal distance assessment was done on both head-to-head and closest body part (predominantly feet).

### Results

We found no evidence to support Patterson's compensation theory in nonverbal immediacy behavior. Across **all interactions**, we found that participants who increased their eye-contact throughout the course of the interaction also moved closer to each other, which was contrary to our hypothesis ( $r = -.30, p < .01$ ).

Upon closer inspection, this contrary relationship was driven primarily by **female-female** dyads.



Additionally, the correlation for this relationship was weaker for **male-male** than it was for **female-male** dyads.

Plot 1: Distance of closest body part vs. amount of eye-contact in the last minute of the interactions for various gender combinations of dyads

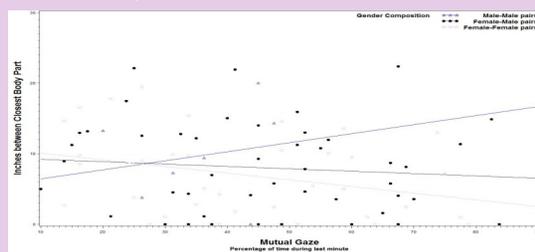


Table 1: Correlations between amount of eye-contact and distance change in closest body part in various gender combinations of dyads

	Distance Change in Closest Body Part			
	Overall	Male-Male	Female-Male	Female-Female
Eye-Contact	-.22**	-.52	-.22	-.40*

\* $p \leq .05$ ; \*\* $p \leq .01$

### Discussion

We believe the increased eye contact as interpersonal distance decreases throughout the interaction in female-female dyads was due to developing more comfort, more rapport, and more self-disclosure between both females. This may be due to the fact that the task was designed for intimacy-building and to compel participants to increase the depth of their self-disclosure by talking about more personal topics as the course of the interaction passes. On the flipside, males withdrew from getting more intimate and self-disclosing; therefore, distance was not closer by the end of the interaction.

Since we had significantly more female-female interactions than male-male interactions, there is reason to expect the overall relationship between change in distance and the amount of eye-contact to be affected more by female-female interaction than any other combination of gender.

### Conclusion

Nonverbally compensating for comfort in interactions is of high importance. Aiello & Thompson (1980) found that there were negative social, emotional, and physiological responses when space was invaded beyond comfort without reduction in eye-contact. Examples of negative responses are: being more aggressive (social response), higher anxiety levels (emotional response), and a higher skin-conductance level or SCL (physiological response). The higher SCL is a result of unpleasant physiological arousal in the human body whenever threatened or uncomfortable. If all these negative responses are triggered by failing to properly compensate, one could make an interviewer uncomfortable and therefore lose a potential job.

### Acknowledgments

Dan Blatt, Greg Erickson, Jenesis Samai, Katy Krieger, Keiko Bostwick, Logan Pedersen, Safia Khan, Shelley Devens, & Stacy Sim