Curbside: Nonverbal Communication of Relationship Status

During Separation and Reunification at an Airport

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Abstract

This study examines how haptic behaviors are used to communicate relationship status during separation and reunification at an airport. The researchers utilized naturalistic observations at the arrivals and departures areas at John Wayne Airport in Orange County. To measure haptics, the research team noted the touches given or received between the people dropping off or picking up a passenger or passengers. To measure the microenvironment, detailed observations and notes were taken. Possible effects of the microenvironment and how interactants’ haptic nonverbal cues are potentially used to communicate relationship status are discussed. The main findings show that men use minimal to no haptics to communicate relationship status in comparison to women when at airport departures and arrivals areas.

*Keywords:* nonverbal communication; haptics; microenvironment; airports; sociopetal; sociofugal; curbside
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Good communication is the foundation of successful personal and professional relationships. However, people communicate with much more than mere words since the messages they send to others include nonverbal cues. Nonverbal communication is an essential form of communication that is natural, sometimes unconscious, and can reveal our true feelings and intentions. It helps us tune in to the feelings and intentions of others around us. The abilities to understand and use nonverbal communication are powerful tools that can help people connect with others, express what they really mean, decode challenging situations, and build better relationships.

All communication includes nonverbal communication. Haptics, the use of touch, is a form of nonverbal communication that is used and can communicate a particular message. According to the Leathers and Eaves textbook (2008), the use of touch can be influenced by gender, age, race, status and even culture (Leathers & Eaves, 2008). Relative to our study, the use of haptics will hopefully allow us to see which forms of touch are used within specific relationships.

Microenvironments are another form of nonverbal communication that is often overlooked, but can affect humans greatly. A microenvironment is a smaller, local area within a macroenvironment such as a room within a large building. According Leathers and Eaves (1991), the artifacts and seating arrangements within an environment, as well as the overall spatial layout and how interactants perceive the environment can affect the way people interact with each other in that environment (Leathers & Eaves, 1991).
In recent years, sociologists, psychologists, and communication researchers have placed great emphasis on understanding how humans determine and interpret the status of their relationships. Much of the research conducted has focused on romantic couples and their understanding of their relationship with their partner or on nonverbal cues that signal turning points in such relationships. Although understanding how to determine the state of romantic relationships is important, humans can be in a number of different types of other relationships that are just as significant. The focus on nonverbal communication in only romantic relationships has left out knowledge of nonverbal cues in relationship identification in general. The proposed study offers to fill this missing knowledge by observing how individuals nonverbally communicate the status of all of their relationships through touch.

The purpose of this study is to determine which haptic behaviors are used to communicate relationship status to others during periods of separation and reunification at an airport.

**Literature Review**

**Haptics**

In 1992, Willis and Briggs designed a research study observed 500 individuals involved in a heterosexual relationship, in public places such as parks, sporting events, and restaurants. They discovered there was no difference between the type of touch between men and women, but men were more likely to touch their partner if they were engaged, dating, or married for less than one year. Women, on the other hand, were more likely to touch their male partners only if the pair had been married for more than one year (Willis & Briggs, 1992). This study on touch and relationships in public settings is relatable to our research study because we are also interested in how haptics and relationships are interrelated in a public setting. While there are
differences in the public setting and types of relationships we observed, we still believe this study could be helpful to our research. Although we are interested in all forms of relationships, unlike to this more specified research, we believe that this study could provide us insight into the forms of touch used between cross-sex relationships observed at the airport.

Similar to the previous study, another research study examined touch initiation involving age and relationship status. The researchers attempted to clarify the differences between age, relationship, and gender in relation to touch initiation. They chose to observe 182 heterosexual pairs in places that were typical for couples to gather, including bars, restaurants, parties, and food courts. After observation, they requested the dyad to answer a questionnaire, asking for their age, relationship status, and level of agreement (Willis & Dodds, 1998). They found that women instigated touch more so than men and usually used their hands. Males, however, touched the females in more intimate areas such as the head, face, lips, back, abdomen, knee, and thigh. They also discovered that their third variable of level of agreement had no influence or predictive measures of touch (Willis & Dodds, 1998). The information provided by this particular study can help us further investigate how touch and relationships are correlated. The ages of individuals at airports vary, and through observation many people at the arrivals and departure sections are cross-sex dyads. These results can help us determine how age is associated with touch and how the two variables influence the type of relationships.

In a study by Heslin and Boss (1980), 103 travelers and 103 randomly chosen people who were picking up or dropping off the travelers were observed at an airport using three scales: intimacy of touch, intimacy of relationship, and intimacy of actual encounter. After observing the pair, the researcher would ask the couple their relationship. The study found that the greatest number of relationships observed were intimate ones. They also found that the closeness of the
relationship between the two people related to the intimacy of the encounter. In addition, males and older aged people tended to initiate touch more than women and younger aged people in cross-sex (male-female) encounters. Pairs of women who gave and received more solid hugs, scored higher on the touch intimacy scale, and engaged in more frequent contact than pairs of men. The information from this study directly relates to our study because we are also observing the use of touch at an airport. Additionally, this study can provide us with a coding scheme to use while we are observing our interactants.

Another study by Greenfield and Rosenbaum (1980) examined touch in greetings between 152 dyads consisting of airline travelers and their greeters. The observer randomly chose travelers disembarking from a plane and immediately noted the sex of the traveler chosen. When greetings occurred, the sex of the greeter was noted, the total elapsed duration of bodily contact was measured, as well as the specific types of contact-behaviors that occurred. This study found that men in same-sex dyads greeted each other with less touch such as a firm handshake, while females in same-sex dyads greeted each other with more touch such as longer embraces. This study also relates to our specific study because, again, it is regarding touch at an airport. Although this study took place before airport security was increased and people were not able to meet the traveler at his or her gate, this study provides valuable information about same-sex dyads.

**Microenvironment**

Microenvironments function as a powerful medium of communication because they have a seemingly unnoticeable effect; most are not completely aware of what the microenvironment is communicating (Leathers & Eaves, 2008). For our study, the departure and arrival areas at John
Wayne Airport were designated as the experiment’s microenvironments. In order to help define microenvironments, further research was necessary.

In an article, Langan sought out to reveal the features in themed restaurants through an observational study. Since it is believed that different settings influence the way people interact, Langan decided to observe the motif of six restaurants that have a theme (Langan, 1999). Through observing two Planet Hollywoods, two Hard Rock Cafes, Harry Carey’s, and Majerle’s, Langan found that the design of the restaurants is primarily sociofugal, which discourages interaction. The features and artifacts within those restaurants were also primarily fixed, with the exception of seasonal decorations. Through these observations, it was noted that all these elements helped provide the restaurants’ “sense of place” (Langan, 1999). It is believed through this study that a microenvironment’s particular motif can influence people’s attraction to the restaurant and how they will act when in that environment (Langan, 1999). This particular article is strongly relevant to our study as we are observing the microenvironment of an airport. The features of airports are fixed, meaning they don’t move easily, and the seating arrangements discourage interaction between people, or are considered sociofugal. This article can help our group further define the features of our microenvironment.

In the next article, the focus included the comparison of two similar, yet different microenvironments. Researchers looked at the fast food restaurants, Burger King and McDonalds and contrasted the two based on privacy, furnishings, location, size and personalization. Their questions include how comfortable and how involved the patrons were at the two restaurants, and how the design elements influenced those two factors. Their results included that the level of involvement was higher at the McDonalds restaurants, while the level of comfortability was higher at the Burger King restaurants. These conclusions were based on
many variables, such as design, lighting, and seating (Leathers & Eaves, 1991). The two microenvironments examined were very similar, as they are both popular fast food restaurants with similar menus; however, the difference between their design, lighting, seating and others, differed greatly. These variables influenced the level of involvement and comfortability. As with our research study, we examined two very similar microenvironments at an airport, yet they differ in variables. This study can help provide us with specific variables that vary between microenvironments and how this influences patrons.

**Separation at an Airport**

This study was conducted to determine whether there are similar behaviors between adult separation behaviors and infant separation behaviors and how behaviors vary in relation to partner accessibility (Fraley & Shaver, 1998). At a metropolitan airport, observers asked couples to fill out a questionnaire regarding their personal perceptions of their respective romantic relationship. Observers then unobtrusively watched the couples temporarily separate from each other, looking for specific behaviors they had coded in an earlier phase of the experiment. These coded behaviors include, but are not limited to: a brief hug, massaging inner thigh, several kisses and holding hands. The results of this study suggested that adult attachment behavior is similar to that of children’s attachment behavior when separating from a parent. It also found that relationship length and separation status corresponded to the nonverbal communication of attachment (Fraley & Shaver, 1998). At the time this study was conducted, partners, family members, and/or friends were allowed to accompany the person traveling to the gate of the plane. This means that separation behaviors may have changed since this study was conducted, as most non-travelers now say their goodbyes and hellos curbside, or outside where the sidewalk meets the street in the arrivals and departures areas. Nevertheless, the environment of a metropolitan
airport and the observation of coded behaviors used in this study are similar to the microenvironment and method used in our study.

**Relational Messages**

Le Poire, Duggan, Shepard, and Burgoon (2002) used five nonverbal cues to determine what they conveyed among four relational message dimensions. These included emotional arousal/composure/formality; intimacy/similarity; immediacy/non-immediacy; and dominance/submission (Le Poire, Duggan, Shepard, & Burgoon, 2002). One hundred and fifty subjects were advised to observe 2 out of 40 videotaped conversational segments that presented various combinations of nonverbal cues between a male and a female. For example, high eye contact, close proximity, forward body lean, and smiling conveyed greater intimacy, attraction, trust, and composure. On the other hand, low eye contact, a distant position, backward body lean, greater dominance, and the absence of smiling and touch communicated greater detachment. Touch played an important role in communicating intimacy, while body lean played a significant role on all four relational dimensions. The results demonstrated that nonverbal behaviors are in fact communicative and may be regarded as part of a socially shared coding system (Le Poire et al., 2002). The strong consistency in interpretations among subjects, despite changes among accompanying cues, supported the study’s belief that a social consensus exists among various cues. The cues in combination accounted for variance in the interpretation of the four relational message theme clusters; this finding underscores the power available cues to shape interpersonal perceptions (Poire et al., 2002). The study clarified that because relational messages usually involve nonverbal behaviors, they can be ambiguous to the observer. Thus, we took that into consideration when confirming the relationships of people when they were being dropped off or picked up at the airport.
A research performed by Burgoon, Buller, Hale, and Deturck (1984) focused on the association between proximal perceptions of nonverbal behaviors and relational messages. In an attempt to measure and study social meanings of nonverbal behavior, the researchers investigated the relationship between global perceptions of an individual’s behavior and the messages they were expected to send (Burgoon, Buller, Hale, & DeTurck, 1984). The results confirmed that perceptions of intimacy and composure were associated with greater vocal involvement. As vocalic involvement increased, romantic partners felt as if their partners were communicating more intimacy and composure. Since most participants had commonplace conversations with their partner, few engaged in extreme behaviors. This study helps us realize that romantic partners often develop their own culture of nonverbal cues that others may not understand. Nonverbal involvement, pleasantness, and expressiveness were strongly associated with perceived messages of intimacy, dominance, formality, and composure among romantic partners (Burgoon et al., 1984). Thus, if we are to see any of these components revealed at the departures and arrivals sections of the airport, this can assist us in distinguishing the level of the intimacy between the couple. However, we must consider the fact that the airport is a public environment, which may cause couples to hold back on their intimate behaviors.

By examining previous literature involving haptics, relationships, and microenvironments such as an airport, there are two research questions that can help determine which haptics individuals use to communicate relationship status to others during periods of separation and reunification at an airport. These research questions are:

RQ1: Is there a difference in motif (artifacts and decoration) and physical environment (spatial layout and structural organization) at the arrivals and departures areas at an airport?
RQ2: Is there a difference in individuals’ usage of haptics at the arrivals and departures areas at an airport?

**Method**

For our specific environment, we chose to observe the arrivals and departures areas of a nearby commercial airport. We believe these microenvironments are the proper contexts for observing people’s use of touch when communicating relationship status to others during periods of separation and reunification. We are also interested to see if the microenvironment had any effect on people’s interactions with each other.

Naturalistic observations were used in order to observe haptic behaviors and microenvironments at the airport. The departures and arrivals areas were observed in person, each by two of the four group members simultaneously. Two members observed the departures area, which was located on the second floor of the airport, and the other two members observed the arrivals area, which was located on the ground floor of the airport. Two separate observations were made to avoid observing unusual circumstances. These two observations occurred for one hour each, with one researcher per microenvironment observing haptic behaviors and the other observing the microenvironment. The first observation took place on Wednesday, November 7, 2012 from 4:50 p.m. until 5:50 p.m. and the second observation took place on Wednesday, November 14, 2012 from 4:50 p.m. until 5:50 p.m. All observations occurred outside of the airport building at the departures and arrivals areas where individuals were dropped off or picked up curbside by someone in a vehicle.

To measure the microenvironment, the two members observed this aspect by noting the artifacts, the overall spatial layout, how one would perceive the space to be according to Knapp and Hall’s (2010) perceptions of the environment, and anything else deemed appropriate and
important for the study. In order to measure haptics, the two members observed this aspect and noted if the person driving got out of the car to say goodbye or hello to the traveler. Among the haptics observed, they were coded using the intimacy scale of six levels from the Heslin and Boss (1980) study. The codes included 0, meaning no touch at all; 1 marked a handshake or a touch on the head, arm or back; 2 indicated a light hug, arm around waist, holding hands, or a kiss on the cheek; 3 was if a solid hug, or mouth kiss was observed; 4 was an extended embrace, both a kiss on the mouth and a hug, or two items from the 1 and 2 sections; and 5 was when an extended kiss, extended embrace plus a mouth kiss, or an extended embrace plus a solid hug and another action was observed (Heslin and Boss, 1980). After coding with this intimacy scale, the two observers also noted the sex of the interactants and anything else that would add to the study.

**Results**

**Research Question 1**

Although at first glance it appears as though the arrivals and departures areas look almost identical in terms of motif and physical environment, there are many differences that render them eligible as two separate microenvironments. The most apparent distinction is the amount of interaction encouraged by each area. The arrivals microenvironment contains seating so that people may rest and interact with others while waiting to be picked up, creating a moderately sociopetal seating arrangement. The seats are made of concrete and are positioned in a way that it easy to accommodate a small group of people, so while it does promote lingering and moderate interaction, it does not promote either for the long-term. The departures area, on the other hand, does not contain seating of any kind, forcing people to walk directly from the drop-off vehicle into the main ticketing area of the airport and inhibiting social interaction. This lack of seating can be understood as a sociofugal arrangement because it significantly hinders communication.
between people. Individuals must stand if they wish to remain in the departures drop-off area for any extended amount of time.

In terms of motif, the arrivals and departures areas were very bland, gray, and simple. There were very few decorations outside of the building in either area. The departures area had a luggage drop-off area, two mobile signs for luggage, a few trashcans, and cement poles/dividers. The arrivals area also had a luggage cart station and a few trashcans scattered about, but also had palm trees with flowers in the planters. Both areas had traffic lights, informative signs for travelers picking up or dropping off, and employees in uniform to make sure vehicles didn’t stay in the loading and unloading zones for too long, all of which were semi-fixed objects within the microenvironments.

To explain the physical environment and to understand how airport travelers might perceive these areas, we utilized Knapp and Hall’s (2010) six perceptions of the environment, noting the formality, warmth, privacy, familiarity, constraint and distance of each microenvironment. Both the arrivals and departures areas were relatively cold environments because neither was very inviting or comfortable. Both areas would be perceived as formal because the interactions that typically happen within the microenvironments are highly ritualistic and stylized. Both of these areas are very familiar to people because most people have either been to an airport or seen one portrayed in some form of media. Therefore most know how an airport operates and what one may look like.

Both environments were constraining in some ways; the departures environment severely restricted the scope of activity that could take place within the microenvironment, and in the arrivals environment people were more or less forced to remain in the environment until their ride arrived. Although in the departures area, people were able to move freely about, which was
essentially the scope of all they could do in the environment as there was no seating or other interactions available. Both environments also fostered physical and psychological distance. In the departures environment, it was evident that people’s thoughts were separated themselves from others. Similarly, in the arrivals section, when two people sat on the same bench, they each appeared to be lost in thought and did not interact. Not only did people seem to be psychologically isolated from others in the microenvironment, they also appeared to be physically distant as well. With the exception of two small children in a large family, every single person who walked through the departures area walked at a distance from others, including at a distance from members of their own party.

**Research Question 2**

Within the departures area of the airport, our observations led us to have a sample of 113 pairs of interactants. Using Heslin and Boss’ (1980) intimacy scale, we came up with the following results. Of the 113 interactants, 66 fell under the 0 score, with absolutely no usage of haptics. Twenty pairs of interactants fell under the 1 score, using either a handshake, or a light touch on the arm, head or back. Under the 2 score, 11 pairs used a light hug, arm around the waist/back, holding hands, or a kiss on the cheek. The 3 score included 11 pairs as well, involved in either a solid hug, or mouth kiss. Under score 4, three pairs were involved in an extended embrace, a kiss on the mouth and a solid hug. Lastly, in score 5, two pairs had extremely long embraces with an extended kiss and solid hug. To further our observations, sex was recorded. Within the 66 pairs in score 0, 47 were men, 6 were women, and 14 were cross-sex dyads. In the 20 pairs in score 1, 17 were male pairs. Of those 17 male pairs, 13 used the handshake. In score 3, 10 out of the 11 pairs were cross-sex pairs or females. Within score 4, all 3 pairs were cross-sex dyads. And in score 5, both instances were women. We had unofficially hypothesized that most
would be women in score 5, as women typically are those who take the time to say hello or goodbye (Heslin & Boss, 1980).

While observing individuals’ usage of haptics at the arrivals, we were able to observe 41 interactants. Among the 41 interactants, 19 pairs fell under the 0 scale by having zero contact with one another. In scale 1, 0 pairs shook hands, touched on the head, arm, or back. Among the 2 scale, 3 pairs engaged in a light hug, laid their arm around the waist or back, held hands, or kisses on the cheek. Scale 3 included 11 pairs who had solid hugs or kisses on the mouth. 8 pairs fell under the 4th scale by having extended embraces, kissing on the mouth as well as giving each other a solid hug. Surprisingly, 0 pairs fell under the scale 5 of extended kisses, extended embraces plus mouth kiss, and extended embraces plus solid hugs. Based on our results, we noticed that because the majority of the interactants were in a public setting, they were more hesitant to engage in intimate behaviors in order to respect others around them. Thus, majority of the interactants fell under the middle scales of Heslin and Boss’s six codes. This further proved that they were not any less in love with each other, but they were simply in a time constraint in both departure and arrival sections of the airport.

**Discussion**

As stated earlier, the purpose of our study was to determine which haptic behaviors are used by individuals to communicate relationship status to others during periods of separation and reunification at an airport. From our results we concluded haptics was used differently between sex and types of relationships. We also found that there were minimal differences between the two microenvironments, while also having an insignificant influence on communication of the patrons.
Research Question 1

The findings from our study show that while there is a slight difference in motif and decoration between the departures microenvironment and the arrivals microenvironment, there is a notable difference in physical environment. The main differences between the two locations are the seating arrangements and the vegetation such as purposely planted flowers. Neither seats nor attractive vegetation were found in the departures area microenvironment. These artifacts and decorations, however, were present in the arrivals area microenvironment. This change in motif can be attributed to the purpose of the area, as passengers entering the airport facilities do not spend much time in the entrance, passengers leaving the airport facilities often must wait for their ride home. Therefore, the arrivals area microenvironment offers a slightly more pleasing environment so that waiting passengers may feel a bit more at ease.

The physical environment of both areas appeared to have had notable effects on the people within the environments. From Knapp and Hall’s six perceptions of environment, we know that people are more likely stay in warm environments. This relates to our study because neither of our microenvironments was perceived as warm; therefore, individuals within them did not want to stay for longer than required. It is also determined that the perceived constraint of each environment hinders genuine interaction. The psychological distance that passengers of the airport experience is most likely due to the overall situation. For example, many in the departures section are probably consumed with thoughts about the impending departure whereas in arrivals many may be consumed by the past nature of their visit or returning to responsibilities at home.
Research Question 2

After analyzing the arrivals and departures sections of our data, we came to some interesting conclusions about the usage of haptics at the airport. Through our observations, we came to infer the relationships based on the types of haptics the pairs interacting used. Within those 47 male pairs who did not use touch, we chose to believe those men had either no relationship or a professional relationship. Typically those getting dropped off in a town car or a taxicab shook the driver’s hand, indicating a small or non-existent relationship. As for the total of 13 male pairs who used the handshake, we inferred the same thing: either a professional relationship or no relationship. The 11 pairs who used the solid hug or mouth kiss were primarily cross-sex dyads and females. From these, we inferred a close relationship between the two interactants, possibly a friendship or light romantic relationship. Within the mouth kiss interactants, we believed it was a romantic relationship that the individuals shared. Among the cross-sex pairs with the score of 4, we inferred they had a romantic or familial relationship if they were not kissing on the mouth. The last 2 pairs in score 5, were both women, which appeared to replicate the results found in previous studies by Heslin and Boss (1980) and Greenfield and Rosenbaum (1980).

These findings were consistent with the findings in the studies done by Heslin and Boss (1980) and Greenfield and Rosenbaum (1980). Regarding same-sex dyads, men were found to use less touch when departing or greeting, while women were found to use more touch in both instances.
Implications

The study found that there is a slight difference in motif and physical environment between the departures and arrivals areas of the airport. But, neither microenvironments stimulate interaction. Throughout our study and observations, we found some important implications for further research, while also discovering some limitations to our research. The findings of our study could shed light on when and why individuals choose to clarify or reinforce the status of their relationships with others. Research settings, like the airport used in this study, offer a valuable context for observing nonverbal behaviors during human interaction because of the impending separation or reunification. After reading our study, individuals may take into consideration the impact of airport microenvironments and use the knowledge when creating microenvironments in the future. With haptic behaviors, it is difficult to fully submerge oneself in the score 5 area of intimacy and haptics. But individuals may realize that there are different ways to display the correct relational message to the person they are interacting with (Heslin & Boss, 1980). Because the airport is known for curbside airport and drop-off, people may in fact reject this stylized routine and instead park to walk inside with their partner, therefore allowing more time and a slightly more comfortable environment in which to display a relational message.

Limitations

Because our research is an exploratory study and used the method of observation, there are inevitably some flaws in our analysis. While observing at the airport, we stationed our two pairs of observers in the arrivals and departures areas. However, each pair was placed in the Terminal A section of the airport. The airlines that fly out of this terminal include Alaska Airlines, Delta Air Lines, and American Airlines. This limits the sample groups to passengers of
those three airlines, which specialize in national flights (under five hours). The amount of individuals arriving for departures would come in spurts. For example, at one time no cars would pull up for a few minutes, while at another time there would be a large flow of vehicles arriving to drop off passengers. Because of the specific departure times the microenvironment would be inundated with vehicles and people. The observer’s focus was generally only on interactants who were in the observer’s immediate, direct line of vision. This convenience sample could possibly provide a bias as not every single interactant situation was recorded. Another flaw in our observations could be attributed to our being stationed solely at Terminal A. As mentioned earlier, there are three airlines that fly out of this location, and this could bias our results to mirror a certain type of people who use these airlines. In addition, we did not take note on the types of flights, domestic or international, which could also create a cultural bias. The time and day we observed could also influence our results as we chose to observe in the middle of the week on Wednesday, around 5 p.m. As observed, most people in the departures section of the airport included individuals traveling alone, or with business partners. We concluded that family travel usually does not occur mid-week, and therefore a bias exists. Another variable that could have influenced our results, was that we did not take into account the people who parked their car to either pick up or drop off individuals. In the departures, some of these instances were observed but never recorded. Lastly, we never requested further information on the individuals we observed. Because of this, we were unable to gather the true status of relationship when observing their haptic behaviors. This ultimately means that our conclusions about the relationships involved could be flawed.
Conclusion

Overall, our study’s findings can be useful for future researchers and individuals interested in this topic. Through critical observation, we have found perceptions of the microenvironments and how they can possibly influence communication. Also relative to research question one, we have compared and contrasted the two with seating arrangements and motif, helping us figure how these can also influence communication. Through our results of research question two, we have ultimately discovered males tend to either use no haptics, or minimal haptics at the airport, which display that specific relational message. Females were also noted as those who use the longest extended embraces to say hello or goodbye to their loved ones. Because of our study’s limitations, future research could help further develop knowledge on this topic and determine which haptic behaviors are used by individuals to communicate relationship status to others during periods of separation and reunification at the airport.
References


