

Handedness and Lateral Positioning in Heterosexual Couples: Are Men Still Strong-Arming Women?¹

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This study examined the way in which heterosexual couples arrange themselves while walking together. In same-handed couples, significantly more females were on the males' preferred (dominant) side than expected by chance – especially when the partners were touching. Apparently, handedness and lateral positioning combine to reflect a male-dominance tendency in this type of situation. In opposite-handed couples, males and females put their dominant sides together, especially when touching. Social implications of these findings and suggestions for future research are also discussed.

Two of the most rapidly growing research topics in social psychology are the investigations of sex differences and nonverbal communication processes. Several excellent reviews of the burgeoning sex difference literature have recently appeared (Deaux, 1976; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), as have reviews of the nonverbal findings (Duncan, 1969; Knapp, 1972). Furthermore, as these two areas of inquiry expand, it is becoming increasingly clear that there is a substantial overlap between them.

Numerous investigators have observed consistent differences between men and women in such varied nonverbal activities as eye contact (Exline, 1963; Exline, Gray, & Shuette, 1965), proxemics (Baxter, 1970; Leibman, 1970;

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Walker & Borden, 1976), orientation (Fisher & Byrne, 1975), and touching behavior (Henley, 1973a; Nguyen, Heslin, & Nguyen, 1975).

In an attempt to further demonstrate the subtle and perhaps unwitting involvement of sex roles in everyday behavior, the present research examined the manner in which heterosexual couples arrange themselves while walking together.

According to recent reports by Henley (1973a, 1973b) it is apparent that one person's touching another often serves as an indication of the former's dominance in the relationship. For example, it is considered much more appropriate for a boss to place a hand on the shoulder of a subordinate than for a lower ranking executive, secretary, or custodian to touch the boss. Even TV's popular Lieutenant Kojak pinches and pats the faces of his sergeants, while it is doubtful that he would tolerate similar caresses from them. Consequently, after a detailed investigation of this phenomenon, Henley (1973b) has concluded that "touching is a status privilege over lower-status persons and that this applies in sex, age, and socio-economic relations" (p. 93).

Of additional importance for the present study is the tendency of humans to have a preferred or dominant hand (i.e., right-handedness versus left-handedness), and for most touching to be initiated with this hand (Dusewicz & Kershner, 1969; Oldfield, 1971). Taken together, these separate facts pose some interesting possibilities about the way in which touching, lateral positioning, and handedness might combine to provide an unobtrusive index of dominance in heterosexual couples. To examine these notions, three specific hypotheses were constructed.

Hypothesis 1. In same-handed side-by-side couples (e.g., a right-handed male with a right-handed female, or a left-handed male with a left-handed female), the male will arrange the dyad so that the female walks on his preferred (dominant) side. Such an arrangement, of course, would put the male's dominant, preferred, or "strong" side near the female, whose nondominant, unpreferred, or "weaker" side would be beside the male. Consequently, a more comfortable touching of the female by the male would be facilitated.³

Hypothesis 2. Also in same-handed couples, this "female on the male's dominant side" phenomenon should be more pronounced when the couple is walking *and* touching. In other words, once two individuals have a "touching"

³We thank an anonymous reviewer for an interesting corollary to Hypothesis 1. The reviewer noted that the higher incidence of touching in the male-dominant pairings might occur in part because the partners are in this arrangement. Although the reviewer notes that other evidence seems to argue for the deliberate male positioning for touch initiation, this suggestion opens the possibility that a male who is walking with a female on his nondominant side and who wishes to touch her will in some way rearrange the dyad prior to initiating a touch. In other words, touching may be preceded by a tactical shift in positioning. Conversely, the male who does not wish to touch his partner may position himself so that the female is on his nonpreferred side. Thus, mere positioning may serve as nonverbal indicant of liking.

relationship, the dyad configuration is expected to be such that the female walks on, and is touched by, the male's preferred hand. Even in nontouching couples this effect may be evident, given the possibility that an occurrence of touching may be initiated.

Hypothesis 3. For opposite-handed couples (e.g., right-handed male with a left-handed female, or a left-handed male with a right-handed female), the couple will arrange themselves so that both partners will place their dominant, rather than their nondominant, sides together. This configuration would show the above male-dominance phenomenon as well evidence that couples who can arrange themselves so that both members can touch with their "strong" hand will prefer to do so (as only opposite-handed couples can). Again, this effect should be stronger among touching than nontouching partners.

The interactions with which these hypotheses are concerned, of course, are common and readily observable behaviors. Consequently, rather than construct laboratory analogs of these situations, which in themselves might induce an assortment of suspicions, evaluative anxieties, or self-consciousness, we chose to conduct the study under naturalistic conditions.

METHOD

Subjects

Subjects were 199 male–female couples at a large Midwestern university. Of the 398 total subjects involved in the study, 167 (42%) were right-handed males, 164 (41.2%) were right-handed females, 32 (8%) were left-handed males, and 35 (8.8%) were left-handed females. These 199 males and 199 females combined to form the 199 couples, of which 142 were same-handed couples (137 right-handed males with right-handed females and 5 left-handed males with left-handed females) and 57 opposite-handed couples (30 right-handed males with left-handed females and 27 left-handed males with right-handed females).

Procedure

In all, 100 walking and touching couples and 99 walking and not-touching couples were observed and questioned. The experimenter first recorded the position of the male and the female, and then approached and asked each person's dominant hand in the following manner: "Excuse me. I am doing a survey of handedness. Could you both tell me if you are right-handed or left-handed?" After obtaining this information, the experimenter briefly explained the purpose of the study and thanked the couple for their assistance. All observations

of couples were made as the subjects were walking along centrally located walkways of the campus.⁴

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main dependent measure was the proportion of females walking on the male's dominant side. In support of Hypothesis 1, 123 (or 61.8%) of the 199 couples were arranged in this fashion. This proportion was substantially higher than would be expected by chance, $Z = 3.34$, $p < .001$ (Blalock, 1972).⁵ A further analysis of this effect with regard to same- versus opposite-handedness, and touching versus nontouching, was then performed.

Same-Handed Couples

In same-handed couples, it will be recalled, only one member of the dyad can have someone on their dominant, or preferred, side. That is, if a right-handed female is on the right-hand side of a right-handed male, her right hand is to the "outside" of the dyad. If they happen to be touching, then she must touch with her nonpreferred hand.

The arrangement of same-handed touching and nontouching couples is presented in Table I. In these 142 same-handed couples, the female was on the male's preferred side in 59.9% of the cases, $Z = 2.36$, $p < .01$.

In support of Hypothesis 2, nearly two-thirds (65.2%) of the touching couples were arranged so that the female's dominant hand was left dangling at her side while she was touched by the male's dominant hand, $Z = 2.53$, $p < .01$. For nontouching couples, only slightly more than half (54.8%) of the females were on the male's dominant side, $Z < 1$, *n.s.*

Opposite-Handed Couples

In an opposite-handed couple, the partners are either both on each other's preferred side or neither are. Overall, exactly two-thirds of the couples were arranged with their preferred sides together, $Z = 2.53$, $p < .01$ (See Table II). This effect was especially pronounced when the two individuals were touching, with 71% of the couples choosing an arrangement that "satisfied" both members,

⁴There is (or used to be) a custom that the man should walk on the street side of a sidewalk when escorting a woman. It is not clear whether this was done to protect the woman from the spray of passing carriages and/or slop thrown into the street from the windows above. However, in order to avoid any such lingering influence on the results of this study, all observations were made on walkways that were not adjacent to a street.

⁵All tests are one-tailed, unless otherwise noted.

Table I. Same-Handed Couples: Right-Handed Males (RHM) with Right-Handed Females (RHF) and Left-Handed Males (LHM) with Left-Handed Females (LHF)

	Walking and touching	Walking and not touching	Overall
Female on male's dominant side			
RHM-RHF	43	38	81
LHM-LHF	2	2	4
Total	45	40	85
Male on female's dominant side			
RHM-RHF	24	32	56
LHM-LHF	0	1	1
Total	24	33	57
Proportion of male dominance	45/69 (65.2%)	40/73 (54.8%)	85/142 (59.9%)

$Z = 2.34, p < .01$, whereas only 61.5% of the nontouching couples were arranged this way, $Z = 1.16, n.s.$

Clearly, the results from same-handed couples support the notion that males subtly assume a dominant position in touching relationships with their female partners as measured by lateral positioning. Furthermore, the findings for opposite-handed couples show that, especially when touching, partners will arrange themselves so that their preferred sides are touching. In this world, however, most couples are composed of two right-handed people, and as we've seen here, the woman generally ends up in the less dominant position.

Henley (1973a, 1973b) concluded that touching often communicates dominance. She and others (Mehrabian, 1972) also recognize that touching may

Table II. Opposite-Handed Couples: Right-Handed Males (RHM) with Left-Handed Females (LHF) and Left-Handed Males (LHM) with Right-Handed Females (RHM)

	Walking and touching	Walking and not touching	Overall
Males and females with dominant sides together			
RHM-LHF	11	9	20
LHM-RHF	11	7	18
Males and females with dominant sides apart			
RHM-LHF	4	6	10
LHM-RHF	5	4	9
Proportion of couples with dominant sides together	22/31 (71%)	16/26 (61.5%)	38/57 (66.7%)

frequently communicate affection. In the observations made in this study, it was apparent that the vast majority of the touching that occurred was of the latter form. Of particular interest, though, is that while the touching was probably motivated by affection, the *positioning while touching* reflected a subtle commanding of the relationship by the male member. Indeed, our informal observations further support this contention. In many cases, the couples were observed as they were leaving a building. When this was the case, the female usually emerged first, followed closely by the male, who then glided into position — i.e., with the female on his preferred side.

One might argue that, in part, these findings reflect a “car dating” effect. That is, males in this country tend to drive with the female on their right side. The data for left-handed males, however, argues convincingly against such an interpretation. Of the total left-handed male sample ($N = 32$), 68.8% were arranged with the female on their left. Of the touching couples involving left-handed males, 72.2% were arranged this way — actually higher than the 65.9% observed among right-handed males who were touching their partner.

Finally, in addition to describing an interesting phenomenon in and of itself, the present findings may also provide an unobtrusive measure useful in a wide range of settings. For example, the male lateral dominance ratio could prove sensitive for testing “chauvinistic” tendencies associated with such factors as age, socio-economic status, professional groups, or even cross-cultural variables. The extent to which this phenomenon occurs in other male–female encounters (e.g., choosing seats on busses, planes, trains, or at the dinner table) may also be of interest to future sex-role researchers.

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