

Dyadic Power Theory, Touch, and Counseling Psychology: A Response to Smith, Vogel, Madon, and Edwards (2011)

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Abstract

Smith, Vogel, Madon, and Edwards' (2011) recent article tested dyadic power theory (DPT) by examining the use of touch as a compliance-gaining tactic in the conflicts of married couples. In this response, we raise a methodological issue about the touch behaviors examined by Smith et al. and also pose a theoretical critique that their test of DPT violates an important scope condition of the theory. They did not examine differences between power-equal and power-unequal dyads, but instead they state that topic selection provides an actor with legitimate authority (and thus greater perceived power) and therefore the actor would touch their partner more to influence the partner. In contrast, DPT predicts that actors will use control attempts such as touch more when they are equal in power than when they are unequal. We believe DPT is relevant to touch in marital conflicts and provide a preliminary statement of that idea.

Keywords

power, interpersonal touch, nonverbal communication, marriage, dyadic power theory, dominance

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A theory's heuristic value, or its ability to be operationalized and used by researchers, and its practical utility for explaining both empirical data and everyday circumstances are important criteria by which theories should be judged (Griffin, 2012). Dunbar (2004) first advanced dyadic power theory (DPT) as a "theory in progress" (p. 235) in a special issue of *Journal of Family Communication*, and since then, Dunbar and her colleagues have conducted several empirical tests of the theory using married and dating couples (e.g., Dunbar, Bippus, Allums, & King, 2012; Dunbar, Bippus, & Young, 2008; Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005) and also strangers in experimental settings (Dunbar & Abra, 2010; Dunbar et al., in press). We were pleased to see Smith, Vogel, Madon, and Edwards's (2011) recent article in *The Counseling Psychologist* testing DPT. They examined the use of touch as a compliance-gaining tactic in the conflicts of married couples demonstrating the heuristic value of DPT and its applicability outside our own disciplines of communication and sociology. However, we believe the hypothesis that they claim is derived from DPT is not consistent with the theory and DPT might make different predictions about the use of touch in the conflicts of married couples than what the authors posit. In this brief response, we will make a methodological critique of the touch behaviors examined by Smith et al. and also a theoretical critique based on our contention that their test of DPT violates an important scope condition of the theory. We also discuss how their research has the potential to advance DPT with an alternative framing of the role of touch in marital relationships.

Coding Interpersonal Touch

We should begin by saying that we support Smith et al.'s (2011) call for more study of "gender and power dynamics within couples to inform both research and clinical practice" (p. 765) and their recognition of touch as an essential nonverbal cue for the expression of not only power but also a host of other relational messages including emotional connection and social support. We agree that these topics are in need of more research and are important to our understanding of communication within close relationships.

Our first critique of this study is a methodological one. According to DPT, control attempts are attempts by one person to change the behavior of another (Dunbar, 2004). In this case, the Smith et al. article examined whether spouses used influential hand or nonhand touch during the discussion of a conflict topic. Touch can certainly be used as a control attempt, and they cite appropriate research documenting the use of touch as a compliance-gaining strategy. In Segrin's (1993) review of nonverbal compliance gaining, the author

concludes that touch (depending on the force used and the part of the body touched) is one of the most consistently effective forms of nonverbal influence.

In the Smith et al. (2011) study, the authors coded for expressive and supportive touches (and in some cases removed those touches from their analyses) and assumed that any other form of touch must be expressing power or control. The list of functions touch can serve is long. It includes communicating emotion, creating attachment, indicating distress, gaining compliance, getting attention, showing support, and reinforcing power and status. It can even serve task purposes such as cutting hair or fixing teeth (see Hertenstein, Verkamp, Kerestes, & Holmes, 2006, for a review). If compliance-gaining touches are the focus of their study, we believe they should have coded for touch with that intent. They argued that “those who touch others are seen as more dominant than those who are touched . . . and that touch influences compliance with requests” (p. 772). However, they did not verify touches used in their analyses were indeed meant to communicate power, dominance, or influence.

Without more information about the specific functions of touch that Smith et al. (2011) examined in their study (other than hand vs. nonhand touch), it is impossible to know whether the touches analyzed in their study all expressed either support or influence, as claimed by the authors. Their results revealed that wives touched their husbands more than husbands touched their wives, but even with expressive and supportive touches removed (which they described as any touch expressing kindness and love) the women in their study may have been engaged in an influence attempt or an attempt to communicate something else entirely. For example, they may have been trying to establish rapport or simply to gain their partners’ attention. By establishing a dichotomy between powerful and supportive touches, the authors oversimplified the complexities of touch and may have been overlooking important reasons wives use touch during conflicts with their husbands.

A preferable methodology would have been to code for touches that appear to be compliance-gaining attempts or that reinforce power or status rather than to place anything outside the expressive/supportive touch category into the power category. Other researchers use a “stimulated recall methodology” (Marangoni, Garcia, Ickes, & Teng, 1995) in which participants watch their own behavior on video and, in this case, explicitly state the reasons for using touch. We have found such a method helpful for identifying the reasons participants use humor in their conflict interactions with romantic partners (Bippus, Young, & Dunbar, 2011; Dunbar et al., 2012), but it could easily be applied to coding for the motivations for touch. The net result of the power-support dichotomy used by Smith et al. (2011) is that they cannot use touch to

test DPT. If a touch is an example of a control attempt by participants, then it needs to be verified that the participants are using the touch for that purpose.

Predictions Made by DPT for Interpersonal Touch

Our second critique is a theoretical one. In their article, Smith et al. (2011) posit two competing hypotheses: One, based on Henley's (1995) gender politics hypothesis, suggests that touch will serve to reinforce traditional power roles; the other (ostensibly based on DPT) predicts that the actor who initiates a topic will feel more legitimate authority over that topic and thus will touch their partner more. The two hypotheses should produce the following respective behaviors: The gender politics hypothesis predicts that husbands will touch wives more than wives will touch husbands, and the DPT hypothesis predicts that whoever initiates a topic will touch their partner more than the partner will touch them. We do not believe that the second hypothesis actually derives from DPT, so we will discuss the hypothesis and what we think DPT would predict in this circumstance.

The authors state that

according to DPT, the frequency with which one partner exerts power through touch should vary according to whose topic is being discussed. Accordingly, if a spouse chooses a conflict topic he or she feels needs to be changed in the relationship, then he or she should perceive more legitimate authority to exert power during a discussion of that topic. (Smith et al., 2011, p. 770)

DPT makes no such assertion that raising a grievance with one's partner will cause that person to experience greater legitimate authority. Instead, DPT assumes that legitimate authority, along with access to resources, is an antecedent to perceptions of power, which then causes dominant or submissive acts toward one's partner. DPT predicts a curvilinear relationship between perceptions of power such that those who are relatively equal in power will make more control attempts (i.e., use more dominant touch) than those who are unequal in power. In the Smith et al. (2011) study, the authors do not state whether their dyads are of equal or unequal power, a critical component of DPT. Based on DPT, we would predict that only individuals who are relatively equal in power to their partners will raise grievances (and use control attempts such as compliance-gaining touch), whereas those in unequal relationships would do so less often. Those low in perceived power may experience a "chilling effect" and fear reprisals from their partners (Afifi, Olson, &

Armstrong, 2005; Roloff & Cloven, 1990), whereas those high in perceived power have no need to raise grievances because their power advantage already shapes the relationship in desirable ways, negating the need for overt forms of dominance. In other words, to be a test of DPT, there must be variation in power between the couples to ascertain that the touch is a function of power associated with raising the topic. These authors do not vary the critical independent variable of DPT: power.

The results of our work testing DPT using volunteer married and dating couples, like the data reported by Smith et al. (2011), has found that most individuals in these couples report they are equal in power (see Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005; Dunbar et al., 2008). In fact, the lack of variance on the power dimension is what prompted us to begin testing DPT experimentally and manipulating power so that differences between the high and low power groups can be examined (Dunbar & Abra, 2010). Our suspicion is that there is not a large enough power difference between the husbands and wives in the Smith et al. study to say with certainty that either a lack of power or a feeling of powerfulness stemming from their perceived legitimate authority is what caused wives to touch their husbands more.

Instead, we think that Smith et al. (2011) have raised a new and interesting question about DPT. Perhaps within power-balanced couples, there are certain domains of influence on which either the husbands or the wives are more powerful (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Emerson, 1976). Even within stable and generally power-balanced relationships, there are domain-bounded asymmetries of power. It would be consistent with DPT to assume that partners would avoid conflict on those issues and would be more likely to initiate conflict on topics about which they perceive they are power equal because the curvilinear relationship between power and dominance would remain on those issues. For example, in a power-balanced couple in which an accountant husband is married to an artist wife, the accountant may take control over the household finances, and the artist may have more say about the home décor. In a laboratory observation of their conflicts in which they choose the topic, DPT would predict they would not raise finances as an issue of contention. The accountant is probably already controlling the finances, and so opening this as a topic for debate can serve only to undermine his authority on that topic. Likewise, the artist will not choose a topic about which she holds little knowledge. Since Smith et al. did not measure the perceived power of the husbands and wives in their study, we do not know whether the topics they initiate are chosen because they have equal power (rather than unequal power as the authors suggest), but the former would be more consistent with DPT than the predictions made by the Smith et al. study.

Why Do Wives Touch More Than Husbands?

Assuming that touch is being used as a control attempt in Smith et al.'s (2011) study, DPT would predict that partners in equal power relationships will touch one another more than those in unequal power relationships. If we also assume that the marriages in Smith et al.'s study are equal in perceived power as they have been in our tests of DPT using volunteer couples, the lack of power variation required by DPT is absent, and DPT cannot be used to predict sex differences in dominant touch. However, some of our work testing DPT has found sex differences on the types of control attempts used in conflicts and negotiations, although we have never examined touch because our experimental setup positions the partners in chairs facing one another, making touch difficult for the participants. In one study, men and women used different verbal and nonverbal expressions of power. Power was associated with decreased body control, facial expressiveness, and increased illustrator gestures for men, but none of those variables was associated with power for women (Dunbar & Burgoon, 2005). Another study found that women used more aggressive humor in conflicts with their spouses when they were equal in power than when they were unequal, but this was not true for men (Dunbar et al., 2012). Perhaps touch is a more feminine behavior, even if it is being used as a control attempt. In older and more established relationships, like the marriages studied by Smith et al., women tend to initiate touch more often than do men, suggesting it is simply part of their normative roles as wives (Guerrero & Andersen, 1994; Hall & Veccia, 1990). In addition, much of the compliance-gaining literature cited in the review by Gallace and Spence involves women who are doing the touching, such as female food servers, nurses, and caregivers of the elderly (Gallace & Spence, 2010). We should be cautious when inferring the reasons behind the touch used by wives in the Smith et al. study.

The Utility of DPT for Counseling Psychology

We are pleased that DPT has found its way to the field of counseling psychology and that it may prove useful as a theoretical mechanism for explaining power dynamics between husbands and wives. Although we disagree with Smith et al.'s (2011) assertion that topic selection in a conflict is the result of legitimate authority or that touch is used primarily as a compliance-gaining attempt, we believe DPT may have something useful to offer counselors and therapists. Power is an important variable that shapes many interactions and can be relevant in decision-making even when there is no

overt conflict. Control attempts should not necessarily be seen as negative behaviors, however, because Dunbar and Mejia (2012) found that satisfied, power-equal couples often engage in banter and one-upmanship, which is both dominant and relationally positive because it is not perceived by partners to be controlling or threatening. By encouraging the examination of the reasons behind verbal and nonverbal control attempts and the uses of interpersonal power in close relationships, DPT can help the field of counseling psychology develop better practices for couples and families to resolve their conflicts peacefully and fruitfully.

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