

RUNNING HEAD = Perceived Power

**Perceived Power:  
Nonverbal Communication and Masculinity in Public Space\***

Julia Perry

Metropolitan State University of Denver

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\* Julia Perry, Metropolitan State University, [jperry43@msudenver.edu](mailto:jperry43@msudenver.edu)

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## ABSTRACT

A person's subjective attitudes towards gender ideals can be revealed by their nonverbal communication during social exchange. What social conditions might underlie such instances? Particularly within the public sphere, research findings show that gender identity, stereotype-based perception, and the enactment of masculinity influence nonverbal communication, reinforce broader gender inequalities, and control unequal power dynamics. This literature review evaluates scholarly sources to examine power behavior, nonverbal communication, and gender beliefs. My conclusions show implications that gender identity has on social exchange between people of different genders, specifically in public space. Examining the underlying factors that shape public interaction further opens a dialogue to address nonverbal behaviors that restrict the embodiment of equality in public settings.

## INTRODUCTION

Nonverbal behavior carries poignant messages that verbal communication otherwise fails to convey. Because this experience is overlooked regularly, our analysis expands current explanations of nonverbal, public behavior relative to social forces that warrant discriminatory conduct towards women. Concerning symbolic interactionism, face-to-face exchanges sculpt cultural beliefs and values concerning gender identities. In the same way, overarching perceptions of gender-appropriate behavior comprise ideas that people draw from their experiences in social exchange (see Gingrich 2002).

First, I define several variables to ensure clarity. Kinesics is the study of body language and expression; it involves proxemics (the way in which spatial distance is regarded with one's surroundings), movement, and gesture in communication (Richmond and McCroskey 2004). Public spaces, such as parks, city squares, or forms of public transit, are shared spaces where verbal communication enhances the function of nonverbal exchange. Contemporary society has engaged in a global discussion pertaining to gendered harassment, but with little attention to a noteworthy element—body language that reiterates men's masculinity and power (Day 2001; Goh and Hall 2015; Morgan and Davis-Delano 2016; Richmond and McCroskey 2004). Socialization, internalization, and conformity illustrate how the physical embodiment of authority are perceived subjectively.

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Many of the contemporary works cited in this review reported a limited amount of available research in their focus or an unawareness of previously published studies. While bodily gesture, human interaction, gender relation, and public space have each been examined across many fields, research lacks to explain their relationship. For instance, the expressed attitude of sexism has had little consideration in research although its everyday influences on social exchange are plainly known (Goh and Hall 2015). There is much to learn about inter-gender interaction; I encourage further investigation to publicly-displayed assertions of power through gender expression.

## GENDER CONSTRUCTION

### *Gender Displays*

Broad cultural attributions of gender permit the continual reinforcement of stereotypes. The *Handbook of the Sociology of Gender* identified the “gender system,” as the fixed organization of mixed-gender interaction. Gender socialization instills early on, what a child ought to identify with—male or female—and which social roles should then be assumed. Morgan and Davis-Delano (2016) illustrated the “doing gender” concept:

Gender is an accomplishment that is generated, reproduced, and recognized in interaction embedded in a context of gender ideals specific to place and historical period... Doing gender produces gender difference that undergirds gender inequality. This occurs partly because difference is a necessary foundation for inequality and also because doing masculinity involves conveyance of control and dominance whereas doing femininity involves conveyance of deference.

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By “doing gender,” men and women actively design social norms. Society regenerates these norms, and therefore regards certain associated actions as “natural” behaviors. Additionally, personal conformity to conventional models of masculine and feminine performance reinforces the cycle (Morgan and Davis-Delano 2016). The obligation to conform urges men to appear masculine, although doing so can simultaneously constrain them (Day 2001:116). The ideal type of masculinity is never truly achieved. One must continuously perform to upkeep and validate the masculine self. Likewise, because femininity is constructed through the dialogue and polarization of masculinity (Day 2001:110), feminine conformity equally sustains gender inequality. During interpersonal interaction then, the performance of “doing gender” exemplifies the overarching gender system and its influence on shaping gender ideals.

The ways in which humans outwardly carry their bodies disclose (consciously or not) underlying attitudes concerning both one’s self and others. Goh and Hall (2015:253) noted that sexism’s “chivalrous” impression regards women as warm, yet incompetent. Researchers classified such attitudes through their comparative study of men’s nonverbal expressions of “benevolent” and “hostile” sexism. Benevolent sexism involves an expressed motive to attract women who participated in the study. In contrast, hostile sexism was characterized as distant, dominating, and assertive nonverbal behavior during interaction. Whereas hostile sexism is more explicit in nature, it is easier to challenge. Benevolent sexism however, is covert and subtly demeaning.

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[E]xposure to benevolent sexism not only promoted increased justification of gender inequality but also less motivation to participate in collective action against gender inequality as a consequence. We propose that affiliative expressions, like a wolf in sheep's clothing, operate as another possible mechanism by which benevolent sexism can perpetuate support for gender inequality among women at an interpersonal level. These supposed gestures of good faith may entice women to accept the status quo in society because sexism literally looks welcoming, appealing, and harmless. (Goh and Hall 2015:260–61)

### *Status Displays among Genders*

Although men may be more closely associated with socially desirable traits such as power or dominance, they do have less flexibility in their nonverbal expression. In Bailey and Kelly's (2015) investigation of power cues, researchers associated men most strongly with dominant posture and women with submissive posture (p. 334). Men's nonverbal display of femininity was more likely to be deemed as socially inappropriate in comparison to women's display of masculinity. Other research confirmed that young girls receive greater acceptance in gender variation, whereas young effeminate boys are 'sissies.' In adulthood, men have fewer leniencies in the acceptable ways to show status through body language (Bailey and Kelly 2015:333). This exemplifies the pressure that surrounds performance and the drastic difference in social expectation between genders.

## THE EMBODIMENT OF POWER

### *Posing Power*

Contemporary research presents a large body of work concerning power feelings. In an innovative experiment (and later disputed), scholars examined the effects of posing in physical displays of power and whether expansive, high-power poses (vs. contractive postures) could cause beneficial physiological and behavioral changes (Carney, Cuddy, and Yap 2010; Cuddy et. al 2015). High-power poses involved taking up a larger amount of space with limbs outreached from the body. Low-power feelings portrayed hunched, contractive postures with limbs held in, against the body while occupying minimal space. Testosterone and cortisol levels denoted power feelings and risk tolerance in participants. Resulting measurements of testosterone were heightened in high-power posers and cortisol intensity revealed that they were more willing to take risk. In fact, only 13.63 percent of high-power posers were opposed to taking risk in the given task whereas 40 percent of the low-power posers were unwilling (Carney et al. 2010:1366). In contrast, people expressed powerlessness through “closed, contractive posture.” (Carney et al. 2010:1363). To understand how power dictates interaction, it is important to note how embodied empowerment affects bodily behavior and perception of such behavior.

As power is both a personality trait and a social role, it comprises various notions. Authors have used “vertical dimension,” or simply, “V” as a comprehensive reference to power, dominance, and status (Bailey and Kelly

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2015:318; Carney, Hall, and LeBeau 2005; Cuddy et. al 2015; Hall, Coats, and LeBeau 2005:899). “Verticality” refers to a person’s position on a theoretical, high-low spectrum of social authority during interpersonal exchange. For example, in an experiment conducted by Carney, Hall, and LeBeau (2005), participants described a dominant person as someone who seeks control over others in social situations. Other literature added that a dominant person does so through “subtle” or “explicit” means (Bailey and Kelly 2015:318; Hall et al. 2005:898). Status, an indicator of V, attributes privilege and/or respect but does not necessarily infer dominant behavior. Nonetheless, status and dominance manifest social power, which in turn governs social interaction (Cuddy et. al 2015; Hall et al. 2005:898).

## *Postures in Power*

The link between social power and nonverbal conduct has become recognizable in both sociological and psychological fields (Hall et al. 2005:898–99). Bailey and Kelly (2015:319) cited a meta-analysis of such studies that resulted in consistent findings; subjects who displayed expansive posture were associated with high social power. An additional meta-analysis (Carney, Cuddy, and Yap 2015:662), which included thirty-three independent experiences, proposed that the presence of social interaction controlled whether expansive postures would be detected. When interpersonal roles are asymmetrical, one person indicates nonverbal dominance while the other adopts submissive behavior. Either may be in response to the trait first displayed. A separate study



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surveyed participants' beliefs about nonverbal communication exhibiting power (Carney et al. 2005:116). Subjects believed that "high-power individuals" with erect, open, and expressive postures held more socially desirable traits than "low-power individuals." Those with power were also recognized to speak faster, initiate eye contact, interrupt others more often, and have more confident speech (Carney et al. 2005:108). As Bailey and Kelly (2015) stated, "[p]erceptions of who is, or who should be, in charge organize social interactions" (p. 318). Much of the literature agreed that social context has significant effect on individual body language whereas one's achievement of social power subsequently governs who adopts certain postures.

## PUBLIC BEHAVIOR

### *The Public Stage*

Posture and proxemics deliver an array of social implications in the public context. Since this setting provides a central stage for social performance, it concurrently provides a setting for the maintenance of conventional gender ideals. Society considers such conduct to be natural and rarely brings conscious attention to its impacts, however. Masculine presentation can be seen by an audience of both men and women while also having the ability to reflect social notions surrounding appropriate identity (Day 2001:116). In addition to, or in lieu of, other social stages, men can perform in these spaces to secure masculinity and thus signal power (Morgan and Davis-Delano. 2016:258).

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Scholars recognized that the idea of women's vulnerability in public—even when no actual threat exists—perseveres because of its role in the structure of gender identity. Day writes, "Fear and the perception of danger may encourage women to adhere to gendered social norms for behavior that restrict their independence in public space" (2001:19). Day later applied qualitative methods to discover how masculinity influenced men's consciousness of being feared by women in public space. (2004). They found that the construction of masculine identity correlated with men's interpretations of women's apparent fearfulness as well as personal feelings of fear (Day 2001:312; Day 2004:569). For example, the interpretation of women's fearfulness motivated men's chivalrous action in effort to be "gentlemanly." Such action included escorting women to safety and confirming their protection within the experiment's public setting. Because masculinity stresses the presentation of toughness, men are encouraged not to reveal visible fear (Day 2001:119–21). The expectation of men to appear fearless may contribute to the shortage of research around men's experience of public fear in comparison to that of women. The combined notions—femininity as fearful and the expectation of masculinity—contribute to distinct, inter-gender nonverbal communication regarding personal space and invasion of territory.

### *Private Property*

Such distinctions are apparent in people's concern for personal space. This "extended self" is reserved for a buffer between others and the self. Through territoriality, people tend to declare occupation of fixed spaces and defend

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against invasion by another. Territory becomes difficult to claim since the public is open to all people, rarely controlled by one person or group, and is subject to dispute (Richmond and McCroskey 2004:120–32). Social expectations also request civil inattention for public cooperation—the process whereby visitors in close vicinity express awareness of one another while recognizing personal boundaries. Individuals engage indirect eye contact with others to amicably acknowledge mutual presence and to additionally rule out any further interaction (Aranguren and Tonnelat 2014:496). With decreased personal space and increased shared space, territorial encroachment easily occurs. People employ, often unconsciously, two principal methods of territorial resistance—prevention and reaction. For instance, individuals may use assertive gestures to prevent encroachment or react with withdrawal to avoid conflict once encroachment has occurred. The other person's conduct may be a temporary violation of one's claimed space or a more permanent invasion with intent to completely take over that space (Richmond and McCroskey 2004:122–26). By measuring individual's emotional reaction to encroachment on a subway transit, researchers found that bodily contact from a stranger indicated territorial invasion regardless of increased crowding (Aranguren and Tonnelat 2014:495). Whether or not the act is intentional, the recipient of that encroachment evaluates its appropriateness.

This section presented public space as a performance stage so that gender identity has an audience for which to present. Societal expectations and gender beliefs strongly influence public behavior. Additionally, the identification of

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personal space and encroachment permits further discussion about nonverbal communication between high and low-power individuals.

## DISCUSSION

Research confirmed that individuals learn gender-appropriate performance through socialization and recite those behaviors through nonverbal communication. Conformity to gender-specific conduct not only produces social expectations but also reinforces structural inequality. The construction of masculinity and femininity suggest opposing connotations of power. One commonality throughout the collected works was the consistent observation between high and low-power body language. The contrast was most apparent in studies of interpersonal interaction. However, the larger stage of a public sphere presented accounts of unique interaction—power conflict (including territoriality and encroachment) and gender performance.

Another significant finding stated that study participants believed high-power people to act freely while invading other's personal space (Carney et al. 2005:114–117). Henley, who contributed to the initial exploration of nonverbal signals and the “vertical dimension” of power, or V, previously asserted similar results. Henley drew the following parallel between nonverbal behavior, V dimension, and gender: men's kinesics and use of personal space differs from those of women principally because men and women personify high-V and low-V conduct, respectively (Hall et al. 2005:899).

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The underlying conditions that generate contrasting kinesics should be expanded. It's necessary to increase focus on nonverbal communication in public space towards gender and power. Comprehensive observations of public territoriality and encroachment may uncover new revelations between masculinity, power, and nonverbal communication.

## CONCLUSION

This literature review has evaluated contemporary findings on nonverbal communication to expose social conditions that inhibit gender equality. I found that gender norms and expectations exclusively associate expansive, high-power postures to men and contractive, low-power postures to women. The public opportunity for masculine or feminine performance reiterates conventional ideals and disproportionate power dynamics. The portrayal of nonverbal masculinity, due to social power's strong correlation to masculinity, reinforces inequality for men and women both.

### *Implications*

Researchers of power posture confirmed that the onset physical embodiment of power might enable low-power individuals to gain social authority. The ability to change one's physical posture could in fact enhance social circumstances—due to physiological changes in the body—for those who lack social clout or feel “chronically powerless” (Carney et al. 2010:1367; Cuddy et. al 2015:1286). These people may become better equipped to react rather than withdrawal when their personal space is encroached in a shared space.

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### *Suggestions for Further Research*

I suggest future research to discuss power's effect on spatial use within the public sphere. As previously illustrated (Day, Stump, and Carreon 2003), much of the present research does not highlight men's perspectives but originates in feminist theory. It would be of benefit then, to develop extensive perspectives concerning men's experiences of masculinity. further research can better address proxemics and encroachment behavior in terms of gender and power. Such observations may explain the ways in which high-low-power interactions unfold.

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