

# Nonverbal Communication Increases Romantic Relationship Longevity

Rachel Heckman

## Abstract

*This paper will look at the research of nonverbal communication and its impact on romantic relationship longevity. According to Dainton (2002), divorces are increasing. Manusov et al., said that nonverbals such as facial expressions, touching, eye contact, and tone of voice can be turning points in relationships (2008, p. 5). If negative nonverbals are displayed, they could lead to a negative change in a relationship. As a result of this research, three research questions were put in place: 1) will couples that practice effective nonverbal communication have a lower chance of divorce? 2) will the satisfaction of couples decrease if negative nonverbal cues are communicated? 3) will implementing exercises in the couple's daily life improve their nonverbal communication? These three questions will be introduced and examined. A longitudinal study will be introduced as a method that involves a survey and an interview.*

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## Introduction

According to Spott, Pyle, & Punyanunt-Carter (2010), almost half of all marriages end in divorce (p. 31). Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (1998), added that another 25% of marriages report that the relationship is distressing to at least one of the partners (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 33). Divorce rates are increasing, and researchers are asking why? Dainton (2000), says relationship satisfaction is based on what an individual actually experiences and what he or she expects to experience (Spott et al., 2010, p. 31). If an individual's experience is not what they expect, they are more likely to leave that relationship. Per Dainton (2002), research indicates that

maintenance behaviors that are relative to an individual's expectations lead to a more satisfying relationship (Spott et al., 2010, p. 31).

Nonverbal communication plays a huge role in interpersonal relationships (Huirui & Yang, 2014, p. 56). Therefore, it is important to study nonverbal communication in relationships. This will impact the field of communication because it will examine nonverbal communication and whether it impacts relationship satisfaction (Spott et al., 2010, p. 30). In other words, if there is an increased amount of positive nonverbal behaviors, will there be an increase in the satisfaction of that relationship? Another thing that it will show

is if there is a correlation between positive nonverbal behaviors and relationship longevity (Spott et al., 2010, p. 30).

Manusov, Docan-Morgan and Harvey (2008), also state that “nonverbal cues are important in relationships” (p. 3). In all relationships, nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, touching, eye contact, tone of voice, and so forth (Prinsen & Punyanunt-Carter, 2010, p.1), help an individual to feel welcomed and supported by their partner (Schachner, Shaver & Mikulincer, 2005, p.150). On the contrary, Prinsen & Punyanunt-Carter (2010) found that in casual dating, nonverbal communication is not important (p.3).

To summarize, nonverbal behaviors are important in looking at the reasons relationships are ending in divorce (Spott et al., 2010, p.31). Many of these couples are impacted by negative nonverbal cues (Manusov et al., 2008, p.2). The more positive the nonverbal behaviors are, the longer a relationship will last (Spott et al., 2010, p.34). This research can help in creating more extensive studies about this topic. One important thing that studies should do is to include more cultures, ages, and look specifically at different nonverbal behaviors and how they change in different stages.

### **Research Questions**

Building upon conclusions found in the existing literature on nonverbal communication and relationships, this project poses three research questions. The first is about the long-term health of marriages. The second is about relationship satisfaction with regard to nonverbal communication. The third is about how nonverbal exercises impact the health of a relationship. They are as follows:

**RQ1:** Will couples that practice effective nonverbal communication have a lower chance of divorce?

**RQ2:** Will the satisfaction of couples decrease if negative nonverbal cues are communicated?

**RQ3:** Will implementing exercises in the couple’s daily life improve their nonverbal communication?

### **Method**

The research method that Gottman, Coan, Carrere, and Swanson (2001) used in their research was a two-stage sampling process (p. 44). They used a series of tests, observations, and evaluations. Gottman et al., (2001) conducted an oral interview in which they asked questions about the relationship, how they met, when they dated, when they decided to get married, good times and bad times in the marriage, how their marriage is different from their parents’ marriages, their philosophy on what works in marriages, views of marital conflict, and how their marriage changed (p. 44). This same method will be used for part of the current study.

This study will use some but not all of the methods Gottman and his colleagues (2001) used. This is the best method to answer the research questions because it will observe nonverbal behaviors as the couples talk about issues that are important in relationships and show how strong and far along their relationships are. After following up with the participants four weeks later, the study will show how the nonverbal cues have changed in the relationship over time, affecting the relationship. The study will help determine where the marital issues stem from, if there are any.

Participants will be recruited by putting posts on social media. The sample for this study will be five couples who have been married for less than one year. The recruiting process will use networking and snowball sampling, which is when participants connect the researcher to other individuals to ask them to participate in the study. The study will measure the quality of the relationship by using a scale to rate longevity, quality, and satisfaction in relationships. Once there are at least five couples, interviews and questionnaires will be taken by the participants.

Just as Gottman and his colleagues conducted interviews with each of the participants individually, this study will give each participant a questionnaire individually. Participants will be asked their gender, age, relationship status, length of relationship, and the number of serious, long-term relationships (at least a year) before their current marriage. It will then go through a series of questions where the individual will have to rate how much they agree or disagree with the following statements: (1) When I am talking to my spouse/partner, I feel comfortable making eye contact, (2) When having an argument, my spouse/partner's tone of voice often makes me feel uncomfortable, (3) I can tell how my spouse/partner is feeling based upon their nonverbal communication. Finally, the participants will rate the following questions on a scale from 1 to 5: How important is nonverbal communication to you?

1. Nonverbal communication adds to a relationship, how important is it for you and your partner to have the same outlook on things?
2. How willing are you to make nonverbal communication better?

3. Nonverbal communication has to change and increase in order for the relationship to grow or work.

After each of the participants takes the survey, the couples will come together and be given an interview together. The interview will include the following six questions:

1. How important is nonverbal communication in your relationship?
2. Would you be willing to work on your nonverbal communication with your partner?
3. How often do you show affection and how important is that in your relationship?
4. Why did you start dating your significant other in the first place?
5. How does your significant other's tone of voice change when you are in an argument?
6. How long does it take to make up after an argument? What role do nonverbals play in this?

The couples will then be sent home with exercises that they will be asked to work on for four weeks. While the couples work on the exercises, the data from the surveys and interviews will be analyzed. After those four weeks, the couples will then return, and the same interview and survey will be conducted to see if the exercises change their nonverbal behaviors. These surveys and interviews will then be compared to the ones they took four weeks previously.

The exercises that they will work on come from Guerrero and Floyd's research on nonverbal communication (2006). They will work on their nonverbal expressions of interpersonal warmth and positive affect. They will do things such as smiling and warm vocal tones when dealing with conflict. In turn, this will allow each partner to feel cared for and that the relationship is desired. Each couple will practice eye contact, facial expressions, space, posture, and tone and sound of their voice. They will get the free eBook, *How to Improve Your Nonverbal Communications Skills: Effective Strategies for Enhancing Your Non-Verbal Communication* by BizMove Management Training Institute. During the first three weeks, the couples will go through three chapters. During the final week, they will look at the last chapter.

### **Conclusion**

One couple was interviewed in this study. With just one couple, the results can not be generalized to every couple. The couple expressed nonverbals were important when making up after a fight. Closeness after a fight was important to the couple so the other knows they care. In conclusion, further research should have ten years between the initial interview and survey to the post-tests. Initiating a longer time between tests will allow for nonverbal communication development.

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