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Reciprocal Communication as a Form of Nonverbal Communication

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science

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## **ABSTRACT**

### Reciprocal Communication as a Form of Nonverbal Communication

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The current state of psychological research in nonverbal communication is briefly summarized and several problems are noted. Reciprocal communication (RC) is suggested, defined, and qualitatively investigated as a way of describing the experience of emotional compatibility in communication, with an emphasis on form, degree, and timing as fundamental aspects of nonverbal communication. Support for three different levels of emotional compatibility (fully, partially, and nonreciprocal) is found. Variation in the interpretation of nonverbal communication when communication is perceived as either intentional or unintentional is noted, and a system of categorizing reciprocal communication is suggested. Further patterns in nonverbal communication are observed, and terminology suggested.

**KEYWORDS:** emotional compatibility, dating, nonverbal communication, physical affection, qualitative research, reciprocal communication

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## Reciprocal Communication as a form of Nonverbal Communication

Within psychology, the study of nonverbal communication has a long history, appearing in psychological texts in the early 1900s (McDougal, 1908). Nonverbal communication has been investigated from several theoretical frameworks, including evolutionary/ecological, attachment, organizational/behavioral, and sociocultural models (see Zerbowitz, 2003; Schachner et al., 2005; Gibson, 1979; Burgoon & Newton, 1991). These frameworks have produced several measures for differing aspects of nonverbal communication, including sensitivity, emotional correlation, and deciphering ability (Harrigan et al., 2005). After briefly reviewing the most common theoretical frameworks, several problems with current conceptions of nonverbal communication will be examined, and possible solutions suggested. Finally, research implementing the suggested solutions will be detailed and discussed.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

The theoretical frameworks most often used to conceptualize nonverbal communication are evolutionary and sociocultural, depending on whether the researchers in question favor biological or social explanations of behavior. Behavioral and Attachment perspectives are also used to study nonverbal communication, but are often subsumed within larger evolutionary or sociocultural frameworks.

Evolutionary theoretical frameworks typically view nonverbal communication as “an adaptive function either for the survival of the species or for the goal attainment of individuals.” (Zerbowitz, 2003, pg. 134). Within such a framework, nonverbal communication persists in human interaction as the genetic heritage of our pre-verbal ancestors. Progenitors with a genetic predisposition for sensitivity to nonverbal communication presumably had advantages in mate

selection, hunting, and avoiding predators, and therefore had more opportunities to pass on their genes (Zerbowitz, 2003). As our ancestors moved from individual and dyadic lifestyles toward smaller group and community-centered lifestyles, proficiency at nonverbal communication presumably continued to provide evolutionary benefits by helping individuals within the community engender trust, secure positions of leadership, and ensure protection (Boone & Buck, 2003). The highly social nature of our current evolutionary context ensures that proficiency in nonverbal communication continues to provide advantages in mate selection and job attainment.

Social Learning theory, as proposed by Bandura (1977), states that behavior is the result of learning through observation and interaction. From the perspective of Social Learning theory, everything a person thinks or does is the result of previous social interactions. Sociocultural explanations of nonverbal communication have two central tenets: “Most nonverbal behaviors do not have inherent meanings but, instead, acquire their meanings through social consensus” and “most nonverbal communication is learned, rather than innate” (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006, pg. 31). While individual consciousness is important in learning how to communicate nonverbally, the meaning of what is learned is almost entirely the province of social consensus. Meanings of nonverbal communications are therefore derived from previously observed or experienced socially prescribed interpretations, rather than from present interactions as they are consciously experienced. From this perspective, application of these socially prescribed interpretations will occur regardless of whether an individual is consciously aware of either the application or the original experience in which he or she first learned that the interpretation was appropriate.

In attachment theory, variation in a person’s sensitivity to nonverbal communication is explained as a function of the attachment relationship they form with the primary caregiver, with

higher levels of sensitivity typically ascribed to individuals with a history of secure attachment (Schachner et al., 2005). The attachment relationship that was initially formed with the primary caregiver serves as the model from which individuals pattern all of their subsequent relationships. Since the initial relationship with the primary caregiver happens largely through nonverbal interactions, nonverbal communications can be viewed as an especially salient presentation of attachment style.

Organizational and behavioral models of psychology most often present nonverbal communication in terms of rewards and punishments. An individual's particular style of nonverbal interaction is seen as the result of their past reinforcement history. Those with a history of either extremely positive or extremely negative nonverbal interactions demonstrate an increased sensitivity for such interactions and experience them as rewarding or punishing, respectively. In social situations, an aptitude for nonverbal communication can provide a way to reward or punish behaviors while avoiding overtly exposing intent (Grammer, Kruck, & Magnusson, 1998). The covert rewards and punishments available through nonverbal interactions are especially useful in situations where overt action would be seen as too forward, or outside an individual's authority.

### **Problems and Further Questions**

While the overview of theoretical frameworks commonly used to study nonverbal communication given in this paper is by no means comprehensive, it does demonstrate a general lack of consensus regarding the best model for the conceptualization of nonverbal communication. There are, of course, several possible explanations for this disagreement. One explanation would be that despite a long history of interest on the part of researchers, a relatively



short period of time has been devoted to nonverbal communication in terms of overall scientific investigation, and that most research is still directed toward quantitative description. Another possibility is that the continuing lack of agreement about the nature of nonverbal communication results from a failure to account for certain fundamental aspects of the phenomenon itself.

Quickly revisiting the four theoretical frameworks will demonstrate that they each neglect to examine a feature of nonverbal communication that may play an integral role in the overall phenomenon.

Evolutionary theories of nonverbal communication explain such behavior as arising from genetic factors that have been selected for due to survival advantages provided by those factors. This description fits well in the framework of evolutionary psychology, and nonverbal communication makes a certain amount of sense when viewed from this perspective. However, such a perspective ascribes a motivation to nonverbal communication that is outside the conscious awareness of the persons involved. The cause of an individual's nonverbal proficiency is genetic, and the motivation for such behavior is the preservation of the genetic factors involved in nonverbal communication. Individuals cannot be conscious of their genetic inheritance in any meaningful way, and are conscious of their need to pass on their genetic inheritance in only the most ancillary way. A motivation that is outside of a person's consciousness has questionable value in describing nonverbal communication as it is experienced, since unconscious motivations are not available for consideration when experiential description of the phenomenon are given.

Given that Social Learning theory requires that an individual observe or experience social interactions before learning can occur, sociocultural explanations for nonverbal communication

might be expected to account for the conscious experience of nonverbal communication. However, as previously stated, even though learning requires some level of consciousness, meaning is almost entirely decided by social consensus. An individual does not need to be conscious of the social constraints of their interpretations for those interpretations to occur. In fact, sociocultural theory often assumes that the influence of societal consensus on our interpretations of nonverbal interactions is unconscious (Philippot, Feldman, & Coats, 1999). Sociocultural theories therefore also claim that the most significant influences on the experience of nonverbal communication are factors outside of individual consciousness. Individuals can hardly be expected to experientially verify motivations they are not conscious of or consciously participating in.

Attachment theory also assumes a similar set of built-in, unconscious motivations. Predispositions toward and sensitivity for nonverbal communication are functions of the attachment relationship an individual formed with their primary caregiver during infancy. Since most individuals have no memory of the process they went through to form that initial attachment, they can only be conscious of how their attachment style influences their experience of nonverbal communication in a very limited sense. Once again, the primary motivational aspects of nonverbal communication are outside of an individual's consciousness.

Initially, Behavioral explanations of nonverbal communication allow for more consciousness of intent than the other frameworks, since individuals are usually conscious of when an experience is rewarding or punishing, and are generally conscious of avoiding pain and seeking after pleasure. On the other hand, behaviorism arose out of a desire to avoid talking about psychology in terms of unobservable motivations and cognitions, such that theorists tend

to downplay, if not blatantly deny, the influence of consciousness on observed behavior (Wegner, 2002). When individuals try to explain their behavior in terms other than rewards or punishments, the usual behavioral response is to treat such cognitions as separate and apart from the combination of past and present reinforcers that are the actual cause of the behavior. Such a response demonstrates the same problem as the other theoretical frameworks, where the experiential nature of nonverbal communication is downplayed in favor of the theoretical explanation of the phenomenon.

What emerges in each of the dominant theoretical frameworks is a tendency to either leave the conscious experience of nonverbal communication unexamined or to deny that any examination of the experience will advance our understanding of the phenomenon. Whether the conscious experience of nonverbal communication plays any fundamental role in the overall phenomenon is, however, a more difficult question to answer. It is entirely possible that existing theoretical frameworks provide an accurate context for the most salient aspects of nonverbal communication. It is also possible, however, that experiential descriptions of nonverbal communication will conflict with or contradict assumptions made by the theoretical frameworks used to describe them. Given the existing theoretical tendency to neglect experiential accounts of nonverbal communication, it is unlikely that further quantitative description under these frameworks will provide any indication as to their accuracy in portraying the experience of the phenomenon, no matter how much time is allotted. Qualitative methods of description, which rely primarily on experiential accounts from participants, are ideally suited to address questions of this nature. At this point, however, little if any qualitative investigation of nonverbal communication has taken place. This may be the result of a hesitancy within the greater

psychological community to engage in qualitative research, due to concerns about generalizability and a lack of traditional variable isolation and manipulation that are associated with qualitative methodology. A brief review of difficulties with such traditional measures of analysis when applied to nonverbal communication will show that the peculiarities of qualitative research methods may actually be more appropriate to the phenomenon than more traditional quantitative analysis.

**Traditional measures.** Research has found nonverbal communication to be an extremely context dependant experience (Barret, 1993). What is considered a meaningful nonverbal communication varies widely with the setting, number of people present, and the relationship of the people engaged in communication. In an attempt to isolate and manipulate the variables of interest, most quantitative studies rely on scaled response or yes/no formats to test sensitivity to nonverbal communication. Studies that incorporate actual instances of nonverbal communication often rely on pictures or video recordings, many of which are staged or filmed in a laboratory setting (Harrigan, Rosenthal, & Scherer, 2005; Scherer and Ekman, 1982). Studies that utilize actual person-to-person interactions almost always include a confederate.

Some research has already begun to conclude that such methods are unlikely to reveal consistently relevant information about nonverbal communication. In particular, there are variations in duration, gaze, and inflection in nonverbal communication that make measuring only the presence or absence of touch insufficient (Floyd, 1999). These variations make the use of questionnaires or still pictures ineffective ways of measuring nonverbal communication. Additionally, studies show that induced attraction has little if any consistent effect on nonverbal

communication (Stapleton, Nacci, and Tedeschi, 1973). Thus the use of a confederate as a means of measuring nonverbal communication in studies targeting attraction is also likely to be ineffective.

Difficulties that arise when applying traditional variable isolation and manipulation to nonverbal communication are due in large part to the nature of the communication itself. The possible forms, duration, and emotional content of nonverbal communication have been shown to interact in unique and non-additive ways to influence participants and observers' perceptions of the experience (Floyd, 1999). Attempts to isolate and manipulate any one of the variables inevitably disrupt the entire phenomenon. This is in large part due to their being no true "objective" experience of nonverbal communication. There are the physical emblems that make up the nonverbal interaction, but when these physical motions are studied without reference to the intentions and the perceptions of the individuals involved, then communication is no longer being studied. "Generally, the expression of an emotion or other behavior involves the coordination of multiple modalities working concurrently... Thus, the meaning of behavior is based on the configuration of these specified modalities and their function relative to each other" (Harrigan et al. 2005, p. 369). Quantitative methods are generally sufficient to capture nonverbal behaviors and interactions, but the operationalization required to quantify nonverbal communications is too restrictive to capture aspects of the phenomenon that may be most valuable for the advancement of research in the field. In essence, in order to study nonverbal communication as it occurs, the methodology used must be able to account for the contextually bound, subjective evaluations of the individuals involved in the communication. Of the

methodologies available to psychology, qualitative description is the most appropriate to accomplish this task.

**Psychology's unique responsibility.** One final argument for qualitative investigation is that psychology has a more complicated responsibility to its subject matter than other scientific disciplines (Giorgi, 1970). While biologists or chemists take great pains to ensure that other scientists understand their findings, they don't have to explain these findings to the objects of their research. So long as a theory in one of these "hard" sciences is predictive, it is considered an adequate description of its subject matter. In psychology, on the other hand, we have the unique responsibility of making our theories understandable to our participants. Given this responsibility, even a consistently predictive theory can be problematic when it contradicts the way people experience their own motivations and behaviors. When the primary theoretical frameworks that direct the investigation of nonverbal communication neglect to account for individuals' conscious experiences, it is reasonable to assume that some part of the explanations that arise from those frameworks may contradict the lived experience of the phenomenon. A theory of nonverbal communication that incorporates experiential accounts of the phenomenon would not only advance our scientific understanding, but would be an integral part of our responsibility as psychologists.

In summary, a study of nonverbal communication using qualitative methodology would be helpful to our understanding of the phenomenon in several ways. First, it will provide a documented account of the conscious experience of nonverbal communication, an account which has not been provided by traditional quantitative methods, nor is likely to be provided anytime in the future. Second, it is hoped that a more continuous, context dependent description of

nonverbal communication will avoid the difficulties created by traditional experimental manipulation. Finally, a qualitative analysis of nonverbal communication will provide an invaluable way to compare the terminology used by psychologists with the experiential accounts of participants.

### **Defining Nonverbal Communication.**

Given the broad nature of the subject matter, a comprehensive investigation of nonverbal communication is outside the scope of any one study. It is therefore necessary to select from among the possible types of nonverbal communication a particular form that would best typify the overall experience. Despite the general lack of consensus in previous research on the subject, certain basic elements of nonverbal communication re-occur consistently enough across differing theoretical frameworks to be considered fundamental parts of the phenomenon.

The most basic aspect of nonverbal communication relates to the form of the “sending” signal and “receiving” response. Many culturally expected forms of nonverbal communication involve interactions in which the sending and receiving signals take the same form. Handshakes, bowing, and hugs are all common examples. When a person extends his/her hand, the appropriate response in western cultures is to do the same. Identical form is not, however, a necessary part of nonverbal communication (Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991). When a nonverbal communication is intended to elicit a specific reaction, exhibiting the desired behavior becomes the receiving response. For example, a baseball catcher who signals for a fastball generally expects the receiving response to take a different form than the sending signal.

Another fundamental aspect of nonverbal communication is the timing of the interaction. Research has shown that, in order for an interaction to be considered a nonverbal

communication, there is a maximum time period that can pass between the initial sending signal and the receiving response (Grammer et al., 1998). This time period can be as brief as several milliseconds, or as long as a few days, and can vary depending on the form of the initial communication, the number of people involved in the communication and their degree of familiarity, and several other factors. The timing of the response tends to become more important when the sending and receiving signals take different forms (Bernieri and Rosenthal, 1991).

A third fundamental aspect of nonverbal communication has already been mentioned above. The importance of variance in duration or degree can be seen in cultural forms of nonverbal communication. There are possible differences in the duration and degree of a handshake, typically thought of as warmth or firmness. Varying these aspects of the communication are often construed as a way of communicating different things about the character or intention of the persons involved in the handshake. Bowing in Asian cultures incorporates similar differences in duration and degree. A lower, longer bow communicates different things about the character and intention of the persons involved than a more upright, shorter bow.

Some research investigating the interactions of form and timing has already been undertaken. Feldman and Rime (1991) detail investigation into interpersonal coordination, which is defined as the degree to which the behaviors in an interaction are nonrandom, patterned, or synchronized in both timing and form. Interpersonal coordination is further divided into two parts: behavioral matching and interactional synchrony. Behavioral matching refers to the idea that the more similar interactant's physical behaviors toward each other are, the more similar



their mental states are likely to be. Interactional synchrony refers to specific aspects of the observable behavior: rhythm, simultaneous movement, and behavioral meshing (i.e. how interdependent the observed behaviors are).

Grammer et al. (1998) also performed a series of studies in which they examined variance in form and timing, and developed a terminology to distinguish between them. The general name that they gave to the process was behavioral synchronization, “the precise timing and coordination of movements to coincide with the timing or rhythm of another’s movements” (p. 3). They further refined their definition of behavioral synchronization into a description of movement synchrony and behavioral matching. Movement synchrony emphasizes similarity in timing over similarity in form, while behavioral synchrony emphasizes similarity in form at any given time. Their study found that actions that took a similar form (demonstrated behavioral synchrony) had a longer period of time in which to be considered responses than actions that took different forms.

The use of similar terminology to refer to slightly different aspects of the same phenomenon is a reflection of the current state of research on nonverbal communication. While both of the above studies address the importance of form and timing, there has yet to emerge a clear consensus as to how the interaction of these factors should be conceptualized. In addition, neither of the previous studies incorporated variances in degree of the communication, possibly because such variance is difficult to operationalize. Given the recurrent nature of degree as an integral part of nonverbal communication, and the non-additive nature of the interacting factors, an additional term that encompasses variations in all three aspects of nonverbal communication will be useful.

**Reciprocal communication.** The term reciprocal communication (RC) is suggested as a useful way to refer to any communication that is experienced by at least one of the persons involved as expressing emotional content. Before reciprocal communication is further defined, however, it may be helpful to distinguish it from similar terms found in other theoretical frameworks. In several of the current models of nonverbal communication a reciprocal response is one which is intended to match either an increased or decreased level of familiarity. Reciprocal responses are contrasted with compensatory responses, which are intended to bring either an uncomfortable increased or decreased nonverbal communication back towards a desired level of familiarity (See practical models of nonverbal communication, Guerrero & Floyd, 2006).

Reciprocal communication should be distinguished from other similar concepts by its emphasis on the perceived experience of the participants, as opposed to the observable behaviors involved in the experience. This may appear to be a contradictory semantic distinction, given the relation of form, degree, and timing to the term, but reciprocal communication is concerned with the syntax (form, timing, and degree) of an interaction only as it contributes to the meaning derived from the experience. It is expected that the perceived emotional equivalence of interactions will vary depending on the degree, timing, and to a lesser extent the form of the communication. Reciprocal communication could therefore fall into three categories: fully, partially, and nonreciprocal. Fully reciprocal communications would include communications in which at least one of the individuals involved experiences the emotional content of the sending and receiving signals to be compatible. Potentially, nonverbal communications in which the receiving response takes a different form than the sending signal, but is still desired, could be perceived as expressing similar emotional content. In such situations, interactions that involve

different forms would also be seen as fully reciprocal communications. Partially reciprocal communications would be those in which the degree or form of the interaction is present in the allotted time, but not experienced as completely emotionally compatible. Non-reciprocal communications would be those in which the emotional content of the interaction is seen as contradictory. A non-reciprocal communication would most likely be experienced when a sending signal was given but there was no receiving response in either form or degree within the allotted time, or when the receiving response eliminates the possibility of reciprocation in either form or degree. Smiling at a person on the street, and that person either showing no response or turning their back could both be seen as non-reciprocal communication.

Since a consistent means of distinguishing between the terms nonverbal behavior, nonverbal interaction, and nonverbal communication has not been put forth, it will be helpful to delineate the three terms here. Nonverbal behavior will be used in the most general sense; that is, any behavior that is not verbal. Nonverbal interactions will include nonverbal behaviors that occur when two or more people are interacting with each other. Nonverbal interaction will also be used to describe the strictly observable aspects of nonverbal communication, without reference to either cognitive or emotional correlates of the interaction. Finally, nonverbal communication will refer to interactions that are either intended or interpreted to communicate information about an individual's emotions, intentions, or desires.

### **Objectives**

The main focus of the following analysis will be to capture participants' lived experience through qualitative analysis. It is hoped that participants' descriptions will be useful in determining how well current theoretical frameworks account for the actual experience of

nonverbal communication, but no comparison between the qualitative reports and the theoretical frameworks will be attempted, due to the exploratory nature of the research. Since the terms associated with reciprocal communication were developed specifically for this endeavor, a second aim of the study is to determine the adequacy of the proposed terminology. Also due to the exploratory nature of the research, this study will not include formal hypotheses. Certain principles of communication will be considered fundamental, but these principles will not be tested in the falsifiable manner typically associated with traditional quantitative methodology.

**Principles of reciprocal communication.** The specific assumptions of the study are as follows:

1. Form, degree, and timing are key elements of the experience of nonverbal communication.
2. Nonverbal communication can be experientially divided into 3 subcategories: fully reciprocal, partially reciprocal, and nonreciprocal
  - a. Fully Reciprocal communication is most likely to be experienced when the form, degree, and timing of the interaction are similar.
  - b. Partially Reciprocal communication is most likely to be experienced when the degree of the receiving response is less than that of the sending signal.
  - c. Nonreciprocal communication is most likely to be experienced when there is no receiving response, or when the response excludes further communication.

**Definitions.** Because of the qualitative nature of the project, each principle must be understood in terms of the participants' experiences. Strictly speaking there is no operationalization, in that the objective of the investigation is to make clear what participants

mean when they refer to aspects of nonverbal communication, not to make clear what the researchers mean when they refer to aspects of nonverbal communication. That being said, certain terms will be used by the researcher when the participants' descriptions are consistent with the proposed patterns. Form will refer to the physical actions that constitute the sending signal and receiving response. Degree will be used to refer to the measure or comparability of the receiving response relative to that of the sending signal. In situations where nonverbal communication involves bodily contact, physical pressure will be the best measure of degree, but not all nonverbal communication involves bodily contact. If a person sent someone a rose, and the recipient responding by sending a dozen roses back, the communication would have identical form and an increase in degree, but no bodily interaction between the individuals. Timing will refer to the amount of time that passes between the sending signal and the receiving response. Fully reciprocal refers to communication in which one person experiences the sending signal and the receiving response as expressing compatible emotional content. Nonreciprocal refers to communication in which one person experiences the sending signal and receiving response express incompatible emotional content. Partially reciprocal refers to communication in which one person experiences the sending signal and receiving response as having some level of emotional compatibility and some level of emotional incompatibility. Here emotional compatibility refers to experiencing similar emotion or emotional desire, as when both the sending signal and the receiving response express happiness, or the desire for closeness.

It is expected that identical form in nonverbal communication is not necessary to experiencing the communication as reciprocal. When identical form is present, it is expected that participants will express more confidence in their estimation of the degree of the

communication. It is also expected that there will be a meaningful relationship between the degree of nonverbal communication and the confidence of the interpretation. Participants are likely to be more confident in their interpretation of the communication when the degree of the receiving response is experienced as the same or similar to the degree of the sending signal.

**Data analysis in qualitative research.** Since the current project will not be utilizing traditional hypothesis testing or operationalization, it may be helpful to briefly discuss how data analysis will proceed. The principles of reciprocal communication listed above are assumptions that guide the formulation of questions during interviews. They help form a set of expectations about how the phenomenon in question is experienced, but they are not inviolate. It is the researcher's job to be sensitive to instances where interviewee's experiences challenge or contradict these assumptions, and alter them accordingly. The process is not completely unlike null hypothesis testing in quantitative data analysis; a qualitative researcher analyzes data under the assumption that the principles guiding the analysis may indeed be false. In this way, quantitative data analysis becomes a search for disconfirming evidence. In relation to the principles listed above, the questions guiding that search were: "Do participants ever describe their nonverbal communication without making reference to form, degree, or timing?", "Are there any aspects of participants' descriptions of nonverbal communication that are not conceptualized adequately by the proposed definitions of form, degree, or timing?", "Do participants ever describe the feeling of emotional compatibility when either the form, degree, or timing of their nonverbal communication is dissimilar?", etc. Once that process has been followed for an individual participant's data, it is repeated across all other participants. Any instances of disconfirming evidence are grouped together and analyzed to determine whether

there is a pattern that might account for their occurrence. If no disconfirming evidence can be found, the researcher concludes that, for the current participant group, the assumptions are adequate to describe the phenomenon. If disconfirming evidence is found, the researcher adapts the assumptions according to the patterns found in the disconfirming evidence, or rejects the assumptions if no consistent patterns arise.

In qualitative research, raw data is initially gathered, and can be present, retrospective, oral, written, audio, or video in nature. In situations where the raw data is not already written, the next step in analysis is transcription, which usually involves verbatim conversion of raw data into text, utilizing a specific notational system to indicate pausing, inflection, emotional content, and other variations that are specific to the raw data's original medium. Once the transcription is complete, data is separated into segments, called meaning units, that portray a single thought, reaction, or emotion. At this point the researcher's task is to examine the meaning units to see whether there are any patterns in the way that emotions, thoughts, and reactions occur across contexts. Frequent referencing between written transcriptions, raw data, and the original source is central to the process, so that there is as much correlation between the researcher's inferences and the participants' description of the phenomenon as possible. A concrete example of the data analysis process from this research will be informative:

***Transcription of raw data.***

I: Back to the...the kiss on the cheek. When you...you had hugged her, and you were coming across clockwise, across your right side...

A: Yep. Saw that she was passing the right side of my face.

I: How premeditated was that? [pause] I mean, was it just an, in the moment...

A: About two minutes out...

I: About two minutes out? So, before hug, during hug?

A: Before hug.

I: Before hug. Okay.

A: It was like, if I get a chance, I'll do this. And then I tried to orchestrate a chance.

I: [pause] When you were thinking about doing it, was there a response that you were hoping for?

A: [long pause] I think that, sort of...almost, subconsciously I didn't have...I wanted a positive response, I had no conscious definition of what that might be. It can manifest itself in a number of different ways. But...I...wanted just a reaffirmation that she was interested in me, and that things were good to keep moving ahead. It...the response I hadn't thought about...making sure that I had told her in that way that I was still very interested in her and wanted to move things ahead, that part I had pretty clear.

***Separation of data into meaning units.***

(If I get a chance, I'll [kiss her on the cheek]. And then I tried to orchestrate a chance [to kiss her on the cheek])

(I wanted a positive response, [but] I had no conscious definition of what that might be)

([A positive response] can manifest itself in a number of different ways)

([A positive response would be a] reaffirmation that was she interested in me)

([A positive response would mean that] things were good to keep moving ahead)

(The response I hadn't thought about)

(Making sure that I had told her in that way [kissing her on the cheek] that I was still very interested...that part I had pretty clear).

After separating the transcribed data into meaning units, the next step is to group those meaning units into similar categories.

***Meaning of the sending signal.***

(If I get a chance, I'll [kiss her on the cheek]. And then I tried to orchestrate a chance [to kiss her on the cheek])

(Making sure that I had told her in that way [kissing her on the cheek] that I was still very interested...that part I had pretty clear).

***Anticipation of the receiving response.***

(I wanted a positive response, [but] I had no conscious definition of what that might be)

([A positive response] can manifest itself in a number of different ways)



(The response I hadn't thought about)

***Meaning of the receiving response.***

([A positive response would be a] reaffirmation that she was interested in me)

([A positive response would mean that] things were good to keep moving ahead)

Once similar categories are established, inferences can be made about the context in which things happen, and how that context affected the overall phenomenon.

***Analysis of meaning units.***

In this instance, the individual had a specific emotional message he wanted to send, and had pre-selected a particular form of nonverbal communication that he felt would clearly indicate the emotional content of the message. The chosen nonverbal communication served two purposes: to convey what he felt, and to elicit a positive response. There had been no premeditation on his part as to what that response would be, and he felt that it could have manifested itself in a number of different ways. Regardless of what form the response took, he felt that a positive response would be a reaffirmation of her interest in him, and a signal that his own emotions and desires were reciprocated.

A similar process is followed for each participant in the study. Once meaning units and contextual analysis were provided for each individual participant, comparisons across multiple participants can be made. The more an inference made about a particular experience reoccurs across participants, the more confident the researcher would be in the importance of that inference as a meaningful part of the phenomenon as a whole. Finally the researcher's task is to organize and present participant's experiences in a way that illustrates the common patterns of the phenomenon. This final step typically involves a large amount of editing, so the researcher must be particularly careful not to sacrifice participant's original intention for the sake of the overall narrative.

## Method

### Measures

Two different methods of inquiry were employed during this investigation: free response questionnaire and interview. The free response portion included four orienting questions, and was administered via e-mail.

- 1.) Describe the first time you remember feeling attracted to your current partner.
- 2.) Describe the first time you remember doing something that was an expression of that attraction.
- 3.) Describe the first time you felt your current partner may have been attracted to you.
- 4.) Describe the first time you felt your current partner realized you may have been attracted to him/her.

The orienting questions focused on the initial interactions for two reasons. The frequency of nonverbal communications was assumed to be higher at the beginning of the courtship, before the relationship was close enough to support overt displays of affection. Having a written record of the initial interactions of the couple also allowed for more detailed questions later in the interview process. (See Appendix for a full copy of the e-mail).

Participants were instructed to respond to the questions via e-mail, and not to confer with their partner about their responses. Although there were no measures within the design of the study that guaranteed participants did not confer with each other, the importance of this guideline was stressed in writing and during the interview process. After the responses to the initial questions were received, more specific questions were developed. These questions were used to

guide in-person interviews, which were conducted individually. Participants were asked not to discuss the questions they were asked or the responses they gave with their partner until after both had been interviewed. When the interviewer had access to information about a participant's relationship from a previous interview, effort was made to avoid asking specific questions about experiences that were not brought up in the normal flow of the conversation. These methods helped prevent participants from altering their responses to coincide with how their partner experienced an interaction.

Interviews were recorded using an audio cassette player for later transcription. After the transcription was complete, the interviews and email responses served as the primary source of data for analysis. Phenomenological data analysis emphasizes the meaning participants draw from their experiences by focusing on perceptions (van Maansen, 1990). As such, of the common qualitative analytical approaches, phenomenology is most consistent with the goals of the study.

During each step of the analysis participants were asked to review the comparisons and conclusions made in order to ensure that the analysis made by the researcher was an accurate interpretation of the participants' experience. This was done primarily via e-mail when possible, with the possibility of follow-up by phone. Aside from the requirement that couples not discuss their responses with each other during the interview process, no deception or other form of manipulation is planned.

In situations where both members of the couple described the same occasion, a third interview was included in the process. This third interview consisted of the primary interviewer and both members of the couple. The couple was invited to discuss the previously described

experience together, with some direction from the interviewer. Since data from the previous two interviews was almost exclusively based on memories of previous interactions, the third interview was video recorded. Video recordings provided the opportunity to observe actual nonverbal interactions as they occurred, as opposed to relying solely on retrospective accounts. The third interview only took place in situations where both members of the couple described the same event, and were willing to discuss it further with their partner present.

### **Participants**

Qualitative research requires a few things of its participants. Generally speaking, participants must be able to give detailed verbal and/or written descriptions of the thoughts, emotions, and interactions surrounding specific experiences. When the experiences of interest involve interactions with another person, it is also helpful if participants have developed theory of mind sufficiently to be able to make reasonably accurate inferences about the other person's perspective. Because qualitative methods usually avoid traditional variable manipulation, it is important that participants have ready access to experiences that involve the phenomenon of interest, (see Creswell, 2007, for an overview of differing methods of quantitative research).

These requirements, in addition to the nature of reciprocal communication, constrained the age of participation to at least early adolescence. Given the emphasis on accurate inferences about others' perspectives and the need for ready access to phenomenon of interest, participants in emerging adulthood were preferentially sought after. Individuals in emerging adulthood often have more frequent experiences with nonverbal communication in the context of their dating relationships. Such experience are especially pertinent to reciprocal communication, as successful dating relationships would be expected to involve more interactions that are perceived

by at least one of the persons involved as emotionally compatible. Including both members of the relationship allowed for a better overall sense of both the sending and receiving sides of nonverbal communications. Participants in the early stages of their relationship are also more likely have clearer memories of their initial nonverbal interactions, and are less likely to have altered their perception of those memories to conform to or contradict with their partner's perceptions. Participation in the study was therefore constrained to individuals and their partners between the ages of 18 and 26, who had mostly positive feelings about their relationship, and who had been dating somewhere between 1 and 6 months.

A total of 7 couples, 14 individuals, participated in the full interview process. 3 couples started the process, (agreed to participate and received the initial email questionnaire), but dropped out before any further interviews were scheduled. 13 of the participants were students at Brigham Young University (BYU), a private university affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS Church).

The remainder of the paper will organize experiences by category, not by couple. So that the reader will have some context to place the experiences in, a brief description of each couple is given here, using pseudonyms.

Dan and Jenni – Dan and Jenni were both active members of a student dance club associated with BYU, and met at a club dance. They had dated on and off for over a year before deciding to be exclusive. They were engaged at the time of their interviews, and are currently married.

Abigail and Michael – Abi and Michael met through their local church group during a summer semester at BYU. They both enjoyed playing sports, and started seeing each other after playing basketball together with a group of friends. They had dated for two or three months before becoming engaged, and were married at the time of their interviews.

Jason and Tammi – Jason and Tammi met in a general psych class they shared with a friend, and started dating a few weeks later. They also had dated for a relatively short period of time before becoming engaged, and were married at the time of their interviews.

Natalie and Alexander – Natalie and Alex met when they were both asked to address their local church group while they were home from college for the summer. They dated consistently during the following months, and exclusively when they returned to BYU in the fall. They were engaged at the time of their interviews, and are currently married.

Ben and Tiffany – Ben and Tiffany met through a local young adult group in Provo. They knew each other for several months before they started dating, and became exclusive after going on a road trip to Ben's hometown with a group of friends. They were engaged at the time of their interviews, and are currently married.

Mandy and Thomas – Mandy and Thomas were both active members in the Swing Dancing community in Salt Lake City and Provo, and met at a dance in Salt Lake. They were dating at the time of their interviews, and are currently engaged.

Joshua and Emily – Josh and Emily lived in the same apartment complex as Freshmen at BYU, and often spent time together with their roommates. They each moved to different housing complexes their sophomore year, and had intermittent contact for several years thereafter until they started dating in their Senior year. They were dating exclusively at the time of their interviews, and are currently married.

### **Data Analysis**

On average, transcriptions consisted of 7020 words and 13 pages of text per interview.

Approximately 70 experiences involving instances nonverbal communication were isolated from the interview sessions and further analyzed with special attention toward perceived emotional compatibility. The first objective of analysis was to identify and isolate instances of fully reciprocal, partially reciprocal, and nonreciprocal communication.

#### **Fully Reciprocal Communication**

This category focuses on experiences where at least one of the individuals involved in the nonverbal communication perceived the content of the message to be the same, or emotionally

compatible. Dan, who was engaged to Jenni during their interviews, met her for the first time at a dance. After dancing with her a few times that night, he describes this experience:

As the night wore on, and it came time to go, I was needed to dismantle the sound equipment and take it outside to the car. As I moved wheeled the dolly bearing the speakers out of the dance hall, I heard Jenni's voice and saw that she was talking to a group of people near a corner I would pass. There was another boy leaning against the corner with his arm out-stretched, and as I passed them, I took the opportunity to peek under his arm to get one last good view of Jenni. When I did so, I was surprised to see her peeking right back at me! We smiled, sparks flew, and I was a goner.

The nonverbal interaction in this instance has two parts, each with its own form and timing. First, looking under the arm of the person standing between them, which consisted of the same form and similar timing. Second smiling, which also shared similar form and timing. In order for the experience to qualify as fully reciprocal, Dan would need to experience Jenni's receiving response as expressing a similar emotion or desire as his sending signal. Dan goes on in his interview to describe what he meant by sparks flying:

I think that like you know sparks, fireworks, energy, like anything...people describe that little phenomenon in a lot of ways. I would have to describe it as a feeling of excitement in your inner desires that that person would be interested in you being confirmed and...seeing that they're interested in you, and naturally it happens on both sides, and both people will like, get a little bit of a high or a little bit of a...of a surprise and a jolt of excitement out of making that simultaneous connection, you know, almost like a coincidence, and being I guess emotionally gratified in the sense that the person that they're attracted to or interested in shows that interest back.

From Dan's perspective, Jenni looking under the arm of the person between them and smiling at him was a confirmation that his attraction was reciprocated. His sense that the attraction he felt for her was returned is expressly tied to the matched way in which she responded:

Interviewer: When she smiled back, or when you both smiled at the same time, you understood that to mean that she liked you, too?

Dan: Right. Like in seeing her peek under that arm, I could read her body language and see that she was smiling, and upon seeing me looking back at her, she smiled more, and...the fact, just the mere fact that in going under to steal that peek, that she would already be looking under to peek out at me.

It is interesting to note that in this instance, in order for the communication to be experienced as fully reciprocal, similar form and timing were necessary. Difference in form or a delay in timing would have prevented eye-contact and made interpretation impossible. The only variation allowed within the context of the interaction was in the degree of the response, or how similar Dan felt the degree of Jenni's smile was to his smile. It is also important to note that Dan was sensitive to changes in the degree. Jenni "smiled more" when they made eye contact, which helped Dan be more confident in his interpretation.

In this first example, it is helpful to talk about the communication in terms of the emotion or desire that prompted the sending signal. Dan had just met Jenni that night; he had enjoyed dancing with her, and felt the beginnings of an attraction for her. Looking underneath the arm of the person standing between them as he passed her in the hallway was an expression of that attraction. Dan understood Jenni smiling in response as an expression of a similar attraction, or a reciprocation of the emotion that prompted the sending signal.

One of the key aspects of each category within reciprocal communication is that they are in reference to only one person's experience. Dan experienced that first interaction with Jenni as fully reciprocal, but Jenni made no mention of it in her interviews. The first experience she shared was from a week later, but indicates that Dan was acting under the impression he took



from meeting her the previous week. In this experience, Jenni talks about a conversation she and Dan had at one of their club dances.

Jenni: I went outside to get some air and he came out and found me. And I wasn't moving in a way that he would see me, and follow me out; I just went out. He just followed me out and started talking with me, and that let me know that he really wanted to get to know me. I like one on one time with people, and Dan is the same way, and so it meant a lot that he would come out and talk with me personally, versus being in the dance room with everyone and just teasing and flirting.

Interviewer: When you say that it meant a lot to you, can you talk a little bit more about what it meant?

Jenni: It told me that, specifically...you're not like the other girls and I want to know why. I love telling people about me, because I am different, and I love being different. I want to be noticed, I want to be liked, and so that really hits my button, because it fulfills dreams that I've had.

Interviewer: Can you talk about some of the ways you reacted to it?

Jenni: Well, besides the fact of smiling and laughing and having a good time or asking him to dance...I tried, you know, hanging out around him, talking with him a bit afterwards, especially when he came out and talked with me. I love getting to know people as well, to show that it's not just a one-sided thing; like, I want to get to know you too. So, ask him questions about...you know, not just general questions, but I really liked digging deeper.

Even though there is no explicit connection between the two experiences, they share an interesting similarity. In each case communication occurred without intention on the part of the sender. Dan did not intend to communicate attraction when he looked at Jenni, but he still experienced a similar attraction in her response. In Jenni's case, moving away from the dance floor was not intended to communicate her preference for individual interaction, but she still interprets Dan's following her out as both a recognition of that preference and an indication of similar interest. She also speaks of her reaction in terms of responding in like manner and increasing the degree of their interaction; she made an effort to talk with Dan, to ask questions

that were personal, and give him a chance to talk about the unique aspects of who he was. All so that he would understand his interest was not a one-sided thing.

Abigail and Michael demonstrate a similar pattern of nonverbal communication in their interviews. Both enjoyed playing sports before they began dating, and they both had some experience playing basketball before coming to college. In their individual interviews they each also describe the first time they played basketball together.

Michael: We parked outside of where we were going to swim, and then right beside the swimming pool was the basketball court, so we decided that we would play basketball a little bit before we got in the pool, to get warmed up. I ended up guarding Abi, and she was a lot of fun. I tend to get easily over-competitive when I play basketball, and so it was fun to have somebody there that was a little competitive too.

Interviewer: So, while you were playing, there was a sense of competition that developed between the two of you as you were guarding each other?

Michael: Yeah, but not fierce competition. Like, playful competition.

Interviewer: When did you first start noticing that?

Michael: If my memory serves me correctly, it was either when she was trying to drive, or when she was guarding me, and she was close; swiping at the ball, and that sort of thing. I was kind of like "Oh...okay, so she's not going to just let me score", you know?

Interviewer: Okay. Did you make a conscious effort when you realized that, like, "Oh, I'm going to step up a little bit, and not just let her drive by me either"?

Michael: Yeah, a little bit. Most of the time, when I play basketball now, I make a conscious effort not to try, because I hurt myself most of the time, so I just have fun with it, and try very little. But I had to try some more, so that I wouldn't let her show me up.

Michael's experience playing basketball with Abigail also indicates that nonverbal communication can occur without intention. He attributed Abigail's nonverbal behavior to aspects of her personality: she was competitive, she was good at basketball. The interaction was

enjoyable for him because his desire to play was motivated by similar emotions: he was competitive, he was good at basketball. Abigail describes the same interaction in this way:

Interviewer: You say that you were attracted to Michael while he was playing basketball because you noticed that he was good, and it was fun to guard him. Can you talk about that for a minute?

Abi: Yeah, well, so we were with a group of 10 people probably, and normally when you're just messing around playing basketball, no one really knows what they're doing. But I could tell that he actually was good, and that he had played before, and I used to play basketball. So, it's always more fun to guard someone who has a level of skill that's closer to your own.

Interviewer: What was he doing that let you know he was good?

Abi: It was obvious that he was trying more than other people, because if people aren't good at it, they just won't try either, to kind of play it off. But he would make his shots, and he would guard me more intensely than other people would, and make steals, and stuff like that. He was just better.

Interviewer: Did you respond by trying to step up your game any?

Abi: Yeah. I think shooting is my strong point. I don't remember really, but I think I probably shot more than I would have. I had more of an interest in playing because I knew that he was good, so I probably egged the game on longer than I would have otherwise.

Abi experienced their interaction in a very similar way. She did not feel that Michael was trying to communicate anything in particular, but that he simply was a certain way. They both talk about their experience in terms of increasing the degree of the interaction; of playing harder than they may otherwise have in order to match the competitiveness they felt from the other person.

Obviously not all nonverbal communication happens without intent. Alex and Natalie relate an instance of nonverbal communication that qualifies as fully reciprocal, and also includes intentional communication. They met when they were both asked to address their

church group on the same day. Afterwards they began chatting online and arranged to go out hiking together, which they did in spite it having rained earlier that day. Alex describes a moment on their hike when he picked Natalie up and threatened to throw her in a puddle:

Interviewer: You said you had threatened to put her in puddles before, but hadn't. Why hadn't you?

Alex: Because I didn't know how she was reacting. And so, you know, I don't want to...scare her away, at all. So I wanted to let her make the first move. I think once I picked her up and held her over a puddle, but I didn't put her in, just because it was like, I was like "No...I want her to still like me".

Alex's interaction with Natalie can still be explained in terms of an underlying emotion or motivating desire. He was attracted to her, and wanted to express that attraction through playfulness. In addition to the underlying emotion, however, there is a question implicit in the signal Alex is sending; is Natalie comfortable with this level of familiarity? After they had finished hiking and were on their way back to the car, Natalie shoved him into a puddle, which Alex interpreted in this way:

Alex: I was really flattered that she felt comfortable enough to do that, because, I mean, it was our first date. And she went and just completely tackled me. It was...pretty sweet.

Interviewer: Worrying about how comfortable she was expressing herself; was that concern alleviated when she pushed you in?

Alex: Yes, very much so. Then, yeah, I threw her in.

In this instance, experiencing the communication as fully reciprocal had two aspects: the similarity of the underlying emotion, and the answer to the implicit question. Alex interpreted Natalie's response as both an indication of like emotion and an affirmative response to the

question of whether that kind of playfulness was okay. Natalie, describing the same experience, says:

Natalie: I don't know what came over me. Maybe it was because he almost threw me in a puddle, and I knew I wouldn't get another chance to do it, but I just like ran into him and just bowled him over into a puddle.

Interviewer: Was that something that you had wanted to do, be a little bit more comfortable around him?

Natalie: I think...I think that's kind of like what it felt like. Maybe it was because initially, he made it seem like we were really comfortable together. And, all of our conversation maybe wasn't the most fluid, but that happens on the first date. I get nervous, I'm sure he was a little bit nervous...But I still felt more comfortable and I could laugh and be silly, and so I think that was part of it, for sure.

Natalie talks about pushing Alex into a puddle in terms of reciprocation. She recognizes that he had made it seem like they were comfortable together, and so wanted to express herself in a way that mirrored that comfort. She even felt a similar kind of concern about whether she had gone too far and made him uncomfortable, but that the concern was alleviated by Alex's response.

Interviewer: Can you talk a little bit more about that feeling confident that he understood that you were attracted to him when you pushed him into the puddle?

Natalie: Well...I think, mostly because he didn't run away, and being like "Oh my gosh, this scary girl". Instead of saying, "Oh man, I'm all wet", or standing up and just trying to laugh it off, he threw me in a puddle afterwards.

The form associated with the interaction is similar, but not the same. Alex picks Natalie up and holds her over a puddle; Natalie pushes Alex into a puddle. Despite the slight difference in form, both Alex and Natalie made a connection between the initial sending signal and the receiving response. Natalie makes particular mention of the timing associated with the

communication when she states that she knew she wouldn't get another chance after their hike was over. Alex makes particular mention of an increase in the degree of the interaction; Natalie didn't just threaten to push him into a puddle, she "completely tackled" him.

In addition to demonstrating a pattern consistent with reciprocal communication that is intentional, Alex and Natalie's experience highlights the contextual nature of nonverbal communication. Alex initiates the interaction by picking up Natalie and holding her over a puddle, but doesn't drop her because he is concerned about how she will respond. Natalie reciprocates, but increases the degree by actually pushing Alex into the water. She in turn feels apprehensive about how he will respond, but is confident that he understood her intentions when he responds in a similar manner.

Jason and Tammi illustrate the same pattern across a less conventional medium. Jason and Tammi met through a mutual friend during a college class they all took together. They each describe being attracted to the other upon first meeting, and being excited to get to know each other better. Jason in particular mentions going home immediately after class in order to invite Tammi to be his friend through a social networking site:

Jason: Yeah. I pretty much went home and tried adding her as a friend online.

Interviewer: Did it not work?

Jason: Oh, yeah. It did. I got home, and I think she had actually added me, and I was like, "Yes! Perfect".

Interviewer: So, you had planned to add her as a friend online, you got home, and she had already added you. Was that something that you had talked about in class? Whether you were both on the same networking site?

Jason: I don't think so. No, we didn't talk about that.

Interviewer: Okay. From your reaction, it seems like you were kind of excited when you got home and she had already sent you a friend invitation. Was there a certain meaning that you took from that?

Jason: More of a hope. Kind of like, you know, I might stand a chance. She might like me. I might have impressed her a little bit. Maybe she thinks I'm cool, too. I might have a better chance, dating her.

Even though there were nothing physically observable involved in the communication, the pattern is consistent. Jason went home with the intention of sending Tammi an invitation. The motivating emotion was attraction, and the question associated with it was whether or not the attraction was mutual. Tammi responded to their meeting in the same way Jason had intended to respond, which he interpreted as an indication of possible mutual attraction. The form of the interaction was identical, if constrained somewhat by the medium. The same constraint makes it difficult to talk about the interaction in terms of degree. There is no bodily interaction, so there is no physical pressure associated with either the sending signal or the receiving response. The timing of the interaction, on the other hand, was very important to the way in which Jason interpreted the communication. He felt attracted to Tammi and decided to invite her as a friend as an expression of that attraction, but didn't even have time to send that signal before receiving a like response. The near immediate timing of Tammi's response increased Jason's confidence in the compatibility of her emotions.

Ben and Tiffany met through their local church's young adult program, and started dating exclusively after going on a road trip with a group of friends. As part of a practical joke on their friends and family, they faked an engagement, complete with photos and a ring. In the aftermath of the joke, Tiffany talks about knowing that Ben loved her, without him saying it verbally:

Interviewer: Can you describe what it was about the situation that kind of conveyed that sentiment to you?

Tiffany: Probably the way that he was looking at me conveyed a lot of it. I kind of knew at that point.

Interviewer: You talk about knowing it just because of the way that he looked, and the way that his eyes were conveying that particular emotion. And you were confident that he knew, in that situation, that you loved him as well?

Tiffany: Mmhmm. After that we vocalized it.

Interviewer: But you knew before the vocalization happened?

Tiffany: Yes.

Interviewer: When you were looking in his eyes, and you could tell from his expression that he loved you, did you feel like his expression and your expression were the same?

Tiffany: Yes. Yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So, you had that recognition just from looking at him. "He looks this way, like he loves me, and that's the same way that I feel like I look, right now."

Tiffany: Mmhmm. Yeah, definitely.

In this experience, the sending signal and receiving response played out in the form of facial expression. The degree of the interaction was comparable. Tiffany speaks about her signal and his response in an almost simultaneous fashion. Recognizing that Ben's expression mirrored her own and identifying the emotions underlying their expressions as compatible occurred in such a way that placing things in a sequence would be difficult, and probably not representative of Tiffany's experience. Tiffany identifies the underlying emotion as love, and felt that the same emotion motivated the response she received. Whether communicating love through her facial expression was intentional or not is also difficult to say, so it may not make sense to talk about a question implicit in the communication.



What appears to be at the heart of the experience of reciprocal communication is a generalizing one's own emotional experience to the other. Experiencing the communication as fully reciprocal depends on the generalization being verified in some fashion, whether it be verbal or nonverbal. Thus far the experiences that qualify as fully reciprocal have most often included similar, but not always identical, form. The timing of the interactions has ranged widely in importance in interpreting the content of nonverbal communication. In regard to degree, there have been some instances of matching degree, and some instances of exceeding degree, but no instances of nonverbal communication that was experienced as fully reciprocal without at least matching degree. Additionally, it seems as though the emotion that motivates the sending signal is the primary emotion to which the sender generalizes the emotional content of the receiver's response. Experiencing a communication as fully reciprocal does not appear to require intention, but when intention is present, it appears as though the underlying emotion may be paired with an implicit question. In instances where there is an implicit question, experiencing a communication as fully reciprocal includes compatibility of the underlying emotion and an affirmative answer to the implicit question.

### **Partially Reciprocal Communication**

Partially reciprocal communication occupies a sort of grey area in between reciprocal and nonreciprocal communication. If fully reciprocal communication occurs when the receiving signal in communication expresses a like emotion and an affirmative answer to an implied question, then it would follow that partially reciprocal communication should occur when either the emotion is experienced as dissimilar, or the answer to the implied question is negative.

Defining partially reciprocal communication in this way allows for two possibilities: dissimilar emotion with an affirmative answer, or similar emotion with a negative answer.

Dan and Jenni both felt an attraction for each other within their first few occasions interacting together, but did not begin dating exclusively until having known each other for over two years. Early in their acquaintance, Dan had taken Jenni on a date which included going to a dance, from which they left separately. Dan describes saying goodnight to Jenni in this way:

Dan: At the end of the date I gave her a hug...but as I was coming away, I just kind of gave her a peck on the cheek. You know, something where there was no way to misinterpret this. Clear cut, what I'm trying to say here, right? When I stepped back, she just had this look on her face, like, kind of this shocked look...but she was still holding onto my arms at the elbow, after I'd hugged her. I was like, "I'm sorry, I probably shouldn't have done that...I hope you have fun at the dance." And she was like, "No no, it's okay. There's just something I want to talk to you about".

Interviewer: When you were thinking about kissing her, was there a response that you were hoping for?

Dan: I wanted a positive response. I had no conscious definition of what that might be. It can manifest itself in a number of different ways. But I wanted just a reaffirmation that she was interested in me, and that things were good to keep moving ahead. The response I hadn't thought about...making sure that I had told her I was still very interested in her and wanted to move things ahead, that part I had pretty clear.

Here Dan explains fairly clearly the emotion and question associated with the signal he sent Jenni. He wanted to communicate his attraction for Jenni and wanted to know whether it was okay to move their relationship forward. While he didn't have a particular response in mind, he was very quick to interpret the one he received as other than fully reciprocal. He was also quick to recognize aspects of the degree of the response. While Jenni looked shocked, she was still holding onto his arms from the hug he had given her. That she didn't break off that aspect of their interaction indicated that his emotion was not entirely incompatible with hers, but

because the receiving response was not equal on some level to the sending signal, he did not experience her emotion as entirely compatible either. It is also important that, from Dan's perspective, he was unsure as to whether Jenni didn't reciprocate the emotional content of the message or the question associated with it. Which of the two was at issue did not become clear until they talked about things together later.

Dan: I really have no idea what to expect from there out, and had no idea what that talk would entail. Later on, I think it was just the following Saturday, we left the dance for a little while and took a little walk. We actually held hands on the walk, which was interesting, another physical manifestation of, you know, like...mutual attraction. But during that walk, what she explained was that she had just recently gotten out of a very involved relationship and that she needed some time just clear out before she got into another one.

After talking with Jenni later that week, it became clear to Dan that, while she felt similarly attracted to him, she didn't feel ready to move the relationship forward. Her partial reciprocation was an indication of like emotion, but a negative response to the implied question. Dan goes on to describe holding hands with Jenni that night in similar terms.

Interviewer: You said that you had held hands during that walk. Was that the first time that had happened?

Dan: Yeah.

Interviewer: How did it happen?

Dan: It just sort of happened. As I recall, I think we were walking side by side and she reached out and took my hand. It caught me a little bit off guard, because after having an iffy response off of the kiss on the cheek, I didn't really know what to expect. In my mind I reverted back to a much more emotionally detached sense, just sort of bracing myself for whatever was coming next. When she did that it caught me a little bit off guard because I wasn't expecting her to do something new, that we hadn't done before, that was definitely a motion towards a relationship and a commitment. I thought that was interesting...it was a very...it was a little bit of a...a two-faced message, in that sense, like yes, but no. Yes, but not right now.

Dan interpreted Jenni taking his hand in this context as an indication of mutual attraction, but not as a motion toward a more exclusive relationship, even though he admits that objectively he would have seen it as a movement toward a commitment.

Dan and Jenni continued seeing each other on a more casual basis for some time afterwards, until Jenni became comfortable with the idea of something more exclusive. She describes a particular experience she had riding the subway with Dan when she tried to communicate her attraction.

Jenni: One of the specifics that I remember was deciding to put my head on his shoulder while we were riding the subway, and being close to him...I made a point of showing him that I wasn't afraid of being that comfortable. Talking with him, and anxiously being engaged in conversation with him.

Interviewer: Do you remember how he responded to you putting your head on his shoulder?

Jenni: I think maybe once, after a few minutes, he put his head down on mine, but then he put it back up again after we slowed down again. And so, it kind of felt like a little victory. It felt like I won little victories that whole time. Just little ones, and so I was never sure.

Jenni's intention was to communicate her desire to be close to Dan, and to show him that she wasn't afraid of being comfortable with him. She describes his response as a little victory; that the form of his response was the same, but that the timing and degree was different. He put his head down on hers after a few minutes, but picked it back up again. Jenni's statement that she was "never sure" is very similar to Dan's statement that he did not know what to expect, and both in the context of nonverbal communication that was experienced as partially reciprocated.

Tammi describes a similar experience in the initial phases of getting to know Jason. Interestingly, she doesn't mention sending him a friend invitation online. For Jason, the

invitation was meaningful because the intention was shared. He had intended to send her an invitation, but she sent him one first. From Tammi's perspective, she sent him an invitation and he accepted it. The interaction played out in such a way that she had no access to the reciprocal nature of his intention. One of the first nonverbal interactions she recalled with Jason occurred after their class together one day, when she missed her bus:

Interviewer: You said he invited you to walk home with him, and on the way he said something to tease you, and you playfully nudged him. Can you describe nudging him?

Tammi: I think it was with, my elbow. I didn't touch him with my hand, because I was too nervous. [laughs] Maybe people don't think about that, but I did. Well, because I liked him. If I didn't like someone, I wouldn't care as much.

Interviewer: Talk about that for a minute, the difference between nudging somebody with your elbow and nudging them with your hand.

Tammi: Like, there's more touching if you're doing it with your hand. I think I just was scared to actually touch him. [laughs] If it's with your elbow, it's just kind of...

Interviewer: It's one point, instead of a palm, and five fingers?

Tammi: Yeah. And really, at that point, we hadn't even hugged or anything.

Tammi's description highlights one of the difficulties associated with developing a classification system for nonverbal communication. While the distinction between form and degree seems theoretically to be a clear one, in practice the two can become conflated. Tammi talks about the form of the interaction, nudging Jason with her elbow, in terms of degree, the amount of area in contact with him. In this instance it becomes something of an expository distinction to say that the form is entirely confined to the physical language of the interaction, and degree is entirely confined to the pressure of the sending signal relative to the receiving response.

Interviewer: Do you remember if he responded to that at all?

Tammi: I'm trying to think if he nudged me back. I think he might have nudged me back. Just like a little nudge. And I think it was with the elbow, and I remember that because I was overanalyzing. You always overanalyze everything. Yeah, I think he did nudge me back.

Interviewer: Can you talk about overanalyzing?

Tammi: Well for me, I didn't want to do it with my hand, because I thought "Oh, that might make him think that I like him". I don't know why I'd think that. But then when he just nudged me with his elbow, I thought "Well, maybe he's just doing the same thing that I'm doing". "Maybe he likes me," but I was like "No, maybe he doesn't". I would just go back and forth. I thought, "If he did, he would have touched me with his hand". [laughs] I bet no one else thinks that.

Even though the form was the same, the fact there was some difference, (just a little nudge), in the degree of the response made Tammi unsure of its meaning. Interestingly the pattern of using one's own motivations and reasoning as a way of interpreting nonverbal communication is maintained. Tammi doesn't push Jason with her hand because she's afraid he will interpret it as attraction. Even though she has the impression her reasoning is atypical, she interprets Jason's response by the same measuring stick: if he liked her, he would have pushed back with his hand, not nudged with his elbow.

Interviewer: If he had touched you with his hand instead of with his elbow, then you would have interpreted it as what you were afraid of doing?

Tammi: Yeah, probably. When he did it with his elbow, I thought, "He's probably doing what I'm doing, because we're both nervous". I could kind of tell he was a little nervous. But you never want to assume. But I was thinking "Yeah, maybe he was scared too". But if he had done it the other way, I would have been like, "Wow, maybe..."

Interviewer: You would have been more confident?

Tammi: Yeah, a little bit.

The pattern of slightly exceeding the original signal in degree for the sender to experience the communication as fully reciprocal is also supported in Tammi's response. If Jason had nudged her back using his hand instead of his elbow, Tammi would have been more confident that their feelings were similar. Even though form and degree are somewhat blurred in this example, Tammi's response indicates that she would have seen nudging with a hand as similar enough to nudging with an elbow to be considered the same form.

Michael also describes a partially reciprocal interaction with Abigail, in the context of a one-on-one basketball game. In this instance, Michael talks about guarding Abi closely, but this time as an intentional nonverbal communication:

Interviewer: Maybe it might help me to get detailed about what guarding closer means.

Michael: Well, when you're playing a pick up game of basketball, most of the time you're not going to get up and put your hand on the person's hip, because you're just not that intense about it. Or if they pick up the ball and they can't dribble, you know, you give them a little bit of space. But I had my hand on her hip, and I was guarding her that way. Or when she would pick up the ball, I 'd get close. I remember her turning around and me being right in her ear, pretty much.

Interviewer: Were you consciously trying to send a message?

Michael: Yeah. I was trying to feel things out, see if she was going to get uncomfortable, is she going to endorse, and reciprocate, or...

Interviewer: And, when you were doing that, did you get a sense for how she was responding to it?

Michael: When I talked to her about it later, I think that she didn't get my message as strongly as I thought I was sending it. But at the same time it was, it wasn't like she got uncomfortable. So that, to me, was saying she's having fun, and that, at least, is a good thing.

Interviewer: What, in your mind, what would have signified her not being comfortable with that?

Michael: Body language, probably, is the main thing, or if she suggested that we stop sooner, or something like that. I think that would be a suggestion for me to say okay, she's not into it, so...

Interviewer: So, if she got uncomfortable with it, she may have recommended "Hey, let's do something else", or "Hey, I have to go, I have this thing I need to do", and would have stopped the interaction.

Michael: Right.

Interviewer: She didn't respond poorly to it, but she didn't reciprocate as much as you would have been confident saying 'Okay, she really likes me'. Is that fair?

Michael: Yeah. Not like 'she really likes me', but 'she would give me a chance'.

Interviewer: Enough that she was open to the idea of you pursuing something.

Michael: Yeah. And so, that night I asked her, if my memory serves me correctly, to do something. I said something to the effect that "This was fun, we should do it again", you know. And she said yeah, so shortly thereafter we went out again. And again, it was the same thing, where we had fun, and the conversation was good, and that sort of thing, but as far as knowing whether or not she was into me, I didn't know.

In this context, Michael expresses a similar uncertainty about whether or not Abigail shared his level of attraction. The fact that Abi didn't end their interaction or recommend they do something else gave him enough confidence in her comfort level to continue asking her out, but that her degree of her response only maintained the interaction without increasing it made Michael unsure of whether she was attracted to him. If the emotion was attraction and the question was "Can we keep seeing each other?", then the question was answered affirmatively, but the emotional content was unclear. Abigail's description of the same experience supports the idea that she was maintaining the nonverbal interaction without increasing it.

Abigail: So, he was really close to my face, like, probably a couple inches, and I didn't flinch or anything. I didn't seem surprised or anything like that. He said later that he was testing the boundaries, which I could kind of tell, looking back on it. But it didn't cross



my mind at the time. I just, like I noticed that he was playing really close, but it wasn't a conscious thing.

Interviewer: You didn't think "Wow, he's really close. That must mean something."

Abigail: Yeah. I just thought "Oh, cool. Yeah."

Interviewer: It was like a "He's really close. This is a competitive game."

Abigail: Yeah.

Interviewer: But it didn't make you uncomfortable at all.

Abigail: No.

Interviewer: And you say of course you reciprocated. How did you reciprocate?

Abigail: Well, when I guarded him I would guard him close. I didn't flinch, I didn't back away, or anything. I held my ground.

It appears that a key aspect of the confusion resulting from partially reciprocal communication is due to the pairing of the emotion and the question in the mind of the sender. From the sender's perspective, one naturally follows the other. When a matching emotion is encountered without a similar desire, or a similar desire without the matching emotion, the accuracy of the sender's own emotional state as an indication of how the receiver feels is thrown into question. Apparently this can be especially disorienting in a dating context, where much of the relationship is built on the assumption that the other part of the couple feels something emotionally comparable. Amanda met Thomas at a swing dancing venue in Salt Lake City, and describes giving him her number at one of the dancing events there.

Interviewer: Can you describe the phone number incident?

Mandy: He is so dense. I am still mad about this. We just had our six-month-aversary, and we were just talking about all the things that we've done, and I was just like, "What the crap?" Even now, I don't understand what he was thinking...at the door, I was like,

“Hey! Can I get your number?”... And he’s like, “Yeah”, and then a girl walked by, and he said “I got to go. Here.”, and handed me the phone and went out with her. But then he never came back. So I just kind of waited, and waited, and waited, for like an hour...And so I put my phone number in, and I closed his cell, and I dropped it off at lost and found. Just kind of hung out for a while. Then I was like, “Well, the dance is over. Guess I’ll go home”. So, that was weird.

Interviewer: Okay.

Mandy: So he knew, even if he didn’t respond. I put myself out there.

Interviewer: You didn’t know at the time what was going on between him and his friend?

Mandy: No, I did not. So, to me, it was just, “Can I have your number?” “Yeah, there’s this other girl, actually I’m going to go off with her.” Because, he tossed it. He didn’t even hand it. He was like, “Sure. Here” [makes tossing motion] and then walked off. I’m like, “Okay...”

For Amanda, it was confusing to have the question “Can I give you my number” answered affirmatively but without any indication of the emotional interest that motivated the question in the first place. Even six months later, after finding out that Thomas was saying goodbye to a friend who would be moving away soon, the interaction was still a little baffling for her.

Emily and Joshua met during her first year in college, and had only sporadic contact for several years thereafter. When they began seeing each other during her Senior year, Emily thought of their dates mostly as becoming reacquainted with an old friend. It was something of a surprise for her when she realized she could be attracted to him. She relates an experience when they were coming back from a date and had gotten off the tram a stop early:

Emily: I knew it was a stop too early, but he wouldn’t believe me. Then we got off, and I was like “See? Nothing.” It was 40 minutes before the next shuttle came, and I was freezing, because it was probably, like, 1 in the morning, 2 in the morning. And it was December, and it was cold. I had my Ipod with me, and we were trying to stay warm.

He said, “Here, lets huddle together”. And so I was like, ‘Okay’. And I was like, “Hey, do you want to dance?” And he said okay, so we put one of the ear buds in each of our ears. And then we listened to different songs, and then we just danced. And, that was the first time I was ever attracted to him, was then. Not the rest of the date. It was really fun, but right when we were dancing. I think it wasn’t just because we were dancing. I think it was because of everything that lead up to it. Like, we had such a fun date, and then when we were dancing, I was like, “Oh, wait...I could be romantically interested in this guy”.

Interviewer: Was there anything else that you did that was flirtatious that you can remember?

Emily: I know he almost kissed me, but, I didn’t want him to, so I kind of leaned away so he couldn’t. But not in an obvious way, I just kind of moved so that, I don’t know if I leaned away or maybe I put my head next to his, because we were like, dancing. But I made it subtly impossible for him to kiss me.

Interviewer: Can you describe how you could tell he was going to kiss you?

Emily: I don’t know if all girls know, but you can tell when a guy’s interested. Maybe not always, but there are times when I can tell if a guy is interested. I don’t know how I knew he was going to kiss me. Like, maybe it was his body language; when a guy’s about to kiss a girl, he kind of thinks about it, cause he’s like, “Should I do it? Should I not do it? Okay, I’m going to do it. All right, when am I going to do it?” I don’t know if this is real, but this is what I think happens, just because they spend time looking. They look at your eyes, and then they look at your mouth, and you can tell that they’re thinking, strategically “How am I going to do this?” Maybe it’s not a conscious thought, but they always hesitate, especially if it’s the first time that they’ve kissed that girl. And usually they think about it for a while; it’s usually not completely spontaneous. If it was, I wouldn’t know it was coming.

For Emily, the nonverbal cue involved with knowing a person was thinking about kissing her was eye-contact. Specifically, a person looking from her eyes to her lips, which she associated with planning out spatially how the kiss should happen. Additionally, eye-contact as a nonverbal cue required the physical closeness that came with huddling together and dancing to keep warm. While the realization that she could be attracted to Joshua wasn’t an unpleasant one, she didn’t want him to kiss her, which she explains as the interview continues:

Interviewer: Was there a lot of eye contact, during the dancing?

Emily: I didn't want there to be, because I didn't want him to think "Oh, this is the perfect time to make a move." Because I really was thinking, "I'm having fun with this guy, the last thing I want is for him to kiss me, because then I'll have to tell him I just want to be friends with him." At that time I didn't want anything more from anybody, because I was very anti-boyfriend. So, I avoided looking at his eyes for more than a second. When we talked, I would look around. Either more animated than I normally am, because I wanted us to have fun, but also because I didn't want it to turn into some kind of a romantic moment, and it kind of was turning into that. So, when I got the impression that he was at least thinking about kissing me, probably he was looking at my lips, because that's pretty standard. I know that he did that in the future, so I'm guessing he did this time, even if I can't really remember it. So, anytime he seemed like he might do it, I would start talking about something else. Or I would lean in so that he would have to do an awkward maneuver to get where he wanted to be. Or I would like look away, so that it wouldn't be possible. But, apparently I did it really subtly, because he had no idea that I was avoiding it, he just thought that the moment wasn't quite right. Which was good, because that was my whole goal, to make the moment not quite right without making it awkward.

For Emily, the interaction became a balancing act in which she tried to maintain a level physical closeness that was enjoyable while at the same time avoiding a level of closeness that would be uncomfortable. Preventing the moment from escalating was mainly accomplished through avoidance and exclusion; she avoided eye-contact, the cue she associated with kissing, and made it spatially difficult for Joshua to kiss her by leaning in. Prolonging the enjoyable aspect of their interaction was accomplished by maintaining the physical contact that had already been established.

Interviewer: Had you considered backing out as a way of communicating, or trying to avoid kissing, in that situation?

Emily: No, because I was having a lot of fun. I was having a lot of fun, and at that point, I was like, "Wow, I'm kind of attracted to this guy." So, it was like, "How can I keep this going without it going further than I want?" I guess if I really wanted to I could have like, gone and sat down, but I didn't want to. I wanted to extend that as long as possible. So, it lasted for 40 minutes without him kissing me, and probably a half hour of that he was trying to wait for the right moment.

It is possible to separate this interaction into two parts. The first, huddling together and dancing, would be a fully reciprocal communication. The underlying emotion that Emily felt from Joshua was attraction, and it was an emotion she felt similarly for the first time that night. If the implied question was “Are you attracted to me?”, then Emily’s answer was yes, which she communicated by maintaining the form and degree of their interaction for as long as possible. The second part of their interaction, eye-contact, is bit more complicated. The underlying emotion Emily felt Joshua to be communicating was still attraction, but she was uncomfortable expressing her attraction through kissing. Her discomfort didn’t stem so much from an emotional disparity as from the consequences she anticipated would follow kissing. In her mind, kissing would inevitably lead to a conversation that would ruin the moment, and possibly end their relationship. So, while there was some level of compatibility in the underlying emotion, Emily did her best to answer the implicit question “Should I kiss you?” negatively without making things awkward. Although he may not have consciously read and responded to her answer, Joshua’s recognition that the moment wasn’t quite right shows on some level he realized the question was being answered negatively.

From a theoretical point of view, breaking interactions into separate portions is more convenient for exposition. Experientially speaking, however, participants tend to view their interactions in context, as demonstrated by Joshua’s perspective on his date with Emily that night.

Interviewer: Do you remember a time when you were fairly confident in Emily being attracted to you?

Joshua: Well, I was confused for quite a while. I thought it during this date...I was pretty sure she was attracted, but there was something that was giving her problem. But I

couldn't figure out what it was. But yeah, I think it was on that date that I realized that she was at least attracted to me.

Interviewer: You were like, "There's something here".

Joshua: Yeah. It took quite a while after that to figure out exactly what was going on.

Joshua's response indicates that he recognized the attraction Emily felt for him, but also demonstrates some of the confusion that is common among participants who relate experiences of partially reciprocal communication. While individual interactions during the night may have ranged between fully reciprocal and partially reciprocal, the overall impression Joshua came away with was that Emily shared his attraction, but that there was some hesitation on her part.

Emily's initial reluctance to commit resulted in some friction with Joshua, who felt that since they obviously enjoyed being with each other, an exclusive relationship made sense. Their conflicting desires came to a head one night a few weeks after Joshua returned from Christmas break, and Emily decided she needed to talk to him about where the relationship was heading:

Emily: When we got back to my apartment, I was like, "Okay. I have to do it. I have to talk with him". So, we both sat down on this chair that I have that two people can sit on. I wanted to do it in such a way that I could explain it, but he would still want to date me. So he sat on the chair, and then I sat facing him, on his lap. And we started talking. I was like, "Can I talk to you about something?" And he said, "Okay, but can I go first?" And I thought to myself "Oh, no", and said to him "Okay." Then he said, "I never...I've never felt this way about a girl before". I don't exactly remember what he said after that, because my mind was kind of like, you know...

Interviewer: Racing?

Emily: Yeah. He said more along those lines, and asked me to be his girlfriend. And, then he said, "So, what did you want to say?" And I was like, "I should have gone first". And he just kind of deflated, and was like "Oh, no". I'd understand why he would think that; there I am sitting on him, after we just had this walk, after we kissed. Like, of course he would think that.

Emily's intention was to convey to Joshua that she enjoyed spending time with him, and to encourage him to keep asking her out, but to make it clear that she wasn't ready to be his girlfriend. In her mind the way to do that was to use physical contact to express her attraction, but verbally to answer the question of whether she would be his girlfriend negatively. For her, the underlying emotion was still equivalent on some level, but she answered the question, explicitly in this case, negatively. Even though Emily had a different perspective on where their relationship should go, she understood Joshua's confusion at the contradictory nonverbal and verbal signals.

### **Nonreciprocal Communication**

The proposed definitions for all three forms of nonverbal communication (reciprocal, partially reciprocal, and nonreciprocal) allow for disparity in the experience of the persons involved. It is possible for one person to experience a nonverbal interaction as fully reciprocal, while the other person experiences the same interaction as only partially reciprocal, or completely nonreciprocal. While this provision is complicated from a theoretical perspective, it allows the definitions to more accurately reflect the experiential accounts of the participants. Joshua's initial reaction to being told by Emily that she couldn't be his girlfriend was confusion, similar to the kind experienced by other participants who relate nonverbal interactions that qualify as partially reciprocal.

Joshua: I was like, "What? We hang out every day for the last two weeks, hours at a time. I know you're into this, what's the deal?" So, I was totally confused.

Interviewer: Was there a time when that changed? The inconsistency between her hanging out with you, obviously enjoying spending time with you, but saying "I can't be your girlfriend". When did that switch?

Joshua: I think it actually started that night. It was kind of a rough conversation for me. I tried to talk to her for a few minutes about it, to try and find out what her reasons were, and all the reasons she gave I thought were lame. So, of course I was talking to her about it. After a while, I was just like, “Well, okay. If that’s how it is I better go”. Like, “There’s nothing for me to do here”, you know? I got up, and put on my shoes, which was a long 30 seconds. And then I gave her a hug, and I was going to walk out, and I look back, and I could tell that she was distraught; like, she was totally crying. But at the moment, I didn’t care. I had done everything I knew how to do. So I just left.

Joshua’s confusion at Emily’s partially reciprocal response stemmed from the interrelated nature of his emotion and his question. He was attracted to Emily, and he wanted to be exclusive with her. In his mind, being Emily’s boyfriend was a natural consequence of how he felt. If Emily didn’t want to be his girlfriend, then he could no longer consider the attraction she felt for him as compatible with the attraction he felt for her. So, while Emily experienced their interaction as partially reciprocal, with similar emotion but a negative response, Joshua experienced it as nonreciprocal, the negative response indicating a dissimilar emotion. This was especially difficult for him because his desire to be more exclusive was based on weeks of interaction that he had experienced as positive, and had reinforced his impression that her feelings were similar to his. His confusion turned into frustration, and finally resignation. He had done everything he knew how to do; the only thing left was to leave. However, Joshua still describes that night as the point when the inconsistency between Emily’s emotions and her actions started to change.

Joshua: But then, I don’t know; it must have occurred to me that there had to be been some reason she was crying about it. And I couldn’t sleep, because, I don’t know; I thought it must be something. So, probably at 3 in the morning, I texted her to see if she was still awake, and then asked if I could come back over and talk about things.



Emily and Joshua talked for a while longer and eventually arrived at an understanding and a stable relationship. Joshua's recognized that Emily crying in response to his leaving might indicate more of an emotional attachment than refusing to be his girlfriend suggested, which allowed him to reinterpret the compatibility of their emotions.

Even though his final reading of the interaction was a partially reciprocal one, Joshua's initial interpretation follows the pattern one would expect for nonreciprocal communication: he experienced the underlying emotion to be dissimilar, and the answer to the question as negative. His response had three additional aspects: resignation, withdrawal from communication, and reevaluation of previous interpretations. He became frustrated, he left, and he no longer trusted nonverbal cues that had previously indicated attraction. These aspects tended to reoccur in the interviews of other participants who related nonreciprocal experiences.

Like reciprocal communication, nonreciprocal communication can occur without the intent to communicate. There is evidence to suggest that individuals consider the nonverbal posture of their partner before they decide to send an initial nonverbal signal. Jason describes watching a movie after going ice-skating with Tammi on their first date, and the process he used to decide whether or not to hold her hand.

Jason: During the movie, we were sitting there, and I really liked her. I thought, "You know, I kind of want to show her that I like her, I don't know what to do." But the whole time she was there she had her arms crossed. And I was like, "Yeah, she does not want to hold my hand", and I was like, "I don't know how comfortable I am trying to hold her hand anyway". But I knew that she was kind of just like, I didn't know if she was nervous. I actually got a little nervous because I was kind of like, "Maybe she doesn't like me. I don't know what's going on".

Aside from sitting next to each other, there is actually no nonverbal interaction to speak of in this experience. Jason is simply interpreting nonverbal behavior, even though he didn't feel

Tammi was intentionally trying to communicate anything. Regardless, he still experienced her behavior as conveying information about her emotions. The impression he got from her posture was that if she wanted to hold hands, she would have made her hand available. That unavailability translated into doubt about whether or not she was attracted to him. At some level, the emotional compatibility of their experience was connected to her responding in a similar way to their situation. If she had been as attracted to him as he was to her, she would have made her hand available for him to hold. Tammi commented on the same experience in her interview, but remembers specifically making her hand available:

Tammi: I was trying to show him...inadvertently. I did the thing that girls do, when you just rest your hand on knee? Yeah, he never grabbed it.

Interviewer: Do you remember how you felt about that at the time?

Tammi: I was kind of disappointed, but at the same time, I was like “Well, it is the first date”. I’m a really slow mover too, so for me to even want to do that, I think subconsciously I was like “Let’s just try”, but I wasn’t really expecting anything. But I was kind of sad.

While timing played into many of the experiences that were discussed during participant interviews, it isn’t often an aspect of nonverbal communication that is commented on explicitly. Here, differences in the timing of Jason’s observation and Tammi’s nonverbal signal led each of them to interpret the other’s emotions as nonreciprocal, even though they both wanted to hold the other’s hand. In Tammi’s case, she intentionally sent a signal to Jason, and was disappointed and sad when he didn’t respond.

A week or so later Tammi and Jason decided to watch a few movies together. They very quickly wound up in a similar situation, which Tammi describes in this way:

Tammi: We had watched two movies, and then we took a break and we walked to a park by his house, and we talked...and then we came back, and we watched another movie. By this point our hands were like this [indicates that their hands were side by side and touching], and I was so frustrated. I was beyond frustrated, because he just wouldn't grab it. And this one time I nudged it, and he just sat there. I was like, "Does he not want to hold my hand?", but then I'm like "Then why would he..." because he put his hand by mine, so I'm like "Then why would he have done that?" So, I think I started to pull away a little bit, because I was way self-conscious after I nudged him.

Interviewer: I think I'm going to need you to describe "tried nudging" a bit. Can you get detailed about exactly what happened there?

Tammi: So, I kind of like, nudged with my pinky, like this [indicates raising her pinky] and then he didn't do anything, so I pulled away to here [indicates distance between her hand and his] so we weren't touching anymore.

Interviewer: What did that mean to you?

Tammi: That meant, either that he didn't want to hold my hand...that's what I thought at first, and that's why I pulled away. But, then I thought about it more and I was like, "But why would he still have his hand there?"

Tammi attempts to communicate her desire to hold hands with Jason by brushing her finger against his hand. When he doesn't respond, her first inclination is that he doesn't want to hold her hand, and she withdraws it so that they are no longer touching. Since the intent to communicate is present, it is possible to separate the interaction into an underlying emotion and an implicit question. Tammi was attracted to Jason, and wanted to hold his hand. Initially, Tammi interpreted Jason's response as a negative answer to whether or not they could hold hands, which caused her to question the emotional compatibility of their interactions. The fact that she couldn't understand what the motivation for his behavior could be if it wasn't attraction caused her to reconsider her initial interpretation.

Alex and Natalie saw each other at church the Sunday after their puddle-jumping date. In that context, Alex describes an experience that could qualify as nonreciprocal.

Interviewer: Can you remember a time when you tried to communicate something nonverbally and you felt like it either wasn't understood or it wasn't returned?

Alex: The Sunday after our first date, there were a few other guys that were also interested in her, so I tried to sit next to her. I think I sat next to her during the first hour; I'm not sure. But then I tried to sit next to her in Sunday School, and I sat next to her, but then they changed which room Sunday School was in. And so, we moved over into the new room, but while we were moving, we got separated, and these other guys went and sat next to her. So, I had to sit in front of her, and there wasn't a whole lot of interaction that could be had during Sunday School, for that reason. I didn't really know what to think about that, because she's really nice, and nice to everyone. So, she was talking to these guys, and I picked up on the fact that one of them, she really didn't want anything to do with. But, I still felt like, why didn't she save a spot for me, or...

Interviewer: We were sitting together before...why aren't we now?

Alex: Yeah, why aren't we now?

Alex describes sitting next to Natalie as an attempt to communicate nonverbally with her. He had enjoyed their first date together, wanted to continue getting to know her better, and hoped that his making an effort to sit next to her in both their first hour and afterward during Sunday School would communicate that to her. The fact that Natalie didn't save him a seat when their class moved effectively cut off his ability to communicate in that fashion, which caused Alex to wonder whether she wanted him to sit next to her or not.

After they played basketball together the second time, Abigail and Michael went on a second date, which they both describe in their interviews as enjoyable. The next day Abigail attending a community function that Michael was involved in running. She describes her experience in this way:

Interviewer: You talk about waving excitedly at him, and trying to talk to him, but he seemed distracted, and his wave left something to be desired. Can you describe that a little bit more?

Abi: Yeah. I was actually really mad, so I remember this very well. I had just walked in, and of course I had got myself all ready, because I was going to see him again, and we just had this great date the date the day before. As soon as we walk in, I saw him, and so like, I got butterflies, you know? I waved, and I was going to go over and talk to him, but he just kind of put his hand up, and then looked away, and walked away. I just felt completely shut down, because I was like, “Well, we have a few minutes before things start, he could talk to me”

Here the interaction is fairly simple, and entirely nonverbal. The emotion Abigail felt was excitement, and the question implicit in her wave was whether Michael could talk for a few minutes. The form of the interaction is the same, but Abigail experienced the degree of his response differently, and the fact that he turned and walked away before she could come over and speak to him excluded the possibility of further communication. As with Joshua toward Emily, a large part of Abigail’s frustration stemmed from previous experiences she had interpreted as indicating attraction on Michael’s part.

Emily: I thought he was really flirty [the day before], and told me a million times that I was pretty, and had his arm around me, and stuff like that. So I thought it went really well. It was a lot of fun; like, we were laughing the whole time. I knew I definitely liked him at that point, and I thought it was obvious that I liked him. And I was pretty sure that he liked me. Like, I couldn’t see him acting how he had, and not liked me.

Interviewer: You thought it was pretty clear that he was attracted to you, because he was always complimenting you on how you looked, and putting his arm around you, but that you roommates said that he had been the same with them. Was it roommates, plural?

Abigail: Well, there was one main one, but another said he had been all flirty with her too. I was like, “Well, what the heck? So, obviously this doesn’t mean anything.” But at the same time, I felt like it was different, because I think it’s common to believe that you’re different. But, I just felt like he stepped beyond the normal flirty range and that it was into “I like you”...I couldn’t see him acting the way he had without liking me.

The fact that previous roommates had had similar experiences increased Emily’s frustration. She had evaluated her interactions with Michael in light of her roommates’

experiences, and still felt he was showing more than just casual interest in her, but Michael's nonreciprocal response forced a reevaluation of their previous interactions.

Abigail: I felt like my roommates had been proven right, like he is just that way with everybody.

Interviewer: Like he had been flirty with you and it didn't mean anything more than it meant with them?

Abigail: Yeah. So I was really mad.

Interviewer: And that was because he didn't take time to just respond to your wave and come over, or wait for you to come over?

Abigail: Yeah. I felt like his excitement level didn't match mine.

Abigail's response includes both frustration and reevaluation. From Michael's perspective, it also included withdrawal. He describes his interaction with Emily that morning in this way:

Michael: I didn't talk to her that next morning, and she texted me right after, and was like "Well, thanks for not saying hi to me". And I was like "Oh, no". So, I think I texted her right back, because I was busy, and then I called her within 5 or 10 minutes, and said "Hey, I'm sorry; that's not what I intended. I was busy". She said that I didn't even look at her, and I remember staring at her, and her never looking my way. Maybe that was after she had already decided that I was being a jerk.

### **Further Classification**

One of the main questions of this project concerns how the form of the communication relates to the experienced level of reciprocation. It is possible that when the sending and receiving signals in a nonverbal communication share similar forms, it allows for more accurate evaluation of timing and degree, which in turn facilitates more confidence in interpretation. If this possibility holds true, it would follow that similar form in nonverbal communication would

not only be preferential, but would coincide with moments when participants expressed the most confidence in the emotional compatibility of their communication. Participants' experiences often demonstrate this pattern, but with a further progression.

After Michael called Abigail and apologized for not making time to speak with her that morning, they arranged to go on a drive later that day. As they were driving, they passed a local park, and Abigail expressed an interest in getting out and hiking. Michael describes the experience in this way:

Michael: We went up and we climbed up these little ledges, sat up on top of them, and just kind of were throwing rocks. Then, after a while, I laid back and mentioned that it was a good day to see things in the clouds, and so she leaned back too, and she put her head on my shoulder. And that was the moment when I was like, "All right. There's something going on".

Interviewer: Was laying back in any way an invitation on your part for her to join in on the activity?

Michael: No. Well, to lie back, sure. But not for her to put her head on my shoulder or anything like that. That was a surprise.

Michael describes a pattern of nonverbal interaction that would qualify as fully reciprocal. He invited Abigail to lie back verbally and nonverbally, and her response was similar in form, but exceeded his sending signal in degree. Michael feels confident for the first time that Abigail is attracted to him.

Interviewer: Can you describe a little bit of how you interpreted that? I know you've talked about it already, but talk about in the context of what you were feeling.

Michael: It didn't feel alien at all. It felt pretty natural. It wasn't like either of us were trying to move something faster than the other was comfortable. I don't think it was a huge step, but it was a big enough step for me to have the fact that she might be interested in me, and that I can put more effort into it, without fear of being rejected. She did that, and it was almost like a relief, you know? It was like "Okay, good".

Interviewer: There was tension in the situation that was gone, when that happened?

Michael: Yeah. Before that, when you like a girl and you don't know if she likes you, you don't know like, "Can I touch you? Can I..."

Interviewer: What is too much?

Michael: Right. So, there was an alleviation of that pressure and that tension. After that, when we walked back to the car, I felt okay putting my arm around her, and just pulling her closer when I said something, or laughed.

Two aspects of Michael's description tend to reoccur in the similar situations described by other participants. First, he describes a feeling of relief in association with becoming confident that Abigail's feelings are similar to his. Even though Abigail admits that it wasn't a big step in her mind to lay her head back on Michael's shoulder, she describes a very similar sense of relief:

Abi: It didn't seem like a big deal to me, to put my head on his shoulder, because we were lying down and looking at the clouds, and I needed a place for my head. And so, it just seemed kind of obvious.

Interviewer: Why not his shoulder? It's softer than the rock?

Abi: Exactly. But then, at the same time, when I did it...I don't know, I could feel that there was a barrier broken.

Interviewer: Can you describe a little bit more about a barrier being broken?

Abi: Yeah, so...when you're in the beginning of a relationship, it's always kind of awkward to touch the other person, even if you don't mean to. You notice it more. You're more aware of it, because you are more aware of everything you do with that person. It's kind of like there's a gate that you have to pass through, and once you pass through it, it's okay. So then, after I laid my head on his shoulder, when we were walking back to the car, like, he was a lot more comfortable. It was kind of like there was less tension between us.

The second aspect of the description that reoccurs in other experiences is a shift in the nature of the nonverbal interaction, typified in Michael's statement: "I felt okay putting my arm



around her and just pulling her close”. Speaking in terms of form, the sending and receiving signals associated with putting an arm around someone are dissimilar. The sending signal is extending the arm, and the receiving signal is maintaining connection between the arm and whichever part of the body the arm encircles. Even in the context of the initial interaction, Michael laid back first, and then Abigail laid back; the forms of the sending signal and the receiving response were similar. But their relative positions to each other were dissimilar; Michael was lying on the ground, and Abigail was lying on Michael.

On their second date, Tammi and Jason finished the third movie they were watching. Although Tammi was frustrated that Jason hadn’t held her hand, she felt it was more likely due to nervousness on his part than disinterest, and so put in a fourth movie and sat back down.

Jason describes his experience in these words:

Jason: It was obvious that she wanted to hold hands; her hand was right up next to mine, and she’d kind of brush it. But I was still so nervous, and finally when I went to do it, it was like this instant reaction. Her hand was like this, [indicates palm down next to his own] and my hand was here, and when I lifted my hand to go over hers, she was there, and just like attacked my hand, just grabbed it. [indicates Tammi flipping her hand over and coming up to grab his] I was like “Yeah, she wanted to, at least”.

Interviewer: When you talk about being nervous, were you worrying about how she was going to react, or just nervousness because it was something that you hadn’t done in a long time?

Jason: I think a little combination of both. Maybe more of not having done it for a long time, but also I think everybody, when they’re starting a relationship, has that nervousness. Even if you feel like the person is attracted to you, you’re still nervousness about being objective. I think there’s still that underlying nervousness of “I don’t want to offend her by trying to hold her hand, or make her feel uncomfortable.” But mostly, you know, I haven’t held a girl’s hand since halfway through my senior year in high school. So, yeah; it was a little nerve-wracking.

Interviewer: When you were motioning towards it, she kind of flipped and...

Jason: She flipped over and came up and grabbed it

Interviewer: And you were like, "Okay. That's..."

Jason: That's perfect for me.

Interviewer: So you felt not so worried about offending her?

Jason: Reassured, yeah.

Jason's experience demonstrates the pattern of fully reciprocal communication. The form of the sending and receiving signals are similar, and the degree of Tammi's response exceeds the degree of his initial signal by enough to make him confident that she wanted to hold his hand, too. Jason also talks about the alleviation of a tension similar to the kind Abigail and Michael related. Tammi describes the same experience this way:

Tammi: So, at that point, I put in the fourth movie, and I came back, and I put my hand down, and then he put his right next to mine. So, I'm like, "Okay, he must really want to hold my hand." Halfway through the movie, he slowly started to move, and I just grabbed it. Like, latched on. I was like, "Yes! Finally!" And then, through the night, we eventually ended up snuggling. So, it took, like, forever to hold hands, and then we snuggled and all that stuff within the rest of the movie. That was like, the boundary.

Interviewer: Breaking through the bottleneck? Once we get past this point...okay?

Tammi: I think he like, put his arm around me. And when he did that, I just like, latched on. Later I was like, "I hope that wasn't too forward". I think I said that to him, and he was like, "No. I enjoyed it."

Tammi's description includes some of the some language used by Abigail, speaking about her interaction in terms of passing a boundary beyond which the anxiety associated with physical affection lessened. She also describes a similar shift in the form of their nonverbal interaction. They went from holding hands, which has a similar form, to snuggling, in which Jason had his arm around her shoulder, and Tammi was lying against his chest with both arms

wrapped around his waist. Jason talks specifically about his intention and the way he interpreted Tammi's response when he put his arm around her.

Jason: I think after that, I put my arm around her, and she snuggled down into me, and when she snuggled down into me, she wrapped her arm around me and held on really tight, and so that made me feel like she does care for me.

Interviewer: Can you describe what you were trying to convey to her when you put your arm around her?

Jason: I just wanted to...because I held her hand, and so I wanted to show her that I really did care for her, I guess. Because my roommates were guys that, they just wanted to kiss a girl the first time they met her, after two hours of knowing her. Or they'd bring a girl over and hold hands with her, and the next day with another one. So I wanted to show her that I do care for you, and that I hope this can be more than just holding your hand and never hanging out with you again.

Interviewer: You describe her nuzzling up against your chest, and sticking her arm around you, and kind of latching on; you interpreted that as a recognition that you were there, and that she felt safe?

Jason: Yeah, mostly I felt that she does feel safe and comfortable with me. Because, just how tight she held on, it made me feel like, you know, it was almost like...not that you need me, but kind of like...I do trust you.

Even though the form of the interaction has become dissimilar, the pattern of interpretation demonstrated by Jason is still fully reciprocal in nature. His intention in putting his arm around Tammi was to communicate that he cared for her beyond just that moment. He interpreted her response, which increased the degree of the interaction, as a recognition of his intention and an indication that she felt safe with him.

Alex and Natalie both talk about a similar experience they shared on their third date. They met at Natalie's house, ate dinner and watched a movie. Alex describes what happened in these words:

Alex: After, we went outside onto her porch. We were looking at stars and I was asking her to point out the different constellations and stuff. At first she was standing with her hands like this; [puts arms out in front as if leaning forward on them]. So I put one of my hands here, [indicates left hand to the inside of her right] so it was inside hers and our arms crossed. It started like that, and then somehow I ended up putting my arm around her.

Interviewer: Had you meant to convey any particular emotional message to her when you did that?

Alex: I did want her to know that I liked her, and that I didn't want to just stand next to her, because then that would be, like, very far away from her, and not as open to her.

Interviewer: So, just standing next to her, with her hand next to your hand would have been more distant and not as open?

Alex: Yeah; just by crossing the arms, it made it seem like there was an interaction. It forced there to be an interaction there. It was kind of a way of forcing her to acknowledge that I was there. Whereas if I was just standing next to her, there's a possibility she could have gotten lost in the stars and just focused on those. It sounds funny, but she could have completely forgotten that I was there, and been just alone. But by crossing our arms like that, it was my way of saying, "I'm here. Don't forget about me".

As with the previous two experiences, Alex and Natalie's communication begins in a reciprocal manner that includes similar form. Natalie was leaning on her forearms against the balcony; Alex mirrored her posture, but placed his arm to the inside of hers specifically to create a situation from which he could tell by her reaction whether she understood his feelings. He was also particularly cognizant of possible responses Natalie could have made, and what they might have meant.

Interviewer: Did you have any way in mind of her reacting?

Alex: Well, it was kind of a pass or fail test to see how she would react to me placing myself in her personal space. I figured that if she left her arm there, then that would be a good sign, and maybe I'd scoot closer to her, put my arm around her, as ended up happening. If she found some excuse to move her hand, or if she turned to face me, I

would think “Okay, she probably doesn’t like me in her personal space that much, I’ll give her a little bit more room”.

Interviewer: You had said when you did that that you wanted to force an interaction in which you would be able to tell from her response how she felt about what was happening. Can you explain that a little bit more?

Alex: Well, I knew that by doing that, it would be hard for her not to react. Either she would move away, and that would be a pretty clear sign, or she would not react. Which, I was half expecting her to do. Or, she could snuggle up and encourage it more. And she did the third one.

Alex description indicates that people consciously think about interpreting nonverbal interactions in the patterns suggested by reciprocal communication. If Natalie had moved in such a way as to separate their arms and exclude further nonverbal communication, Alex would have interpreted that as discouraging, and withdrawn. If she maintained contact, he would have scooted a little closer and increased the level of their interaction. The fact that she snuggled into him, responding in a manner that increased the degree of their interaction, was as a positive indication that his feelings for her were returned.

Alex: Honestly, I was kind of surprised when she did that. I didn’t know how she was going to react, and that was a pleasant surprise.

Interviewer: Can you describe feeling surprised by her snuggling a little bit more?

Alex: I didn’t expect her to resist it, but I didn’t expect her to embrace it, and respond so positively to it. I expected it kind of just to happen, and then, at some future date, it would happen more. But she kind of jumped right into it.

Interviewer: How did you read that, emotionally?

Alex: What did I think it meant? I guess, maybe...like, I mean, that gave me a very solid sign that she was digging me. Before, her accepting my friend request online, and her agreeing to go out with me, she could just be friends at that point. She could just have been being nice to me, but that was more than just being nice, or flirtatious, or anything. That was her actually like, liking me.

Beyond creating an interaction with Natalie, Alex talks about interlacing his arm and hers as a way to transition between a similar formed interaction into a dissimilar formed one. If she responded well to him being in her space, he would maybe move closer and put his arm around her. Similar form was important in setting the standard by which Natalie's response would be gauged, but once he was confident in his interpretation of that response, Alex hoped to be able to move into a dissimilarly formed interaction, and his confidence in the compatibility of their emotions was highest when Natalie was obviously receptive to the transition. Natalie describes some part of why the transition was meaningful to her in these words:

Interviewer: When you were walking to go see the stars, was it the front or back of the house?

Natalie: It was in the front of my house. So...we have my house, and we went downstairs, and then there's a porch with an overhang roof. And so, we were just looking up over my yard, and then there are stars. So that's where we were standing, kind of. For me, it was just really appropriate and worked out just how it should have. And it was kind of like "Oh. See, we really do like each other". Because we had been hanging out, these last couple times, and so now it was nice to hold hands for more than thirty seconds, or hold hands instead of nudging each other.

Interviewer: He came up from behind?

Natalie: Yeah, it was that hug thing, where you're holding hands in front of you. The porch was right there, so my arms were resting on the banister. And then he came up around, and like, held my hand, or both hands; I don't really remember. I just remember he was behind me.

Interviewer: You talk about this particular experience in terms of, "Oh...we like each other." You mentioned that you suspected it before, and had tried to communicate it before, but was there something different about this experience?

Natalie: I think I knew that he was attracted to me, and I was for sure attracted to him, but when you finally sit and hold someone's hand for more than thirty seconds, it's not like a commitment, but it's like "I'm committed to liking you a little bit longer than thirty seconds". I was like, "I'm committed to seeing you again", and these last few dates have meant something to me. Because I think I could make some pretty valid judgments on

some of the other things that had happened, and the fact that this was the fourth or fifth date that we had been on. But just sitting there and actually just being there, and letting it happen was good. And at the same time, it wasn't like we stood there for forty-five minutes holding hands. It was fifteen, twenty minutes.

Natalie expresses the most confidence in her interpretation of Alex's interest after transitioning from the briefer, send-and-respond pattern of her initial nonverbal interactions into a pattern that allowed for sustained bodily contact. Even though she felt reasonably sure of her interpretations up to that point, Alex's willingness to maintain consistent, prolonged contact was a more tangible indication of his interest.

The pattern that emerges from these interactions is not so much a strict sequence of sending signals and receiving responses, each with their own form, degree, and timing, but of moving from call and response into a more sustained interaction where one person is creating space, and the other is occupying that space. Technically speaking, it is possible to refer to almost any nonverbal interaction in these terms: a nudge, a hug, inviting a person to play basketball, or pushing them into a puddle. In each instance, the sending signal can be symbolically taken as a way of creating a "space" for the person receiving that signal to occupy. In a dating context, however, it appears that as the couple involved becomes more confident in their attraction to each other, creating space and occupying space becomes more literal. One person uses their body to frame a space, and the other uses their body to fill that space, most often in a way that includes dissimilar form.

## Discussion

### Summary of Findings

**General observations of nonverbal communication.** Due to the nature of qualitative analysis, it will be best to give an overall summary of the findings before attempting a detailed discussion. First, data analysis supports the importance of form, degree, and timing as key aspects of interpreting nonverbal communication. Participants repeatedly made reference to each of the three aspects when describing the process they used to decode the meaning of their partners' communications. Further, the definitions used to describe form, degree, and timing appear to be adequate. While the distinctions between the three terms were not always solid, no additional factors were required to sufficiently conceptualize participants' experiences. Of the three, timing was referenced the least, and less meaning was attributed to the timing of interactions than to form and degree, when it was referenced.

Analysis also reaffirms the contextually bound nature of nonverbal communication. Participants seldom described interpreting their communication solely in terms of the form, degree, and timing of one specific interaction, but interpreted them in the context of a series of mutually constitutive interactions. These series of interactions were seldom exclusively nonverbal, exclusively physical, or exclusively in-person when they were nonverbal. Past in-person conversation, physical nonverbal interactions, and verbal and nonverbal correspondence all played into participants' understanding of their present nonverbal communication. One of the strengths demonstrated by reciprocal communication as a framework for understanding this process is the consistent application of the classification system across both verbal and nonverbal interactions. Calling someone and leaving a message on their answering machine can easily be seen as a sending signal, even though it is entirely verbal. The response can be thought of in



terms of form (returning the message by phone or in person), degree (expressing more or less excitement at whatever proposition was made in the message), and timing (the amount of time that passes between leaving the message and having the message returned), in addition to having an underlying emotion that motivates the call, and an implicit question that underlies the explicit one. It is therefore possible to categorize an entirely verbal interaction as fully, partially, or nonreciprocal in the same manner as has been shown for nonverbal communication.

There appears to be levels of awareness associated with nonverbal communication. Participants often felt their partners were intending to communicate information nonverbally. Somewhat more surprisingly, participants also interpreted meaning from nonverbal behaviors they observed and interactions with their partners even when they recognized that those behaviors and interactions were not intended to convey information.

Data analysis also supports reciprocal communication as a meaningful way of describing participants' experiences. Couples consistently interpreted nonverbal interactions with their partners in terms of emotional content, and distinct instances of the three categories of reciprocal communication were readily identifiable. Additionally, each of the three categories of reciprocal communication showed relatively consistent patterns across participants.

**Fully reciprocal communication.** When participants described fully reciprocal communication with their partners, they described experiencing a kind of emotional equivalence. Regardless of the level of intention they perceived in the communication, participants assumed a fundamental connection between a person's emotional state and their nonverbal behavior, for themselves as well as for their partners. If participants expressing a particular emotion, like attraction, through their nonverbal communication, and that communication elicited a similar

response, the assumption was that the emotion at the core of the response was compatible with the emotion at the core of the signal. When pressed for more detail, participants would be cautious about saying that the emotions were the same, or that their partner felt what they felt, but say things like they were more confident in acting on the emotion they felt. The term “emotional compatibility” seems to be an appropriate way of conveying this sentiment.

Participants felt their emotions were most compatible with their partner’s when a shift in the nature of their nonverbal communications occurred. When the most common initial sending and receiving signals, which tended to be brief and similar in form, were interpreted as fully reciprocal, participants expressed a fair amount of confidence in moving the relationship forward, but still felt some doubt about the exact nature of their partner’s feelings. When the pattern of nonverbal communication shifted to one in which one member of the couple created space with their body and the other occupied that space, participants expressed more confidence in the emotional compatibility they felt with their partner. Generally, this shift in the nature of nonverbal communication involved a longer period of contacts, and dissimilar form.

**Partially reciprocal communication.** The experience of partially reciprocal communication was only reported when communication was perceived as being intentional; that is, motivated by an underlying emotion and either asking or answering an implicit question. Additionally, experiencing nonverbal communication as partially reciprocal included a level of uncertainty about the emotional compatibility of the communication. Participants often used their own emotions as a template for interpreting their partner’s emotions, and saw the implicit question associated with their nonverbal communication as flowing naturally from their underlying emotion. When confronted with a response that either contained a similar emotion

but negative response to the implied question, or included a positive response to the implied question, but a dissimilar emotion, participants expressed a sense of confusion, possibly due to having to reevaluate the accuracy of their emotions as a way of interpreting their partner's. Nonverbal communication by itself was seldom sufficient to clarify the confusion associated with partially reciprocal communication. If an understanding was reached, it included verbal discussion of the previously confusing nonverbal communication.

**Nonreciprocal Communication.** Of the three theorized forms of reciprocal communication, nonverbal communication occurred most consistently with its hypothesized pattern. Participants most often described experiencing a distinct difference between what they were nonverbally communicating to and receiving from their partner when there was no response, or when the response they received excluded further communication. Like fully reciprocal communication, participants experienced nonverbal communication as nonreciprocal both in situations where they felt their partner was intentionally trying to communicate and when they felt their partner was unintentionally communicating. Generally speaking, participants tended to respond to nonreciprocal communication by withdrawing from further communication, and reinterpreting previous interactions. In situations where participants felt that a nonreciprocal response was inconsistent with the message sent by previous nonverbal communication, they expressed feelings of frustration, anger, and resignation.

### **General Discussion**

Several unanticipated findings are of note. First, the distinction between intended and unintended nonverbal communication appears to be an important one. When intention was not present, participants attributed whatever information was communicated as originating from

basic characteristics or some underlying emotion of the sender. More often than not, the initial experience of being attracted to someone occurred in the context of nonverbal communication that was perceived as unintentional, and the basic characteristic being communicated was shared and admired. That is to say that, when participants spoke about first recognizing an attraction to their partner, they spoke in terms of being attracted to characteristics that they did not perceive as intentionally being communicated, but held in common. Instances of unintentional communication were found at the fully reciprocal and nonreciprocal levels, but not in partially reciprocal communication. It is possible that the awareness implied by partially responding to nonverbal communication requires intent.

When intention was present, it was useful to speak of participants experience in terms of an implicit question in addition to the underlying emotion. Generally speaking, the implicit question inherent to any intentional communication is “Am I being understood?” In the context of dating, the question of whether or not the receiver understood was still present, but was often coupled with something like “Do you feel the same?”, or “Is that all right with you?” This manner of dividing intentional communication into parts is useful in terms of exposition, and adds some method to the process of categorizing nonverbal communication as fully, partially, or nonreciprocal. (See Figure 1, Appendix B) The idea of dividing nonverbal communication along these lines was not initially a part of the theory of reciprocal communication, however. As a consequence, there is no data to indicate whether dividing intentional communication into an underlying emotion and an implicit question makes sense from an experiential perspective.

Similarly, the concept of nonverbal communication as creating space and occupying space was formalized after analysis of the transcriptions was completed. There is no data to

indicate whether the conceptualization is accurate from an experiential perspective, but participants' descriptions of these kinds of interactions were consistent with other experiences of fully reciprocal communication. It is possible that the sustained nature of the contact associated with one person creating space with their body and the other person occupying that space with their body is uncomfortable to maintain when the emotions of the two individuals involved aren't compatible at some level. If this is the case, then the creating space and occupying space pattern of interaction would be briefer in partially or nonreciprocal circumstances.

As background research has not revealed any terminology within the scientific community pertaining to the pattern of creating space and occupying space described by participants in this study, the terms "framing" and "filling" are suggested. The individual creating space is referred to as framing, and the person occupying space is referred to as filling. This terminology is consistent with participants' descriptions of the phenomenon, and avoids several of the drawbacks associated with more colloquial terms. Often words used to describe positions in physical interactions carry semantic baggage. Words like "dominant", "primary", "submissive", and "passive" each insinuate the order or presuppose the importance of one position in relation to the other. Each term also has traditional associations with gender. "Spooning" is possibly the most common colloquial instance of this pattern, and its terminology demonstrates a similar semantic baggage. One person is the "big spoon", and the other is "little spoon". It may not be explicit, but the general tendency is to assign more importance to the "big spoon", and to assume the individual in that position is male. Framing and filling are suggested as terms that avoid semantic connections to order, gender, or importance, and therefore better reflect the experience participants have when they engage in such interactions.

As previously noted, conceptualizing nonverbal communication as reciprocal and conceptualizing nonverbal communication as framing space and filling space are not mutually exclusive prospects. Participants often described interactions where one partner framed a space and the other partner filled that space as fully reciprocal, and occasionally described partially reciprocal communication as occurring within the context of framing and filling space. Additionally, the framing and filling pattern was often described as including other, more straightforward patterns of nonverbal communication. A couple that is cuddling in a framing and filling pattern can be holding hands, resting their heads against each other, or kissing consistent with the pattern of similar form, degree, and timing originally proposed for fully reciprocal communication in the second hypothesis.

Two assumptions in the original conception of reciprocal communication should be adjusted. First, the assumption that experiencing nonverbal communication as fully reciprocal involves experiencing a nonverbal interaction as equal in degree was not supported. More often than not participants felt their emotions were most consistent with their partner's emotions when the degree of the receiving response exceeded the degree of the sending signal. Apparently one of the initial steps in navigating attraction is distinguishing between nonverbal communication that is polite and nonverbal communication that indicates interest. This process can be complicated by the ambiguous circumstances in which initial interest is typically communicated. Participants often described the prospect of expressing an attraction without being sure of whether the attraction would be returned apprehensively. Several female participants in particular used the term "butterflies" to describe the physical sensations of anxiety they experienced while attempting to communicate attraction. Partly due to this anxiety, initial

communications of attraction often occurred in contexts where not reciprocating in some comparable degree would be considered impolite. Asking a person to dance, inviting a new acquaintance to a group activity, wishing someone good luck, hugging a friend before parting; each can easily serve as a nonverbal context in which the fear associated with expressing attraction is minimized by etiquette that makes a nonreciprocal response less likely. One drawback to this strategy appears to be that veiling an attraction in these more innocuous contexts makes interpreting the content of the response more difficult. A response that is about equal in degree could be a similarly tentative and anxiety-laden expression of attraction, or it could be the polite reciprocation that the courtesy dictates. It makes sense then that participants would be more confident in interpreting interest when the degree of the receiving response exceeds the degree of the sending signal.

Second, the assumption that matching form in nonverbal communication would coincide with the most confidence in interpretation should be stipulated. In the initial phases of dating and getting to know each other, similar form tended to be a part of communication that participants experienced as fully reciprocal. Participants tended to express most confidence in the compatibility of their emotions when a pattern of creating space and occupying space was adopted, however. When compared to initial nonverbal interactions, this creating space and occupying space pattern of interaction was more likely to involve dissimilar form and more bodily contact, sustained over a longer period of time.

Participants' lack of awareness about how timing played into their nonverbal communication is of note. While they often spoke about their nonverbal interactions in terms of form and degree, participants did not talk about timing as often or as explicitly, even though it

played an important role in many of their experiences. Participants may have overlooked the importance of timing for a number of reasons. The retrospective nature of the interviews in combination with the relatively brief periods of time involved was likely a large factor.

Nonverbal interactions can be measured in milliseconds, so an accurate account of timing would be difficult to provide 6 months in retrospect. Second, participants tended to interpret their nonverbal communication contextually. It is possible that the timing of individual interactions occurring within a given experience is overshadowed by the overall impression a person takes from the relationship as a whole. Finally, the distinction between form, timing, and degree is not always solid. The amount of time a response occurs within can easily become a measure of degree when compared with the amount of time the initial signal took. Research investigating variations in timing and interpretation of nonverbal communication would most likely be better served by quantitative analysis.

The research methodology and participant pool have several limitations that should be acknowledged. Obviously the size of the participant pool limits the generalizability of any possible conclusions. Additionally, participants were almost all members of the LDS church, and students at BYU, an institution directed by the same church. In comparison to larger American culture, LDS church members have a much more traditional perspective on physical intimacy outside marriage. While there is a wide range of individual adherence to the Church's policies in this area, the fact that the majority of participants were also students at BYU indicates that they likely adhered more closely to the official standards of the church. Even though nonverbal communication as it relates to sexual behavior was not included in the scope of this research, it is reasonable to assume a higher correlation between intercourse and dating in



American culture at large than in the present sample. Speculation as to how this difference might affect the ways in which participants interpret and respond to nonverbal communication is beyond the scope of this project. Finally, the majority of couples who participated in the project were engaged or married at the time of their interviews, which indicates a degree of self-selection in participation. It is likely couples that were less sure of the ultimate nature of their relationship were also less comfortable with the idea of being interviewed, and therefore did not volunteer to participate.

Beyond the limitations inherent to the participant pool, implications of this research may not be applicable to communication in other contexts. This research focused exclusively on the communication associated with expressions of heterosexual attraction. It is likely that similarities exist in communication across other contexts, but speculation as to the nature of those similarities would be anecdotal at this time.

## **Conclusions**

The current research is an attempt to address possible weaknesses in our understanding of nonverbal communication within psychology, namely an almost uniform bias within the predominant theoretical frameworks that neglects or denies the significance of consciousness experience on the phenomenon. Qualitative investigation revealed patterns within the experiential data that were largely consistent across participants, and that participants felt were integral to the meaning drawn from their nonverbal communication. Given the constraints of the participant pool and the exploratory nature of the study, any comparison between the model of nonverbal communication proposed in this paper and those currently utilized by more traditional psychological frameworks would be premature at best. It would not be overstating the matter, however, to say that the results of the current study lend credence to the possibility that among

the largely unexamined experiential aspects of nonverbal communication there is something fundamental that is being neglected, and that further qualitative exploration of the phenomenon is justified.

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## Appendix A

### *E-mail Questions and Instructions*

- In answering the following questions, include as much detail as you can remember. Even if the answers for two or more of the questions overlap, avoid summarizing as much as possible. There is no length requirement; write until you feel that your response adequately conveys what you experienced.
- It is important that you **do not** discuss the questions or your responses with your partner until after the written and interview portions of the project are complete. Any discussion of the questions could influence the nature of your, or your partner's, response. It is more important that the answers reflect each person's own personal experiences than that your partner's answers agree with your own.

#### Question #1

Describe the first time you remember being attracted to your current partner.

#### Question #2

Describe the first time you remember doing something that was an expression of that attraction.

#### Question #3

Describe the first time you felt your current partner may have been attracted to you.

#### Question #4

Describe the first time you felt your current partner realized you may have been attracted to him or her.

- Your full responses will only be viewed by the primary investigator and the 3 professors who make up the review board. Excerpts from transcripts of your responses will appear in the published version of the thesis, and subsequent journals the thesis is published. Any possible identifiers will be removed from excerpts and conclusions to ensure your confidentiality.
- Please remember that if you feel uncomfortable with any aspect of the project at any time, you are free to withdraw from participation without penalty. Information from withdrawn participants will be destroyed immediately, and will not appear in any form at any stage of the project.
- Please contact me via e-mail if you wish to withdraw from the project, or if you have any further questions regarding your participation. [jcpenrod79@gmail.com](mailto:jcpenrod79@gmail.com)



### Appendix B

	Underlying Emotion	Implicit Question
Fully Reciprocal	Compatible	Answered Affirmatively
Partially Reciprocal	Compatible	Answered Negatively
	Incompatible	Answered Affirmatively
Nonreciprocal	Incompatible	Answered Negatively

**Figure 1.** Categorizing the level of reciprocal communication according to emotional compatibility and implicit question.