

## Men's Perspectives on Women's Nonverbal Cues of Sexual Interest

Micah Ahmad  
Maryanne Fisher

Department of Psychology, St. Mary's University

---

### ABSTRACT

According to the scientific literature, men are generally thought to misinterpret women's flirting, such that men overestimate women's desire for sexual encounters. This proposal is not logical, as it means that men erroneously invest their time and efforts in pursuing potential mates who are uninterested in them. Instead, it is adaptive for men to have an approximate idea of women's sexual interest, and invest themselves accordingly. In the current study, we use an ethological approach to test the hypothesis that men are able to decipher the nonverbal cues that women use to signal sexual interest. In the first part of our study, 15 men rated a list of nonverbal female flirting behaviors using a scale of "most indicative" to "least indicative" of women's desire for a sexual encounter. In the second part, we observed 50 women's flirting behavior at nightclubs, and recorded whether they left with the man with whom they had flirted. We found the cues identified by the men in phase one were linked to whether or not a woman left a nightclub with the man with whom she had been interacting. Women who exhibited a higher proportion of behaviors thought to be most indicative of sexual interest were the most likely to leave with the man with whom they had recently interacted, whereas women displaying the behaviors least indicative of sexual interest were less likely to leave with the man with whom they had interacted.

### KEYWORDS

Human ethology; flirting; nonverbal cues; signaling theory; sexual receptivity

---

---

\*AUTHOR NOTE: Please direct correspondence to Micah Ahmad, Department of Psychology, Saint Mary's University, 923 Robie Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3H 3C3, Canada  
Email: [kudos.ma@gmail.com](mailto:kudos.ma@gmail.com)

---

*EvoS Journal: The Journal of the Evolutionary Studies Consortium*  
ISSN: 1944-1932 - <http://evostudies.org/journal.html>  
2010, Volume 2(2), pp. 72-80.

## INTRODUCTION

The issues surrounding women's and, more notably, men's accurate interpretation of courtship signals is a popular topic amongst the media and academics alike (see Philips, 1996 for a review). Indeed, the general public seems captivated to learn what "women really want," as documented by the large number of books available on the topic (for example, see Stains, & Bechtel, 2000).

Flirting behaviors are elicited by women and men for the purpose of attracting a desired mate. Women, in particular, have been reported to exhibit a large variety of flirting behaviors that differ from males in both frequency and form (Moore, 1985). For example, women's signals include hair flips, primping, whispering, and solitary dancing. Given sex-specific mating strategies (e.g., Buss & Schmitt, 1993), it is sensible that the sexes show distinct courtship patterns. That is, since women are most concerned with the quality of a potential mate, whereas men are most concerned with the number of mates they may have, women tend to be the selective sex. Thus, it is not surprising that when engaging in initial meetings with potential mates, women tend to initiate a greater proportion of opposite-sex interactions and exhibit a higher rate of courtship behaviors at the onset of flirting (Henningson, 2004). Of particular note is that women's cues are not immediately acted upon by men; after a few minutes of interaction, women's nonverbal flirting cues correlate with men's professed interest (Grammer, Kruck, Juette, & Fink, 2000). That is, men's professed interest increases once they recognize, albeit in a delayed manner, women's increased interest.

Men's delayed reaction to women's flirting might exist for at least two reasons. First, if a man begins to focus on a particular woman, he is forfeiting energies that he could invest in other potential mates. Hence, he needs some assurance that the woman is in fact interested in him before attending to her. Second, and related, given that women are the more selective sex, it is possible that she is trying to decide between several alternatives, and may pass him by in favor of an alternative. Therefore, a delay in responding to women's advances may have adaptive value for men.

The possibility that men are accurate in estimating women's sexual interest, at least within initial flirting situations, conflicts with Error Management Theory (EMT; Haselton & Buss, 2000). A key element of EMT is that, over the course of natural selection, men have developed a bias towards overestimating women's sexual interest in order to reduce the likelihood of a missed sexual opportunity. According to EMT, any individual will be biased to making either false-positive (making a response without the expected consequence) or false-negative (making no response thus foregoing the subsequent consequence) judgments depending on which decision would be least aversive. We propose men are not biased towards making false-positive judgments because the errors have negative repercussions such as misallocated resources and mating effort.

Indeed, Grammer et al. (2000) found that men's self-reported sexual interest significantly correlates with that of women. Men did not show interest in women who

rejected their advances. In contrast, only women's affirmative (or reinforcing) behaviors such as smiling, preening, gazing and so on, correlated with men's professed interest levels. In other words, as a woman nonverbally displays cues of positive interest in a man, his interest in her increases.

One noteworthy study on the topic of women's flirting behavior was conducted by Moore (1985). She observed and described 52 nonverbal courtship behaviors exhibited by women in flirting interactions, such that the behaviors ranged from the discerningly subtle to the candidly overt. She observed over 200 women at a singles' bar, a university snack bar, a university library and at university Women's Center meetings. Her results showed that women exhibit a higher frequency of nonverbal displays directed at men than vice versa, and women using these displays were also most likely to be approached by a man regardless of the context.

Previously, researchers have proposed that women's courtship behaviors are often misinterpreted by men, such that men have problems differentiating between women's friendly versus flirting behaviors (Shortland & Craig, 1988). In fact, prior research has shown men perceive women's behaviors in cross-sex interactions as mostly sexual in nature, regardless of the context of the interaction (Abbey, 1982; Abbey & Melby, 1986). Given this finding, it has been suggested that men tend to view flirting as an invitation for a sexual encounter significantly more often than do women (Henningson, 2004). Henningson (2004) states that among the variety of possible motivators behind flirting, none is perhaps as consistently misinterpreted as those implying a sexual encounter. Though sexual intent is not always a necessary component for an interaction to involve flirting, men frequently associate flirting behavior with sexual intent (Greer & Buss, 1994). Women, on the other hand, attribute flirting more to relational motivators (e.g., to maintain or improve one's social relationships with others; Henningson, 2004) and may even engage in "practice" flirting because it is enjoyable and enhances flirting skills (Moore, 1985).

The reviewed research clearly indicates the potential for miscommunication between women and men in the display of nonverbal cues of sexual interest. We do not doubt the potential for miscommunication. However, we question the proposal based on EMT that men generally overestimate women's sexual interest. If EMT were correct, it would mean that men erroneously invest their time and efforts, on a continual basis, in pursuing potential mates who are likely uninterested in them. This misallocation of mating effort could be highly detrimental, as it would prohibit men from pursuing potential mates who are actually sexually interested. Thus, we propose that EMT is flawed, and instead, it is adaptive for men to have some knowledge of women's sexual interest and invest themselves accordingly. Specifically, we hypothesize that men are aware of women's nonverbal cues of sexual interest.

One novelty about the current study is that it rests upon observational techniques common to human ethology. Past research has often relied on people's self-reported reasons for why and how they flirt (Abrahams, 1994; Eglund, Spitzberg & Zormeier, 1996; Grammer, Honda, Juette, & Schmitt, 1999). Self-report studies have been gaining acceptance in the academic community due to improved statistical methodology and an ever-increasing assortment of data that can be gathered (Nadalín, Bentvelsen & Kreiger, 2004; Sneed, Chin, Rotheram-Borus, Milburn et al., 2001). However, as pointed out by Huizinga and Elliott (1986), there are shortcom-

ings of self-report data with respect to validity, internal inconsistencies and the implementation of *ad hoc* analyses. Moreover, personal biases and privacy issues may lead certain individuals to misrepresent their intentionality on a self-report questionnaire. Naturalistic observation overcomes these limitations, as individuals are not reflecting on their own behavior, but instead, an outside observer documents their overt actions. In the current study, we employ this approach to record which flirting behaviors men believe will lead to sexual encounters.

## STUDY 1: METHODS

### Participants

A total of 15 males (age  $M = 24.73$  years,  $SD = 3.21$ ) were asked to participate. They were individuals who were standing or walking outside a large shopping mall in Halifax, Nova Scotia. There were no specific criteria for selection of participants other than affirming that they were over 18 years of age.

### Procedure

In the current study, an ethogram (Appendix A) based on Moore (1985) was compiled to determine which flirting behaviors to observe, and it was from this list that men selected six. It should be noted that the selected behavioral units do not involve any form of interpersonal bodily contact, as actions such as kissing, holding hands and prolonged hug can be much more easily interpreted as indicators of sexual interest. We were specifically seeking men's accuracy in judging women's more subtle, nonverbal cues of sexual interest.

The experimenter waited outside a large shopping mall and approached men who were alone. They were asked if they would complete a very short survey about female flirting behaviors. If they said yes, they were told, "As you can see from this list, these are a variety of behaviors women show while flirting. Now my question is *which* of these three behaviors do you think would mean that she is *most* interested in having sex?" The participants selected the behaviors and their responses were promptly recorded. Then they were asked, "Now similarly, which three behaviors on this list would make you think she has the *least* interest in having sex?" Again, their responses were recorded, as was their age, and they were thanked for their time.

## RESULTS

The three behaviors voted most indicative of sexual intent included *fixate glance* ( $n = 6$  out of  $N = 15$  participants selected this behavior), *whispering* ( $n = 9$ ) and *neck presentation* ( $n = 14$ ) behaviors. The three behaviors considered least indicative of sexual intent were *group-encompassing glance* ( $n = 7$ ), *head raise* ( $n = 4$ ) and *yawning* ( $n = 15$ ). These six behaviors were observed in the next stage of the study.

## STUDY 2: METHODS

### Participants

A sample of 50 women from two nightclubs in Halifax was selected. The woman either was not accompanied by a man when she arrived at the club or, if she had entered the club with a man, she did not leave with him. Women who did not meet these criteria were not considered for the study. The samples from both clubs consisted primarily of Caucasian women. All participants were believed to range between 19-35 years of age, an assumption based on the minimum age requirement for entering a nightclub in Halifax and inter-observer agreement.

### Procedure

The researcher and a confederate went to two popular downtown nightclubs to carry out observations of the six behaviors as exhibited in a naturalistic environment. At each club, they sat at a table inside the bar recording the behaviors as they occurred. Each observational period commenced upon the initiation of interactions by approaching males and lasted for eight minutes. At the end of each observational period, photographs of the women and men were discreetly taken by the researchers with a cellular telephone and emailed to an observer waiting outside (note this person was blind to the purpose of the research). The observer's task was to look for the women as they left the bar and record whether they were leaving with the men from the photographs. If both individuals were seen leaving the establishment together, a strong possibility for a sexual encounter was assumed; however, if they left separately, then a weak possibility for a sexual encounter was assumed.

## RESULTS

Among the 50 women observed, 15 were seen leaving with the men who approached them. Out of the remaining 35 women, 24 were seen leaving with the female friends they arrived with, seven were escorted out of the clubs for disruptive behavior, three were intoxicated to the extent that they had to be removed from the establishment, and one engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors. All of these 35 women were categorized as indicating a weak possibility of sexual encounter.

We recorded how many times the women engaged in the six behaviors, during the eight-minute focal point sampling period. We then created a repeated-measure Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) model, with the independent variable being whether the woman left or did not leave with the man with whom she had been flirting, which was interpreted as indicating a high or low probability of a sexual encounter, respectively. The ANOVA model yielded significant differences for all six of the behaviors; see Table 1 for descriptive statistics. Women who left with the man performed significantly more of the fixate glance,  $F(1,144) = 71.62, p < 0.01$ ; neck presentation,  $F(1,144) = 21.14, p < 0.01$ ; and whispering,  $F(1,144) = 32.40, p < 0.01$ . Those who did not leave with the man with whom they had been interacting

displayed more of the group encompassing glance,  $F(1,144) = 42.33, p < 0.01$ ; head raise,  $F(1,144) = 45.82, p < 0.01$ ; and yawning,  $F(1,144) = 24.22, p < 0.01$ .

**Table 1. Means and standard deviations for the six behaviors corresponding to the women's high versus low sexual interest for the eight-minute observation**

Behavior	High sexual interest		Low sexual interest	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Fixate glance	2.47	.74	.46	.61
Neck presentation	1.27	.70	.51	.38
Whispering	1.33	.62	.17	.31
Group encompassing glance	.60	.63	2.49	1.04
Head raise	.27	.46	2.17	1.04
Yawning	.46	.35	1.37	.94

## DISCUSSION

In the current study, we examined the proposal of past researchers' (e.g., Shortland & Craig, 1988; Henningson, 2004) that men are unable to accurately decipher women's nonverbal cues of sexual interest. We hypothesized that men are able to determine women's sexual interest, at least within nightclub settings, so that they do not wrongly invest time and energy pursuing uninterested mates. The results of the present study support our hypothesis.

Men in phase one selected three behaviors as being strongly indicative of women's sexual interest, and these behaviors were exhibited by all women who left with the man with whom they had been interacting. The men in phase one were also able to correctly identify three nonverbal cues that indicated a lack of sexual interest, as women who displayed these behaviors typically did not leave with the man with whom they had been interacting. Although the men from phase one can not be deemed representative of the entire male population, the findings clearly suggest that men are able to perceive women's nonverbal cues of sexual interest.

Error management theory (EMT) leads to the prediction that men are prone to making sexual advances, even in contexts in which those advances may not be reciprocated. We did observe that approximately a third of the men continued to flirt with women who were exhibiting behaviors indicative of sexual uninterest. This result leads to the issue of why men who can accurately perceive sexual cues continue to pursue mates who are uninterested. It would be erroneous to *knowingly* expend

effort in the pursuit of an unachievable goal, yet that appears to be how men are behaving in this context.

Similar to any observational research, there are several methodological issues that we could not control for in the present study. We cannot assume with certainty that those leaving with a man were intending to engage in a sexual encounter. As well, we only engaged in focal point sampling for a short period of time, and it is possible that not all the situations we observed represented initial contact. Although we used our best judgment, we cannot confirm that the couple were actually interacting for the possibility of a sexual encounter; some of them could have been friends, or in an existing relationship with each other. The sample size, particularly of phase one could have been larger and included a wider range of men than simply those conveniently questioned outside a shopping mall. Finally, we only documented whether the women exhibited behaviors already present on our list; supplementary flirting behaviors, which may have acted as antecedents to the described behaviors, were not recorded.

There are exciting implications of the present study for human courtship research, as we showed that men may be able to accurately determine women's sexual interest within a dating context. In the future, it could be useful to expand the ethogram to include more flirting behaviors. Future researchers could document the 'courtship dance;' that is, what are men's responses to each of the nonverbal cues displayed by women? Finally, it may be informative to measure factors such as physical attractiveness and type of attire in approaching males, both of which may significantly affect a woman's mate preference (Stains & Bechtel, 2000).

## REFERENCES

- Abrahams, M. F. (1994). Perceiving flirtatious communication: An exploration of the perceptual dimensions underlying judgments of flirtatiousness. *Journal of Sex Research, 31*, 282–292.
- Abbey, A. (1982). Sex differences in attributions for friendly behavior: Do males misperceive females' friendliness? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 42*(1), 830–838
- Abbey, A. & Melby, C. (1986). The effects of nonverbal cues on gender differences in perceptions of sexual intent. *Sex Roles, 5*, 283–298.
- Buss, D. M., & Schmitt, D. P. (1993). Sexual strategies theory: An evolutionary perspective on human mating. *Psychological Review, 10*(2), 204–232.
- Egland, K. L., Spitzberg, B. H., & Zormeier, M. M. (1996). Flirtation and conversational competence in cross-sex platonic and romantic relationships. *Communication Research, 9*, 105–117.
- Grammer, K., Honda, M., Juette, A., & Schmitt, A. (1999). Fuzziness of nonverbal courtship communication unblurred by motion energy detection. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 77*, 487–508.

- Grammer, K., Kruck, K., Juette, A., & Fink, B. (2000). Non-verbal behavior as courtship signals: the role of control and choice in selecting partners. *Evolution and Human Behavior*, 21(6), 371-390.
- Greer, A. E., & Buss, D. M. (1994). Tactics for promoting sexual encounters. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 31(3), 185-201.
- Haselton, M. G. & Buss, D. M. (2000). Error management theory: a new perspective on biases in cross-sex mind reading. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(1), 81-91.
- Henningson, D. D. (2004). Flirting with meaning: An examination of miscommunication in flirting interactions. *Sex Roles*, 50(7/8), 481-489.
- Huizinga, D. & Elliott, D.S. (1986). Reassessing the reliability and validity of self-report delinquency measures. *Journal of Quantitative Criminology*, 2(4), 293-327.
- Moore, M. M. (1985). Nonverbal courtship patterns in women: Context and consequences. *Ethology and Sociobiology*, 6(4), 237-247.
- Nadalin, V., Bentvelsen, K. & Kreiger N. (2004). Reliability of self-reports: data from the Canadian Multi-Centre Osteoporosis Study. *Chronic Diseases in Canada*, 25(2), 28-31.
- Philips, A. (1996). *On flirting*. Boston, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shortland, R. L. & Craig, J. M. (1988). Can men and women differentiate between friendly and sexually interested behavior. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 51(1), 66-73.
- Sneed, C. D., Chin, D., Rotheram-Borus, M. J., Milburn, N. G., Murphy D. A., Corby, N. & Fahey, J. (2001). Test-retest reliability for self reports of sexual behavior among Thai and Korean respondents. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 13(4), 302-310.
- Stains, L. R., & Bechtel, S. (2000). *What women want: What every man needs to know about sex, romance, passion*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

\*\*Received April 20, 2010; Revision received August 11, 2010; Accepted August 29, 2010\*\*



**Appendix A. Ethogram of Women's Nonverbal Behaviors**

<b>Unit of Behavior</b>	<b>Description</b>
Eyebrow flash	Raising of one/both eyebrows while engaged in conversation
Fixate glance	Prolonged eye contact between two individuals for any period exceeding 10 seconds.
Hair flip	Hair is tossed gently on one side of the head
Head raise	Head tilts slightly back so as to look around/behind the individual she is interacting with
Head nod	Head moves in an up-down motion while in conversation
Laugh	Audible, vocal expulsion of air that can range from a loud burst of sound to a series of quiet chuckles; usually accompanied by characteristic facial and bodily movements
Lip lick	Moistening of either the upper and/or the lower lip with one's tongue
Neck presentation	Head is tilted at an angle of approximately 45 degrees to one side while usually (though not always) stroking the bared side of one's neck
Pout	Pursing of the bottom lip with the top lip while engaging in eye contact
Room encompassing glance	Head is oriented towards a body of people for a period exceeding five seconds while engaged in conversation with someone
Short darting glance	Eye contact between two individuals lasting fewer than 5 seconds
Smile	Upturning of corners of the mouth, usually indicating pleasure
Whisper	Movement of one's mouth close to either of another's ears (a distance of four inches or less) presumably uttering vocalizations
Yawn	A prolonged, deep inhalation and sighing or heavy exhalation