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College Student Relationships:

Anxiety and Nonverbal Cues

## **Abstract**

The number of college students feeling overwhelmed by anxiety is increasing. Anxiety influences a person's own thoughts and behaviors, but also how they interpret the actions of others. Studies have shown that in interpersonal relationships, romantic in particular, non-verbal behaviors/cues have been turning points in those relationships. This study aims to examine how anxiety manifests in nonverbal communication and determine if those behaviors and subsequent interpretations affect the quality of a romantic relationship between college students. College student couples, half with one partner having anxiety and half where neither partner has anxiety, and at various stages in their relationships will be studied. The intention is to use the findings from the data analysis and expand existing therapeutic interventions geared towards improving relationship quality between young adults.

## **Introduction**

College is a time for new experiences, one of which being your first serious relationship. College can also be a high-stress, fast-paced environment that explains why 63% of college students suffer from anxiety (LeBlanc et al., 2019). Therefore, this study asks, in romantic relationships between college students, how does anxiety manifest in nonverbal communication, and does it affect the quality of the relationship? To find out, we need to compare couples where one partner has social anxiety to couples without and ask them to describe prominent nonverbal events and the resulting impact the event had on the quality of their relationship at that time. Once we do that, future studies can investigate therapeutic measures that can aid in development of healthier young adult relationships.

## **Background and Related Work**

As a psychology major, I tend to gravitate towards the neuroscience, social, and developmental concentrations. The variety of dynamics that exist in romantic relationships and how they can be influenced, especially in young adults, are particularly fascinating. When I first began my research, I aimed to acquire a layout of the basic dimensions of love and relationships while pinpointing how people evaluate the state of their relationship (Nicholson 2017). In his work *Making Sense of Love and Romantic Relationships*, Dr. Nicholson addresses two different types of love, passionate love and companionate love, and provides a contrast between the two in terms of the level of emotion, passion, and trust. He further discusses the concepts of capacity and willingness that each person evaluates about a prospective partner when determining the practicality of the relationship. Yet, what really stood out was when he mentioned nonverbal interactions contribute to building emotional connections, and how that emotional connection is maintained during different stages of the relationship (Nicholson 2017).

From there, I found a research paper dedicated to supporting the hypothesis that nonverbal cues are turning points in relationships (Duncan-Morgan et al., 2013). For example, physical touch such as hugs and kisses, physical space such as living apart versus living together, as well as environment and time all contribute to turning points in relationships. However, in this study, the researchers are examining a variety of relationships (romantic, platonic, family, etc) and asking what specific non-verbal cues act as turning points instead of just limiting themselves to the aforementioned four (Duncan-Morgan et al., 2013). Ultimately, they concluded touch was usually associated with more positive interpretations, voice with more negative interpretations, and facial expression with more neutral interpretations.

This proposal aims to develop a study that hones in more on nonverbal expression in romantic relationships. *The Difference in Nonverbal Behaviors and How It Changes In Different Stages of A Relationship* publication examined different kinds of nonverbal behaviors including touch, eye behavior, tone of voice, etc. at 5 different relationship stages: casual dating, exclusively dating, long-term relationship, living together in a long term relationship, and marriage (Prinsen et al., 2009). In the results, the researchers concluded there was a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) regarding specific

non-verbal behaviors between men and women (Prinsen et al., 2009). On average, men answered that nonverbal communication was important however more women on average rated questions related to nonverbal behavior with a higher score. It was also determined that casual daters rated nonverbal behavior lower in their relationship in comparison with other stages of relationships (Prinsen et al., 2009).

After understanding the intersection between nonverbal communication and relationships, factors that may hinder/influence nonverbal communication needed to be analyzed. I chose a mental health perspective, initially focusing on depression and anxiety. Depression focuses primarily on how depression can manifest into self-doubt, criticism, and unrealistic expectations when it comes to relationships (Tartakovsky 2018). While this was helpful, the anxiety research was more enticing because I myself fall under the “63% of college students have been overwhelmed with anxiety” statistic reported by the National College Health Assessment (LeBlanc et al., 2019). Since anxiety plays a prevalent role in the lives of many college students, several studies were located that analyzed the effects of anxiety in romantic relationships. While only choosing to sample married/cohabitating couples at Temple University, a group of researchers concluded that there is a definite link between anxiety disorders and relationship distress (Zaider et al., 2010). Furthermore, the results were interconnected between partners in that when the wife was experiencing high anxiety, the husband tended to report lower relationship quality for that day (Zaider et al., 2010).

This proposal outlines a study that expands on the works above but focuses on the interconnections between anxiety and nonverbal behavior over a broad scope of relationship statuses in a college student sample.

## **Methods**

Prior to beginning any research, I would first write a proposal to submit for approval from the Institutional Review Board since my study will utilize human sample groups. My research will require 100 LMU student couples ages 18-26, 200 total participants. I will focus specifically on a racially

diverse sample of heterosexual couples in order to keep the distribution between males and females equal, unlike skewed sample in (Cuming et al., 2009). Moreover, a majority of the research in this area has been using heterosexual couples; therefore, in order to keep the our findings consistent with published research, we will also be sampling heterosexual couples for this study. 5 stages of relationships will be analyzed: casual dating, exclusively dating, long-term relationship, living together in a long term relationship, and marriage (Prinsen et al., 2009). 20 couples from each stage will be sampled compared using two groups: Group A (quasi-experimental): one partner has been diagnosed with anxiety (Zaider et al., 2010); Group B (control): neither partner has been diagnosed with anxiety. While (Zaider et al., 2010) study only analyzed couples where the female partner has anxiety, I would like to sample 5 Group A couples where the males have anxiety and 5 Group A couples where the females have anxiety to obtain a better sense of gender effects.

The bulk of my research will be dependent on a daily diary study. I will have each couple journal individually for 14 continuous days about anything regarding their relationships (Zaider et al., 2010): what they did together, how they felt about the quality of their relationship on certain days, any nonverbal factors that may have contributed to their interpretations, etc. The daily diary study will be on an event-based schedule (participants write when the event/behavior/experience occurs) because not only does it allow generalization to the college student population, but it removes any expectancy effects that accompany a set journaling time (Lischetzke 2014). Each day, only the partners with anxiety will complete a Couples Interaction Questionnaire (CIQ) which measures different contributing factors to anxiety. In addition, every participant will complete a daily electronic form where they will self-report nonverbal behaviors relating to their own expression as well as their partner's. This form will include a section where they can list the specific nonverbal cues and then interpret them in the context of their relationship. Responses will include written interpretations as well as a rating of a positive or negative effect (scale of 1-5) the nonverbal cue had on their relationship with the other person that day (Duncan-Morgan et al, 2013). The scores from this CIQ and this electronic form will then be coded and undergo statistical analysis ( Zaider et al., 2010).

After the 14 days, I will collect the journals, CIQs, and electronic forms and conduct a post-study debrief with the participants to discuss any findings and gain any necessary clarification. From there, I will transition into the data interpretation portion. I along with 3 research assistants will code all of these scores and determine that the most common nonverbal cues (i.e. eye behavior, facial expression, touch, and use of personal space) noted by the sample group and further analyze the data by running an independent samples t-test (Duncan-Morgan et al, 2013). A key point I will be looking for is how each person interprets the nonverbal cues of their partner because part of how they interpret or overanalyze will affect their response in a relationship.

### **Expected Results**

At the end of this study, I plan to publish a paper of my findings. I will showcase my statistical analysis and their results and interpret the significance of nonverbal communication in relation to anxiety and relationship quality. Furthermore, I will compile the most commonly observed nonverbal cues which will hopefully raise further research inquiries I or other researchers may pursue later on.

### **Conclusion**

In this research study, I hope to be granted the opportunity to study how anxiety manifests in nonverbal communication and analyze its effect on the quality of romantic relationships in college student couples. Overall, I hope to gain a deeper understanding about the mechanics as to how college-aged students with anxiety non-verbally behave the way they do in relationships. Future researchers may then use these findings to propose changes to existing therapeutic interventions that may be more effective in helping people build more stable relationships. Plus, based on the data and correlations drawn from this study, I hope to spark further research inquiries about other components that may factor into anxiety-related non-verbal cues such as gender effects and the length of relationship.

## References

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## Budget

1. Participant Compensation
  - a. \$200/participant; 200 participants
  - b. Total: \$40,000
2. SPSS license fee
  - a. \$99/month; 2 month access
  - b. Total: \$198
3. Notebooks for Daily Diary Study
  - a. \$10 per notebook; 200 notebooks
  - b. Total: \$2000
4. Research Assistants for Data Analysis
  - a. 3 research assistants
    - i. \$16/hr per assistant; 5 hrs/assistant
    - ii. Total: \$240
5. Head Researcher [Elqaq] Compensation
  - a. IRB proposal
    - i. 5 hours to write; \$16/hr
    - ii. Total: \$80
  - b. Interview and Select Participants
    - i. \$16/hrs; 15 hours
    - ii. Total: \$240
  - c. Data Analysis
    - i. 5 hours; \$16/hr
    - ii. Total: \$80
  - d. Office Hour availability during 14-Day period
    - i. 2 hrs/day; 14 days; \$16/hr
    - ii. Total: \$448
  - e. Final Research Paper
    - i. 15 hours; \$16/hr
    - ii. Total: \$240

**Total: \$43,526**



## Timeline

