

**CROSS AND MULTICULTURAL
UNDERSTANDING**

PBI

NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION

SESSION 7

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This hypothetical (and perhaps exaggerated) episode was intended to demonstrate a few of the many and subtle ways nonverbal communication affects your life. In our little drama it was assumed, and rightly so, that the interviewer would have positive responses to your nonverbal “messages” of punctuality, grooming, apparel, expression, handshake, odor, and the like. But would these same behaviors be as successful if you were applying for a position in another country? The answer is no. Before we explain our negative response, however, we ask you to reflect on a few more nonverbal examples.

Early in the Iraq conflict, as American troops drove through the streets of Baghdad, they believed they were being greeted by throngs of people who were happy to see them. They observed hundreds of children lining the streets giving them the “thumbs-up” sign. However, as Woodward points out, the Americans “did not realize that in Iraq the thumbs-up sign traditionally was the equivalent of the American middle-finger salute.”¹ That same middle finger used in Dubai would get you deported. Misinterpreting the nonverbal actions of people of different cultures is commonplace. In Mexico it is not unusual to see both men and women greet each other by hugging in public. Arab men often greet by kissing on both cheeks. In Japan men and women greet by exchanging bows. Recall that you greeted the interviewer with a simple handshake. In Thailand, to signal another person to come near, one wags their fingers back and forth with the palm down. The interviewer sent you a beckoning message with her palm facing up. In Vietnam that same motion is reserved for someone attempting to summon a dog. In Italy, and in various Arab countries, it is not uncommon for people to

be thirty minutes tardy for an appointment. And there you were making sure you were on time for your interview!

All of the examples offered in the last few paragraphs were presented for two reasons. First, we hoped to arouse your interest in the subject of nonverbal communication. Second, we wanted to demonstrate that although much of nonverbal communication is universal, many nonverbal actions are shaped by culture. What might be a clear “message” in one culture could well produce confusion in another. This potential for misinterpretation is at the core of this chapter.

To appreciate fully the significance of nonverbal communication to human interaction, reflect for a moment on the countless times, besides employment interviews, that you send and receive nonverbal messages. Barnlund highlights some of those occasions:

Many, and sometimes most, of the critical meanings generated in human encounters are elicited by touch, glance, vocal nuance, gestures, or facial expression with or without the aid of words. From the moment of recognition until the moment of separation, people observe each other with all their senses, hearing pause and intonation, attending to dress and carriage, observing glance and facial tension, as well as noting word choice and syntax. Every harmony or disharmony of signals guides the interpretation of passing mood or enduring attribute. Out of the evaluation of kinetic, vocal, and verbal cues, decisions are made to argue or agree, to laugh or blush, to relax or resist, or to continue or cut off conversation.

THE FUNCTIONS OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Not only is nonverbal communication omnipresent and an essential ingredient in human interaction, it also occurs for specific reasons. Examining a few of those reasons will illustrate why any study of intercultural interaction must include information about nonverbal communication.

EXPRESSING INTERNAL STATES

Nonverbal communication is important because people use this message system to express ideas, attitudes, feelings, and emotions. As Guerrero and Floyd point out, "Nonverbal communication is the predominant means of conveying meaning from person to person."

Consciously and unconsciously, intentionally and unintentionally, people make important judgments concerning your internal state by the nonverbal messages you generate. If you see someone with a clenched fist and an inhospitable expression, you do not need words to tell you that the person is not happy. If you hear someone's voice quaver and witness their hands tremble, you may infer that the person is fearful or anxious, despite what might be said. If someone smiles as you approach them, you feel far more at ease than if they were scowling.

Be it fear, joy, anger, or sadness, your posture, face, and eyes can convey your feelings without you ever uttering a word. For this reason most people rely heavily on what they perceive through their eyes. In fact, research indicates that you will usually believe nonverbal messages instead of verbal messages when the two contradict .

You can even appraise the quality of your relationships according to the interpretations assigned to nonverbal messages. From the amount of touching that takes place, to the tone of voice being used, to the distance between you and your partner, you can gather clues to the closeness of your relationship. The first time you move from holding hands with your partner to touching his or her face, you are sending a message, and that message takes on added significance if your touch is returned. In short, “people use nonverbal cues to define the social and emotional nature of their relationships and interactions.

CREATING IDENTITY

Nonverbal communication is important in human interaction because it is partially responsible for establishing identity. The nonverbal inferences people use to construct their identities are drawn from a variety of messages. From personal experience you know how judgments are often made about another person based on such things as skin color, use of makeup, facial expression, manner of dress, accent, jewelry, and even the type of handshake offered. This use of nonverbal symbols to express a person’s identity is universal, as expressed in the following quote about tattoos.

REGULATING INTERACTION

Nonverbal actions offer clues regarding how people navigate conversation. In a classroom you might raise your hand to signal that you

want to talk. In other situations you could lean forward, point a finger, pause, or change the direction of your gaze as a way of altering the conversation. These and other actions communicate to your partner “when to begin a conversation, whose turn it is to speak, how to get a chance to speak, how to signal others to talk more, and how to end a conversation.”

REPEATING THE MESSAGE

A common function of nonverbal communication is that it can be used for repetition. If someone is offering what you consider to be a substandard plan, you can move your head from side to side at the same time you utter the word “no.” While pointing in a certain direction you can say to the other person, “The computer lab’s over there.” In both of these examples the gestures and the words you use have similar meanings and reinforce one another.

SUBSTITUTING FOR WORDS

Nonverbal messages can be used as substitutes for words. For example, there are many occasions when someone who is carrying bad news will end up signaling their sorrow without uttering a sound. Or think of all the occasions when you approach a very special friend with a large smile and open arms. A teacher will often place an index finger to the lips as an alternative to saying, “Please be quiet.” In each of these examples an action is replacing a verbal utterance and that action becomes the language. To help you understand the language of nonverbal communication, and its role in intercultural communication, we will (1) define nonverbal communication,

(2) offer some guidelines for studying nonverbal communication, (3) link nonverbal communication to culture, (4) discuss the major classifications of nonverbal messages, and (5) offer some advice on how to better employ nonverbal communication within the intercultural context.

DEFINING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Because the central concern of this chapter is to examine how and why people communicate nonverbally, we begin with a definition of nonverbal communication. A single definition, like our definitions of “culture” and “communication”, is hard to pin down. For example, a common and very general definition of nonverbal communication is: “Nonverbal behavior refers to actions as distinct from speech.” Because this definition is so broad as to include nearly every aspect of non-linguistic communication, we offer a slightly different view of nonverbal communication that is consistent with current thinking in the field and also reflects the cultural orientation of this book. We propose that nonverbal communication involves all those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment, and that have potential message value for the source and/or receiver. It is not by chance that our definition is somewhat lengthy. We wanted to offer a definition that would not only establish the boundaries of nonverbal communication, but would also reflect how the process actually functions. Part of that functioning involves (1) intentional and unintentional messages, and (2) the reciprocal relationship between verbal and nonverbal messages.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION CAN BE AMBIGUOUS

Part of the ambiguity associated with nonverbal messages is contextual, which can be seen if someone brushes against you in an elevator: Was it merely an accident, or was it an opportunistic sexual act? As Osborn and Motley tell us, “Meanings and interpretations of nonverbal behaviors often are on very shaky ground.” You saw that “shaky ground” when people, both in and out of the media, interpreted a fist bump exchanged by President Barack Obama and his wife Michelle as a “terrorist greeting” instead of a simple sign of camaraderie between husband and wife. Our intention is to remind you that “different situations or environments produce different nonverbal messages.”

MULTIPLE FACTORS INFLUENCE NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Nonverbal communication, like much of your behavior, is produced by a host of variables, and culture is but one of them. Nonverbal interactions are influenced by factors such as “cultural background, socioeconomic background, education, gender, age, personal preferences and idiosyncrasies.” Simply stated, not everyone in a particular culture engages in the same nonverbal actions, so interpretations of nonverbal behaviors must be carefully evaluated before generalizations can be made.

THE STUDY OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION INCLUDES CULTURAL UNIVERSALS

Although the bulk of this chapter will focus on nonverbal differences across cultures, we need to point out that there are many similarities in how cultures employ this communication system. Intercultural parallels have been at the core of a lingering academic debate that goes back to the work of Charles Darwin. While much of the debate deals with facial expressions, the arguments touch all dimensions of nonverbal communication. Here lies the question: Is there a universal language of facial expressions? One position holds that anatomically similar expressions may occur in everyone, but the meanings people attach to them differ from culture to culture. The majority opinion among scholars is that there are universal facial expressions for which people have similar meanings. Ekman, the driving force behind this position, advances the following point of view: "The subtle creases of a grimace tell the same story around the world, to preliterate New Guinea tribesmen, to Japanese and American college students alike. As noted, this was also Darwin's thesis but now here's hard evidence that culture does not control the face." Ekman and others present the theory that there is "a basic set of at least six facial expressions that are innate, universal, and carry the same basic meaning throughout the world." The six pan-cultural and universal emotions conveyed by facial expressions are happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, and surprise. Despite the biologically based nature of facial expressions, there seem to be clear cultural expectations and norms that often dictate when, where, how, and to

whom facial expressions are displayed. This means that different cultures construct their own rules for what are appropriate facial expressions, as well as what aspects of that behavior should be attended to.

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND CULTURE

We have just finished discussing how culture is but one of the dynamics that influence the manner in which people send and receive nonverbal messages. However, while granting the assorted causes behind human behavior, we nevertheless advocate that nonverbal communication mirrors the learned behaviors imbedded in a culture. Speaking of this link, Wood writes, "Most nonverbal communication isn't instinctual, but is learned in the process of socialization." Rosenblatt confirms this same idea by noting, "What emotions are felt, how they are expressed, and how they are understood are matters of culture."

What is key in Rosenblatt's sentence is that your culture has taught you what nonverbal actions to display (crying or laughing), the meaning of those actions (sadness or happiness), and the contextual backdrop of those actions (funeral or wedding). Our thesis should be clear: Nonverbal communication "plays a crucial and necessary part in communicative interactions between people from different cultures." As a student of intercultural communication, learning about the connection between culture and nonverbal behavior will help to improve the manner in which you engage in intercultural interactions. Hall underscores the need to learn about nonverbal behaviors in the following:

I remain convinced that much of our difficulty with people in other countries stems from the fact that so little is known about cross-cultural communication.... Formal training in the language, history, government, and customs is only a first step. Of equal importance is an introduction to the nonverbal language of the country. Most Americans are only dimly aware of this silent language, even though they use it every day.

By understanding cultural differences in nonverbal behavior you will also be able to gather clues about underlying attitudes and values being expressed by your communication partner. How far people stand from each other during normal conversation can offer clues to their views on privacy. Bowing tells you that a culture values formality, rank, and status. It is not by chance that Hindus greet each other by placing their palms together in front of themselves while tilting their heads slightly downward. This salutation reflects their belief that the deity exists in everyone.

SPACE AND DISTANCE

The variation in distance between you and the people with whom you interact is as much a part of the communication experience as the words being exchanged.

PERSONAL SPACE

The significance of personal space is highlighted by Hall and Hall:

Each person has around him an invisible bubble of space which expands and contracts depending on his relationship to those around him, his emotional state,

his cultural background, and the activity he is performing. Few people are allowed to penetrate this bit of mobile territory, and then only for short periods of time.

Your personal space is that area you occupy and call your own. As the owner of this area, you usually decide who may enter and who may not. When your space is invaded, you react in a variety of ways. You may retreat, stand your ground, or sometimes even react violently. Use of personal space is learned on both the conscious and unconscious levels. Hall classified how personal space was used in the United States by proposing the following four categories that demonstrate how space can communicate.

1. Intimate distance (actual contact to 18 inches) is normally reserved for very personal relationships. You can reach out and touch the person at this distance. Because of the closeness of the participants, voices are usually in the form of a whisper.
2. In personal distance (18 inches to 4 feet) there is little chance of physical contact, and you can speak in a normal voice. This is distance reserved for family and close friends.
3. Social distance (4 to 12 feet) is the distance at which most members of the dominant culture conduct business and take part in social gatherings.
4. Public distance is usually used in public presentations and can vary from relatively close to very far.

As with most forms of communication, space is associated with cultural values. A good example of the link between the use of space and culture can be seen in the values of individualism and collectivism. Cultures that stress individualism and privacy (England, United States, Sweden, Germany, and Australia) generally demand more space than do collective

cultures. According to Triandis, Arabs, Latin Americans, and U.S. Hispanics fall into this collective category, where people are more interdependent and “the members work, play, live and sleep in close proximity to one another.” With regard to Arabs, Ruch writes, “Typical Arab conversations are at close range. Closeness cannot be avoided.” This closeness is even reflected when people stand in line. When waiting, “Egyptians do not stand in neat lines ... everyone pushes their way toward the front.”

As we have noted elsewhere, a person’s use of space is directly linked to their value system and culture. In some Asian cultures students do not sit close to their teachers or stand near their superiors; the extended distance demonstrates deference and esteem. In Germany personal space is sacred. For Germans “this distancing is a protective barrier and psychological symbol that operates in a manner similar to that of the home.” You find the opposite view toward space in Brazil where “physical contact, closeness, and human warmth,” are important, hence, conversation takes place with less room between participants.

SEATING

Like so many features of nonverbal communication, seating arrangements send both inconspicuous and obvious messages. The sending of a very subtle message could be witnessed at an important diplomatic meeting between the Turkish ambassador and his counterpart from Israel. The Turkish representative was extremely distressed that he was asked to sit on a sofa that was lower than the one occupied by the Israeli officials. His anger was so intense that he refused to allow the media

to take a picture of the meeting since he felt it humiliated him and his country. This real-life example vividly demonstrates that seating arrangements can be a powerful form of nonverbal communication. Notice that when you are a member of a group in the United States, people tend to talk with those opposite them rather than those seated beside them. This same pattern controls how the group might designate their leader. In most instances, the person sitting at the head of the table is the leader.

When we turn to China we witness a very different orientation toward seating arrangements. Because of their Confucian background, China is a culture that respects proper etiquette and ritual. Therefore, seating arrangements are frequently dictated by cultural and historical norms, particularly at formal events such as banquets, and diplomatic and business meetings. At banquets, which are very common in China, seating arrangements place the honored person (often decided by seniority and age) facing east or facing the entrance to the hall. The higher a person's status, the closer they sit to the person of honor. At business meetings the Chinese experience alienation and uneasiness when they face someone directly or sit opposite them at a desk or table. If you view a news story about American diplomats meeting with government officials from China, you might observe that the meeting is taking place with people sitting side by side—frequently on couches. In Korea seating arrangements reflect status and role distinctions. In a car, office, or home, the seat on the right is considered to be the place of honor. For the Japanese, much like the Chinese, seating at any formal event is determined based on hierarchy. When conducting business or diplomatic negotiations, the Japanese will arrange themselves

with the most senior person sitting in the middle and those next highest in rank sitting to the left and right of this senior position. Low-ranking members will sit away from the table, behind the other representatives.

FURNITURE ARRANGEMENT

The way people arrange furniture (chairs, tables, desks, etc.) also communicates. The importance of seating arrangement as a form of communication is seen in the Chinese traditional philosophy of feng shui that dates back over 3,000 years. This approach to the arrangement of furniture and space is part of the Chinese philosophy that stresses the need for people and nature to live in harmony. The heart of this perspective is that people must live with, rather than against, their environment. Further, it is believed that striking the balance between self and one's physical environment brings good health, happiness, and wealth. You can observe the signs of this philosophy in Chinese homes and the way some Chinese arrange themselves at a table. For example, when at a business meeting, Chinese executives will often seek out a seat that they believe is in sync with the environment. In recent years many Westerners have found this perception of space so intriguing there are now both books and classes on the art of feng shui.

Just as feng shui reflects some of the history and values of China, furniture arrangement can also reflect some of the values found in the United States, where furniture is often arranged to achieve privacy and interpersonal isolation. It is a way of circumventing interaction. People who value conversation, such as the French, Italians, and Mexicans, are often

surprised when they visit the United States and see that the furniture in the living room is pointed toward the television set so people can focus on the television program rather than the other people in the room. They believe such an arrangement is rude and stifles conversation.

In Japan offices are usually open, shared with many colleagues, and the furnishings are, like the workers, placed in close proximity. The contrast between office arrangements in the United States and Japan can, of course, create problems. As Nishiyama notes, "Because of its lack of privacy, Westerners, especially individualistic Americans, might find the Japanese office arrangement very uncomfortable and annoying."

The arrangement of furniture in offices can also give you a clue to the character of a people. "French space is a reflection of French culture and French institutions. Everything is centralized, and spatially the entire country is laid out around centers." Hence, offices are organized around the manager, who is at the center. In Germany, where privacy is stressed, office seating is dispersed throughout the office. By comparison, in Japan, where group effort and hierarchy are important, office seating is arranged according to seniority, with desks abutting each other.

Some co-cultures have their own special use of space. In prisons, where space is limited and controlled, space and territory are crucial forms of communication. New inmates quickly learn the culture of prison by finding the correct ways to use space. They soon learn how and when to enter another cell, what part of the exercise yard they can visit, how a reduction of a person's space is a form of punishment, and that they must form lines for nearly all activities. Women and men also use space differently. For

example, women normally “establish closer proximity to others” than do men.¹⁷⁷ In summarizing gender differences in the use of space, Leathers has concluded:

Men use space as a means of asserting their dominance over women, as in the following: (a) they claim more personal space than women; (b) they more actively defend violations of their territories—which are usually much larger than the territories of women; (c) under conditions of high density, they become more aggressive in their attempts to regain a desired measure of privacy; and (d) men more frequently walk in front of their female partner than vice versa.

There is also research concerning the co-cultures of African Americans and Hispanic Americans and their use of space. “Most studies reveal that interactions involving black and white communication occur at greater distances than those involving persons of the same race,” and Hispanic Americans communicate at a closer distance than most other groups.

Spatial distance is also a variable when interacting with members of the deaf culture. For example, when using American Sign Language (ASL), it is necessary for the person signing to sit far enough away from the other person so that they can be seen. It would not be uncommon for two signers to sit across from one another at a distance that hearing people might perceive as impersonal.

TIME

When the Dutch mathematician Christian Huygens built the first pendulum clock over three centuries ago, he probably had little idea that his

invention would have such an impact on people's lives. We all strap timepieces to our wrists, hang them on our walls, see them on our computer screens and cell phones, and give them the power to control everything from moods to relationships. Rapport and Overing underscore the importance of time to human behavior when they write, "To cut up life into moments of being, in sum, is for the individual to possess a means by which that life can be filled, shaped and reshaped in significant ways." Some reflection will reveal how time communicates. If you arrive 30 minutes late for an important appointment and offer no apology, you send a certain message about yourself. Telling someone how guilty you feel about your belated arrival also sends a message. Studies point out that one of the markers of a successful and intimate relationship is the amount of time people spend together and how patient they are with each other.

Of course, there is much more to time than what it says about your relationships. "Our temporal perspective influences a wide range of psychological processes, from motivation, emotion and spontaneity to risk-taking, creativity and problem-solving." The connection of time to culture is profound, and like most aspects of culture, is part of the enculturation process early in life.

Culture begins to educate each of us at an early age as to the value of and the means by which we distinguish time. Each culture has its own particular time norms, which are unconsciously followed until violated. When such violations occur, however, they are perceived as intentional messages associated with that particular culture. In this regard, each culture teaches its people what is appropriate or inappropriate with regard to time.

Experience tells you that in the United States most members of the dominant culture adhere to Benjamin Franklin's pronouncement that "Time is money." Think of what is being said about the use of time in the common expressions: "Don't put off until tomorrow what you can do today," "He who hesitates is lost," and "Just give me the bottom line." For Americans, "time is fixed and measurable, and where we feel seconds ticking away, we attach much significance to schedules. We measure our efficiency according to our ability to meet deadlines and cross off items on our checklist by the end of the day. Getting things done on schedule has a value in itself." For Gannon, "Time is also limited in America because there are so many things to do in one's lifetime. The society develops technologically at horrendous speed, and it's difficult to keep up. One has to be continuously on the move. This is America: there is little time for contemplating or meditating."

As is the case with all aspects of nonverbal communication, culture plays a substantial role in how you perceive and manipulate time in order to communicate different messages. "The existence and proliferation of objective, independent timemeasuring devices is itself a cultural by-product, and the uniform seconds, minutes, and hours that clocks appear to 'measure' also are culturally constructed." When cultures employ time in dissimilar ways, misunderstandings and even antagonisms can occur. To better recognize some contradictory ways of using time we will examine two cultural perspectives: (1) informal time and (2) monochronic and polychronic classifications.

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