Nonverbal Interpersonal Communication

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Nonverbal communication is ever present in face-to-face interactions. In interpersonal interactions, individuals are simultaneously sending information with their appearance and nonverbal behavior and receiving comparable information from their partners. Typically, this sending and receiving of nonverbal communication happens automatically and outside of awareness. Consequently, nonverbal communication is a remarkably effective means of managing contact with others, signaling information about social goals, and providing feedback to partners. Although some patterns of nonverbal communication are biologically hardwired, culture, gender, and personality introduce important differences in the subtle give-and-take of nonverbal communication. Finally, because nonverbal communication typically occurs automatically and outside of awareness, people often have little insight into its critical role in interactions.

Keywords: nonverbal behavior, communication, interaction, automatic processes, influence

Nonverbal communication is a pervasive influence in everyday life. Any communication medium carrying visual or vocal information is a vehicle for nonverbal communication. Of course, the power of even a single still image is highlighted in the old adage, “a picture is worth a thousand words.” The images in television, films, and on the Internet provide even more complex and dynamic information. In addition, the vocal cues in audio channels—not the verbal content—are components of the nonverbal system. For example, loudness, pitch, intonation, and pauses can signal speakers’ feelings or candor, and can even qualify the meaning of the verbal message. In recent decades, the expansion of media in our digital world has provided ever-increasing options for communication. Nevertheless, nonverbal communication in face-to-face encounters is critically important for negotiating our social worlds. Consequently, the focus of this article is primarily on nonverbal communication in face-to-face interactions.

Although everyone experiences nonverbal communication, understanding how it operates is not intuitively obvious. Over the last several decades, hundreds of popular books have been written on some aspect of body language, a common term for nonverbal communication. Many of these works are interesting reading and do provide some useful information, but they also help to perpetuate the error of equating body language with nonverbal communication. Body language is a misleading term for two simple reasons: (a) nonverbal communication involves more than...
the body, and (b) it is not a language. The first point will become obvious later, in discussing the components of nonverbal communication. Let’s direct our attention to the second point.

Language has a consistent vocabulary. The building blocks of language—words—are arbitrary signs that refer to people, objects, ideas, actions, and relationships. In contrast, a particular isolated behavior sequence, such as a brief gaze and faint smile at a passing stranger, does not have a simple, invariant translation. The meaning depends on the larger cultural, social, and behavioral context. So, the same brief gaze and smile at a stranger has different significance depending on the circumstances and the actors involved. Are the parties similar or different in gender, ethnicity, or age? Is the setting their local church or a crowded downtown sidewalk? Furthermore, language has rules for how words are assembled and used—syntax. Although there are some probabilistic patterns in assembling the component pieces of nonverbal communication, there is no syntax. For example, usually people look at a partner when they smile, but not always.

So why is the distinction between nonverbal communication and language important? And what is the harm in still referring to nonverbal communication as body language? The reason is simple. Language and nonverbal communication operate differently and engage different underlying neural processes. Language primarily involves left-hemisphere activity in the brain, whereas nonverbal communication primarily involves right-hemisphere activity. This distinction holds whether the language is spoken or not. For example, verbal language and American Sign Language (ASL) are primarily manifested in left-hemisphere brain activity, even though ASL is not a spoken language. Broca’s area, in the left hemisphere, is activated when people are signing or speaking. Wernicke’s area, also in the left hemisphere, is activated when people are receiving sign language and listening to speech (Hickok, Bellugi, & Klima, 2001). In contrast, most of the sending and receiving of nonverbal signals, such as facial expression, gaze, or touch, is manifested in right hemisphere brain activity. Thus, nonverbal communication is not body language. At this point, a simple general definition of nonverbal communication may be offered—**nonverbal communication is the sending and/or receiving of information and influence through the physical environment, appearance, and nonverbal behavior** (Patterson, 2011, p. 17). The contrast between nonverbal communication and language is elaborated next, highlighting a few basic characteristics of nonverbal communication.

**Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication**

A first characteristic of nonverbal communication is that it is always “on” in social settings. As long as there is some sensory input from others—visual, auditory, olfactory, or tactile—nonverbal communication is occurring. This does not mean that everything is necessarily noticed or that different types of input are equally weighted. Attention is pragmatic, focused on input that bears on our welfare. In contrast, verbal communication is intermittent, even in very animated conversations. Often there are short gaps, perhaps only a few seconds, when nothing is said. So the verbal channel is down, if only briefly. Of course, in many circumstances, verbal communication is very sporadic, as in the example of two people sharing a meal. In such a case, appearance, movement, and tactile or even olfactory input between the partners constitutes nonverbal communication, even when there is no conversation.
A second characteristic is that the sending and receiving channels operate simultaneously in nonverbal communication. Thus, as we are receiving information from our social environments, we are simultaneously sending information through our appearance and behavior. For example, as you meet a new person at work, you probably attend closely to her facial expression and movements as you approach, smile, and prepare to shake her hand. Usually, but not always, this happens in a relatively coordinated fashion. In contrast, the brief verbal exchange between you and your new acquaintance typically involves turn-taking. Both of you might try talking at the same time, but this does not work very well.

The simultaneity of sending and receiving processes in nonverbal communication is facilitated by a third characteristic of nonverbal communication—sending and receiving typically happen automatically and outside of awareness. As we see a person for the first time, some basic impressions are formed automatically from “thin slices of behavior,” in only a fraction of a second (Ambady, Bernieri, & Richeson, 2000). Similarly, on the sending side, a fleeting change in gaze or the initiation of facial expression happens very rapidly and usually outside of awareness. Of course, depending on the circumstances, sometimes we can initiate deliberation and control in the sending and receiving processes. For example, an overly friendly greeting from a person in a first meeting may lead to questions about his motives. And the response to such a greeting may be very measured and deliberate. But it is fair to say that the default setting for nonverbal processes is an automatic one. Nonverbal communication is one part of a more pervasive “adaptive unconscious” that operates automatically in managing everyday life (Wilson, 2002). In contrast, with verbal communication, some degree of attention and effort is typical in the give-and-take of conversations. In some cases, when the content of the conversation is complicated, a great deal of cognitive effort is required to understand the partner’s point and to fashion an appropriate response.

A last characteristic of nonverbal communication flows directly from its typical automaticity. Specifically, nonverbal communication is cognitively efficient. Like the Energizer Bunny from old television commercials, it “just keeps on running.” In other words, nonverbal communication drains relatively little from our cognitive batteries. Everyday concerns, whether it is a problem at work or a sick child, can engage our attention and reduce the cognitive resources available for other activities. This might even affect the routine of conversations as we do not fully comprehend a partner’s comments or forget what we were going to say. But such distractions typically have relatively little effect on the sending and receiving of nonverbal communication because these processes operate automatically.

Let us consider now the individual components of nonverbal communication that convey information and influence others. Specifically, the next section provides a brief overview of the static and dynamic elements of nonverbal communication.

Components of Nonverbal Communication

The nonverbal system of communication includes both static and dynamic components (Patterson, 2011, pp. 37–58). That is, over the course of an interaction, some elements are relatively unchanging, whereas others are highly variable. For example, once people take a seat around a conference table for an office meeting, they tend to remain in the same seat. During
the meeting, gaze patterns, facial expressions, body lean, and orientation often change and, likely, very quickly. It is important to emphasize that individual components are always part of a larger coordinated pattern that conveys meaning.

**Static Features**

Because every face-to-face interaction occurs in a particular context, the structural features of settings affect the course of interaction. Simply having the availability of seating options affects nonverbal interactions. Many public settings, and some private ones, have no chairs, sofas, or benches. Interactions occur as people are standing, and sometimes even when they are walking. In situations where there are seating options, the **design and arrangement** of furniture set important limits on nonverbal patterns (Patterson & Quadflieg, 2016). For example, placing chairs farther from, rather than closer to, one another means that people taking those seats will probably maintain more eye contact and speak louder than if they were closer to one another. The orientation of the seating options also affects the nonverbal give-and-take. Thus, two people on opposite ends of a sofa would typically reorient themselves toward their partner, whereas two people at a comparable distance, but in a more directly facing arrangement, would not reorient themselves.

The type of furniture and the surrounding space send important signals to occupants of a setting. For example, in the Western business world, individuals at the top of the organizational hierarchy typically have large offices with an attractive view and plush furniture. In addition, an imposing desk keeps visitors at a considerable distance. In contrast, employees at the lower end of the hierarchy may be fortunate to have partitions separating them from their fellow workers. In our home environments, different types and arrangements of furniture in various rooms can facilitate different types of interactions. For example, important visitors might be invited to a well-furnished living room, whereas visiting family members and good friends might be directed to the den or kitchen. Thus, even before an interaction begins, settings impose physical constraints and social norms on communication. And the territory holders can manipulate the design and arrangement features to their advantage in interactions. Later, the broader effects of the environment on nonverbal interactions are discussed.

Next, **appearance characteristics** are critical signals, especially in our first meetings with others. Although a common axiom suggests that we should not “judge a book by its cover,” automatic judgments of others are inevitable and pragmatic. For example, facial appearance provides information about health, mating quality, and even leadership ability (Re & Rule, 2016). Clothing style can reflect a person’s social class, ethnicity, religion, and even occupation. Appearance characteristics also signal whether others are similar to or different from us. In turn, this leads to different expectancies and behavior as we interact with others. Although appearance characteristics are imperfect indicators of what others are really like, the resulting automatic judgments are useful and relatively accurate (Zebrowitz, Montepare, & Strom, 2013). Of course, appearance can also be strategically modified to create desired impressions. This may be as simple as altering clothing or grooming to increase attractiveness or perceived dominance. But many people invest considerable effort and money for longer-lasting changes to impress others. For example, millions of people commit to exercise programs, weight loss regimens, plastic surgery, and hair replacement, all reflecting the importance of appearance.
Dynamic Behaviors

The fixed features help set the context for interactions and establish expectancies about partners. The fluid give-and-take of interaction is, however, primarily the result of dynamic behaviors changing over time. First, distance and orientation are probably the most basic elements that, in turn, affect the range of other nonverbal behaviors (Hall, 1966). Of course, the design and arrangement of settings constrain interpersonal distance and orientation. If there is only one visitor’s chair opposite the manager’s chair, there is little choice for the visitor. Nevertheless, there are often multiple seating options and, sometimes, the visitor might be invited to “pull up a chair.” In standing interactions, interpersonal distance and orientation are more changeable over time. Distance and orientation are important in both seated and standing interactions because they affect overall involvement between partners and precipitate changes in other dynamic behaviors. As partners are separated by greater distances, they tend to take a more directly facing orientation, increase gaze, and speak more loudly (Patterson, 1973, 1976). That is, they compensate for the greater distance by increasing involvement through other nonverbal behaviors. In contrast, when two people sit adjacently on one side of a table, they are typically less directly oriented toward one another, gaze less, and speak more softly. This is another example of how the components of overall involvement operate as a system, with fluid changes in behaviors affecting one another.

Gaze at interaction partners is the primary channel for gathering information about them. Gaze from a partner signals increased attention and increases arousal in the recipient (Ellsworth & Ross, 1975). Of course, gaze is also an important element in shared intimacy, as in the case of two lovers or a mother and infant. Nevertheless, mutual gaze is not always positive. Intense rivals may try to stare down each other. In addition, the meaning and impact of a verbal message are affected by the timing and duration of listener-directed gaze (Adams & Nelson, 2016). The meaning of a particular gaze is also a product of the facial expressions that frame the gaze. Thus, separate behaviors combine in shaping the meaning of nonverbal messages.

Next, because facial expressions provide particularly rich and often subtle social signals, most of our visual attention in interactions is directed at others’ faces. There are, however, different views of just what kinds of information are sent and received from facial expressions. The early and dominant view proposed by Ekman (1972) is that there are universal patterns, selected over the course of evolution, in the sending and receiving of facial expressions. On the sending side, facial expressions signals are readouts of underlying basic emotions, such as happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust, surprise, and possibly a few others. In turn, according to Ekman, there are universal patterns in receivers’ reading of the senders’ emotional states. Presumably these complementary, hard-wired processes facilitate interaction through the exchange of information about emotional states. A contrasting approach, Fridlund’s (1994) behavioral ecology view, posits that emotions are irrelevant to the sending and receiving of facial expressions. Expressions signal social motives—what people are likely to do, not how they feel. Thus, a smile is not a sign of happiness, but rather an indication of wanting to be friendly and get along with a partner. Although there is continuing controversy over the relative merits of these two positions, the behavioral ecology view is gaining more attention (Parkinson, 2005).

Information about people’s feelings and intentions is also signaled through posture and movement. A moderately open and relaxed posture signals interest and receptiveness, whereas a more closed and rigid posture signals the opposite. Posture differences can also reflect contrasts...
in power and status. More powerful individuals typically take up more space, assume a more relaxed position, and are less vigilant about their social environment than are less powerful individuals (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006). People vary considerably in their typical movement patterns. Some individuals move quickly and others more slowly; some are graceful and coordinated and others awkward and clumsy. And such contrasts affect the impressions that people make.

Next, touch (also known as “haptics”) is a powerful and important component of nonverbal communication in all kinds of relationships. Touch is, however, especially critical for the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development of infants and young children. The routine care of infants necessarily requires high levels of contact and provides an important source of stimulation in their young lives. Touch is also important in reflecting relationship status between individuals and can vary as a function of the age of the partners (Hall & Veccia, 1990). In addition, touch can signal solidarity between friends and among teammates. The strategic application of touch can also increase compliance to simple requests (Patterson, Powell, & Lenihan, 1986). Nevertheless, the meaning and impact of touch varies across different partners and different situations. A “friendly” touch on the arm in one culture might be seen as a personal violation in another culture.

The vocal characteristics of speech provide an important source of information to supplement the verbal content of speech. For example, subtle differences in the tone of voice affect the meaning and impact of a person’s comments, as in the case of sarcasm. In addition, other features of speech, such as loudness, pitch, tempo, and even pauses can signal speakers’ feelings and motives. Another type of vocal behavior—laughter—is particularly important in facilitating positive feelings between partners (Provine, 2017). Just as differences in physical appearance affect impressions of attractiveness, differences in people’s voices also affect impressions of attractiveness (Zuckerman, Hodgins, & Miyake, 1990). And if our first contact with a person is over the phone, we may be surprised later when we discover that she does not look like the way she sounded.

Finally, olfactory cues may be the most subtle and underappreciated nonverbal component. Of course, there are instances where odors are intense, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, and we are consciously aware of them. But much of our olfactory environment is subtle and processing these odors occurs primarily outside of awareness. Recent research indicates that the processing of different kinds of odors seems to engage specialized neural networks for interpersonal odors. Furthermore, specific affective odors may precipitate complementary reactions in those nearby. For example, anxious odors can increase alertness in others (Pazzaglia, 2015). Of course, the impact of olfactory cues is also evident in the billions of dollars spent annually on soaps, shampoos, deodorants, colognes, perfumes, and air fresheners.

In summary, this combination of static and dynamic cues and behaviors provides the basis for nonverbal exchange between interaction partners. The meaning and impact of nonverbal communication depends on the coordinated display of all the component cues and behaviors. Nevertheless, understanding the complex, and often subtle, role of nonverbal communication in our social worlds requires a broader perspective. Specifically, the next section discusses such a perspective in a systems approach to nonverbal communication.
A Systems Approach

Since the rapid acceleration of research on nonverbal communication in the 1960’s, there are literally hundreds of books and thousands (probably tens of thousands) of articles and chapters on some aspect of the topic. As a result, we now know a great deal about the specific elements and processes of nonverbal communication and the factors affecting it (see, e.g., handbooks on nonverbal communication by Hall & Knapp, 2013; Manusov & Patterson, 2006). But how do we assemble and integrate this massive body of diverse information into some kind of meaningful whole? One useful approach is to view nonverbal communication as a kind of adaptive system, serving social goals and constrained by several determinant factors (Patterson, 2011). In taking a systems approach, there is a recognition that understanding specific nonverbal interactions requires sensitivity to a variety of interrelated elements and processes in the system. Although we cannot know the details of every factor affecting particular outcomes, we can appreciate that nonverbal communication occurs in a broad network of interrelated factors and processes. There are several core features in this systems approach to nonverbal communication.

Functional Emphasis

Perhaps the first and most basic characteristic of this systems approach is an emphasis on the functions of nonverbal communication. Understanding nonverbal communication is facilitated, not simply by listing and describing a series of cues and behaviors, but rather by focusing on the practical utility of nonverbal communication—functions. That is, nonverbal communication serves a variety of different goals at the individual and group levels (Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996; Fridlund, 1994; McArthur & Baron, 1983; Patterson, 1983; Zebrowitz, 1997). Among the different interpersonal functions proposed here are providing information, regulating interaction, expressing intimacy, exercising influence, and managing impressions (Burgoon et al., 1996; Patterson, 1983). Each of these functions is discussed later in this article. At this point, it is worth noting that, within each function, a variety of different specific goals is possible. For example, the goal of gaining behavioral compliance from an interaction partner is a specific example of the exercising influence function. This might involve a close approach, a touch on the forearm, and a smile. At the same time, the actor would be reading the partner’s behavioral reaction and deciding if some additional behavioral adjustment was necessary to accomplish the goal. The coordinated initiation of behavior and reading of the partner’s reaction is an example of the simultaneous sending and receiving processes characteristic of nonverbal communication in interactions.

Patterns of Behavior

Second, it is important to move beyond a focus on individual behaviors in isolation to patterns of behavior. Most nonverbal research still manipulates or measures one or two behaviors at time. This is understandable because it is difficult and time-consuming to manipulate and/or measure a variety of behaviors in a particular study. Nevertheless, in the real world, interactions are not characterized by behaving in single, isolated channels in a kind of serial or episodic fashion. That is, we do not pick a distance, and only then gaze, and subsequently initiate a facial expression, until the repertoire of nonverbal behaviors is complete. Rather, the sending side of
interaction is characterized by the simultaneous initiation of multiple behaviors in a relatively coordinated fashion—patterns. On the receiving side of interaction, we do not serially register isolated behaviors, then assemble the specific components, and finally reach some kind of cumulative impression. Rather, incoming stimuli from a partner register in a holistic fashion, very rapidly, and lead to relatively accurate pragmatic judgments (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992; Re & Rule, 2016).

One set of interactive behaviors, including distance, gaze, facial expression, touch, body orientation, and lean cumulatively reflect overall involvement or immediacy between partners (Patterson, 2011, pp. 53–57). That is, nonverbal involvement is conveyed as partners are physically closer, gaze more, and are more expressive. In addition, this same set of behaviors can signal their social motives or intentions. Of course, some components may carry greater weight in the pattern. For example, although a partner’s touch and/or extended gaze are particularly noticeable, these behaviors occur in a larger behavioral context that affects the impact of those more noticeable behaviors. As a result, the impact of the touch and extended gaze depends on whether the partner’s expression is pleasant or unpleasant and the vocal tone is soothing or harsh.

**Determinant Factors**

A third feature of this systems approach is the recognition that several antecedent factors affect the course of nonverbal communication. Perhaps the most important factors are biology, culture, gender, personality, and the environment. The effects of biology are the result of natural selection in shaping adaptive, hardwired patterns of communicating with others (Floyd, 2006; Fridlund, 1994). Several dimensions of culture (e.g., individualism-collectivism and high vs. low context) play a role in cross-cultural differences in communication (Hall, 1976; Hofstede 1980, 2001). Gender differences in nonverbal communication are affected by biology (the hardwired patterns) and by culture (societal norms). For example, women are usually more sensitive in reading nonverbal cues and are also more expressive than men (Hall, 2006). Personality differences affect habitual patterns in sending and receiving nonverbal communication. A set of nominally distinct but practically related traits, including social anxiety, introversion/extraversion, and affiliation reflect a broader social approach/avoidance dimension (Patterson, 2011, pp. 77–78). For example, individuals on the approach end of this dimension are likely to initiate higher levels of nonverbal involvement with interaction partners, whereas those on the avoidance end are likely to initiate lower levels of nonverbal involvement with interaction partners (Patterson, 2011, pp. 59–82). The last determinant, the environment, merits special attention as a separate feature of the systems approach because settings matter in nonverbal interpersonal communication.
Settings Matter

The cognitive focus in psychology over the last several decades has emphasized the dynamics of covert mental processes, while generally neglecting the impact of the physical environment. But every face-to-face interaction happens in a particular setting, and settings matter. Oishi and Graham (2010) made a case for resurrecting a socio-ecological approach to psychology, one consistent with an earlier emphasis on the physical environment (e.g., Lewin, 1939). The concept of a behavior setting from ecological psychology (Barker, 1968; Wicker, 1979) is a useful way of framing the physical and social context of interactions. In general, a behavior setting is a bounded geographical area in which human and nonhuman components interact in a coordinated fashion to facilitate an ordered series of events over a limited period of time (Wicker, 1979). Examples of behavior settings might include a party, a business meeting, a job interview, or a church service. In each of these cases, there is a specific physical environment with associated social norms that constrain individuals in a relatively predictable program of events. Furthermore, aspects of the physical and social environment can prime goals and affect subsequent behaviors and social judgments (Loersch & Payne, 2011). An additional important effect of behavior settings is that people select settings and settings select people. Thus, self-selection and setting-selection processes tend to increase the similarity among individuals in any setting and facilitate more predictable interactions. One way to understand better the power of settings is to focus more of our efforts on field research, increasing the ecological validity of our results (Patterson, 2008). That is, directing more attention to field research may increase the utility and applicability of our research findings.

This discussion of the systems approach provides the foundation for a closer analysis of interpersonal nonverbal communication. In particular, the primary emphasis in the remainder of the article is on the determinants and functions of nonverbal communication.

Determinants of Nonverbal Communication

Specific patterns of nonverbal communication vary widely across people and situations. Nevertheless, if we look below the surface of these highly variable instances, clear consistencies can also be identified. In particular, biology, culture, gender, personality, and the environment combine in constraining the practical range of nonverbal communication in any given interaction. This section provides a brief overview of these determinants in shaping some basic patterns of nonverbal communication. Perhaps the most basic factor affecting the give-and-take of nonverbal communication is the biological hard-wiring shaped over the course of evolution.
Biology

Natural selection has shaped not only our physical characteristics and physiological processes, but also how we communicate with one another. Long before the development of language, our species had to signal important information about survival, reproduction, and the care of offspring (Floyd, 2006). And the individuals whose patterns of nonverbal communication were more adaptive in achieving those goals passed down those characteristics to their offspring. This does not mean that nonverbal communication is fixed and rigid because natural selection also favors flexibility in the face of changing circumstances. For example, as we will see in the next section, cultural differences allow for plasticity in response to specific environmental and social circumstances.

A first issue involves the basic needs of safety and social comparison. That is, as social animals, we have a distinct advantage in being close to other in-group members. This is more than a simple benefit of more members responding to an external threat. Relatively close proximity to others and directing attention to them provides important information about the social motives of group members. That is, when individuals are relatively close and sharing gaze, they can effectively signal what they are likely to do and anticipate others’ reactions. Furthermore, visual attention toward others provides the opportunity for social comparison. By watching what others do, especially under ambiguous circumstances, social learning is facilitated.

Second, appearance and nonverbal behavior play a critical role in mate selection. In general, the typical preferences that both males and females have in potential mates serve to facilitate successful reproduction. The features that males find most attractive in potential female partners—younger, smaller waist-hip ratio (approaching 0.70), facial and bodily symmetry, clear skin, and lively behavior—are correlated with greater fecundity and better health. The features that females find most attractive in potential male partners—somewhat older, taller, more dominant looking, and the possession of resources—are correlated with the ability to protect and provide for the woman and her offspring (Frank & Shaw, 2016). Of course, these are only general preferences and there are some interesting qualifications to them. For example, there is evidence that, for facial features, females prefer male partners with a mix of dominant and baby face characteristics (Cunningham, Barbee, & Pike, 1990). Presumably, the mix with more friendly-looking features is a signal of nurturing tendencies.

Beyond reproduction, the nurturance of children is also required for survival. Children require a long-term commitment from parents and care-givers that includes love, food and shelter, guidance, and security to develop successfully. The distinct baby face features of infants and young children—rounded face and chin, small forehead, and big eyes—signal dependence and prompt adult concern and nurturing behavior (Zebrowitz, 1997). Furthermore, this effect generalizes to baby-faced adults who are seen as less responsible for their actions than are mature-looking adults.

Culture

Although our biological hardwiring determines some critical communalities in nonverbal communication, the demands of contrasting cultural environments shape important differences in nonverbal communication. There are a various ways of defining culture, but most approaches...
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refer to a system of norms and behaviors transmitted across generations that serve to meet the basic needs of a group. And nonverbal communication is important in such a system because it decreases social complexity and facilitates appropriate behavior (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2016). There are different systems for classifying dimensions of culture, but one category common to most of them is individualism-collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). Individualistic cultures, including the United States and most of Western Europe, emphasize the distinctiveness of the individual self and its related motives of personal achievement and fulfilment. Collectivistic cultures, including many East Asian countries, emphasize identity within a larger social group and the related motives of interdependence, cooperation, and saving face. This contrast is reflected in tendencies of people from collectivistic cultures to be more constrained in emotional expressiveness in public settings than people from individualistic cultures. This is particularly the case with negative expressions that may reflect poorly on the group in collectivistic cultures. In contrast, comparable negative expressions in individualistic cultures may be an appropriate sign of assertiveness and independence.

Because the norms for appropriate patterns of nonverbal communication differ across cultures, people from one culture may find themselves uncomfortable, or at least puzzled, in interacting with someone from a very different culture. In turn, this discomfort can adversely affect the outcomes of interactions, for example, the course of a business negotiation. In addition, cultures also vary in the extent to which communication is more explicit or more implicit. According to Hall (1976), in low-context cultures, the explicit meaning of the verbal message is more important in transmitting information in a direct fashion. In contrast, in high-context cultures, nonverbal communication plays a bigger role in transmitting information in an implicit, indirect fashion. In effect, in high-context cultures, people have to “read between the lines” by incorporating the nonverbal cues in understanding a message. In general, the United States and western European countries are representative of low-context cultures and East Asian countries are representative of high-context cultures.

Finally, caution is warranted in assuming too much homogeneity within a given culture. There is considerable individual variability in cultural characteristics within a given culture. Some people do not possess the general characteristic. And there are likely differences across generations, and even between rural versus urban dwellers. Furthermore, in our digital age with rapid global communication and the increasing frequency of international travel, cultural characteristics are more vulnerable to change.

Gender

The role of gender in nonverbal communication has long been a focus of empirical research—and considerable popular speculation. Two broad, conditional generalizations may be offered about gender differences. First, women are typically more sensitive than men in reading the expressive behavior of others (Hall, 2006). Females’ advantage over males in sensitivity to nonverbal cues is likely due to some combination of (a) the social norms across most cultures that stress greater sensitivity in women, and (b) natural selection in favoring females’ sensitivity in the care and nurturance of their offspring. Second, women’s expressive behavior is typically read more accurately than is men’s expressive behavior (Hall, 2006). Nevertheless, this difference is probably qualified by the type of emotional expression. For example, in many cultures, it is less appropriate for females than for males to show intense anger.
Next, there are also gender differences in patterns of nonverbal involvement (distance, gaze, touch, smiling) in interactions. In same-sex interactions, women are typically more comfortable with closer distances, more gaze and touch, and more frequent smiling than men are (Hall & Gunnery, 2013). The patterns with opposite-sex interactions are more complex and depend on the nature of the relationship and who is taking the initiative in the interaction. For example, in an interesting field study of touching in couples walking on urban sidewalks, Hall and Veccia (1990) found contrasting patterns between younger and older couples. In younger couples, men were more likely to initiate touch by holding hands or putting an arm around the woman. In older couples, women were more likely to initiate touch by linking their arm around the man’s arm. These results are an example of the conditional nature of gender differences in nonverbal communication. That is, gender differences are not fixed, but malleable. It is also important to appreciate that much of the gender research has used biological sex as a proxy for gender. As a result, more research is needed on how gender identity per se influences nonverbal communication (La France & Vial, 2016).

**Personality**

The construct of personality provides an important means of making sense of other people and predicting their likely behavior. The stable predispositions represented in personality traits are important for understanding nonverbal communication because much of the sending and receiving processes in the nonverbal system happen automatically. That is, people with contrasting traits are already primed to communicate in different ways. Although there are a variety of traits that are potentially relevant for nonverbal communication, this section focuses on just a few of the more important ones.

First, social anxiety is particularly relevant for nonverbal communication because it deals with the underlying negative affect associated with interaction. In interactions, socially anxious individuals experience higher levels of physiological arousal, have more negative self-thoughts, and behave in a more avoidant manner than non-anxious individuals (Patterson & Ritts, 1997). Specifically, in terms of nonverbal behavior, socially anxious people keep greater distances from others, are less expressive, and initiate less gaze toward their partners. Maintaining lower levels of partner-directed gaze (i.e., the sending side) may also contribute to a deficit on the receiving side. That is, decreased gaze reduces the information from partner appearance and behavior that facilitates judgment accuracy. Related, but nominally different, traits of introversion-extraversion and affiliation, show similar behavior patterns. Specifically, introverted and low-affiliative individuals also keep greater distances from others, are less expressive, and gaze less than those with contrasting traits. In fact, because these three traits are moderately correlated with one another, they constitute a higher-order social approach-avoidance construct generally affecting nonverbal communication (Patterson, 2011, chap. 4).

A second trait affecting patterns of nonverbal communication is dominance. In general dominant individuals are more comfortable taking the initiative and controlling interactions than are submissive individuals (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006). Physical features, including being taller, more muscular, and having a more dominant facial appearance contribute to a person’s effective dominance. The nonverbal expression of dominance may be manifested in one or more behaviors reflecting high involvement: (1) close approaches, (2) high levels of gaze, (3) direct body orientation, (4) the initiation of touch, and (5) behavioral relaxation. But because dominant
individuals are less constrained in their behavior than are submissive individuals, they are comfortable in ignoring others. Thus, greater dominance does not necessarily mean that dominant individuals initiate high levels of nonverbal involvement with others.

Next, the trait of high self-monitoring describes the combination of skill in effective self-presentation on the sending side of nonverbal communication with sensitivity in reading people and social situations on the receiving side of nonverbal communication. As a result, high self-monitors are better able to modify their behavior to changing social goals than are low self-monitors. Because high self-monitors are more adaptive in their nonverbal communication, they are more successful in influencing others than are low self-monitors. Thus, high self-monitors can be expressive and outgoing in one setting and more reserved and quiet in a different setting. In contrast to the situationally variable behavior of high self-monitors, the relatively stable behavior of low self-monitors suggests that “what you see is what you get.”

Finally, narcissism, an increasingly-common trait in recent decades (Twenge & Campbell, 2009) has interesting effects on interpersonal nonverbal communication. In general, narcissists have inflated self-worth, are overly confident, feel entitled, and exploit other people. Although these qualities are hardly desirable, narcissists are often successful in influencing other people, at least in the short term. This influence is facilitated by narcissists’ typical appearance and nonverbal style. In general, narcissists tend to be more physically attractive, dress more attractively, and are more expressive than are non-narcissists (Back, Schmulke, & Egloff, 2010). As a result, in first-meetings, narcissists are very likeable and may even be seen as charismatic. But, over the long term, narcissists’ overconfidence, entitlement, competitiveness, and exploitation of others typically has adverse effects on interpersonal and organizational relationships.

Environment

The influence of the environment on nonverbal communication is far more pervasive than the immediate effects of the design and furniture mentioned earlier in the discussion of static cues. Other proximal effects of specific environmental features will be addressed further, but first the focus is on the more distal effects of the environment on nonverbal communication. The earlier description of behavior settings is a useful starting point in this discussion of the environment. In specific settings, whether it is public concert or a corporate board meeting, there is a specific physical environment that facilitates some behaviors and discourages others, a relatively predictable sequence of events to achieve the setting’s goals, and social norms for appropriate behavior. Usually people are not in specific settings by chance. That is, people select settings, but also settings select people. For example, everyone may be welcome at the public concert, but only a few specific people gain access to the company board meeting. And people in a given setting are likely to have more in common than people sampled across a variety of settings. In general, as settings become more selective, the people in them are likely to be more similar.

The combination of the physical characteristics of a specific environment, the social norms operating in the setting, and both self- and setting-selection processes increases the predictability of nonverbal communication. There is, of course, variability in individual patterns of nonverbal communication but, to a considerable extent, most people are constrained by this combination of setting pressures. Thus, an ecological psychology approach proposes that more
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of our social behavior, including nonverbal communication, is really a product of setting dynamics than individual differences in personality traits, motives, or attitudes (Barker, 1968; Wicker, 1979).

In addition to the effects of the design and arrangement of furniture, other proximal features have more subtle effects on nonverbal communication. Included among these features are lighting, temperature, odor, and the soundscape (Patterson & Quadflieg, 2016). First, the effects of ambient lighting are moderated by partners’ relationship. Not surprisingly, dimmer lighting can facilitate increased nonverbal intimacy between romantic partners. But dimmer lighting between strangers can have the opposite effect—decreasing nonverbal intimacy. The dimmer lighting might signal caution in interacting with a stranger. Next, comfortable ambient temperatures promote more positive impressions of others and may facilitate reciprocity of nonverbal involvement. In a similar fashion, pleasant odors contribute to more positive impressions of other people and friendlier interactions. Because the soundscape affects people’s moods, interactive behavior can also be affected. Thus, pleasant sounds promote approach and greater nonverbal involvement, whereas noise can lead to avoidance. An important exception to the latter pattern is the necessity for closer approaches and increased gaze to overcome the interfering effects of noise on interaction.

Determinants in Combination

Finally, although the determinants are discussed individually, their influence is actually a product of their dynamic combination. Again, this is characteristic of a systems approach. So, for example, the effect of a particular cultural dimension, such as individualism/collectivism, will be different for socially anxious individuals than for non-anxious ones. And, in addition, those differences are further moderated by the type of behavior setting. Although it may not be possible to determine their overall weighted effect on nonverbal combination, it is important to appreciate the dynamic interplay of all of the determinants. Ultimately, interpersonal communication, verbal and nonverbal, is functional. That is, communication serves a variety of different social goals, and these goals may even be activated outside of conscious awareness (Bargh, 1997; Dijksterhuis & Bargh, 2001). These specific goals are manifested across several different functions of nonverbal communication.

Functions of Nonverbal Communication

The function categories described here refer to segments or sequences of interpersonal interaction. Although a particular interaction, for example, a job interview, may be generally characterized from the applicant’s perspective as an exercise in managing impressions, other interactions may engage multiple functions. An interaction with a good friend may reflect both the intimacy function and exercising influence. For example, the casual and warm nonverbal exchange characteristic of friends may be entwined with an attempt by one person to convince the friend to join in going to the baseball game. Furthermore, different patterns of nonverbal behavior may be enlisted in the service of the same function, just as the same pattern of behavior may be enlisted in the service of different functions. It all depends on the partners and
the circumstances. Nevertheless, this categorization is a useful means of illustrating the utility of nonverbal communication.

### Providing Information

In social interactions, there is a continuous exchange of information, and much of this is nonverbal in nature. First, appearance cues are very basic, but nevertheless important pieces of information about other people. We quickly notice cues related to gender, race, age, fitness, and physical attractiveness. Although these characteristics are imperfect indicators of what people really like, they help us to anticipate the behavior of others. In addition, more malleable characteristics, such as clothing, grooming, and ornamentation can signal socioeconomic status, group membership and, sometimes, even occupation and religion. Next, nonverbal behavior provides fine-grained information about others’ personality and goals in interaction. The coordinated exchange of information has been selected over the course of evolution because it benefits both senders and receivers (Fridlund & Russell, 2006). We are descendants of early ancestors who effectively sent and received critical interpersonal information. The informational function is broadly relevant for a variety of social settings from mate selection and nurturance of offspring to something as trivial as deciding which store clerk to approach for help.

Most of the sending and receiving of nonverbal communication occurs automatically and outside of awareness. Although some judgments of others can be carefully reasoned, automatic judgments are inevitable. Relatively accurate judgments of other people can be made at exposures of 100 ms (0.10 s) or less. For example, competence ratings of political candidates in one study predicted 70% of election winners after only 100 ms exposure to candidates’ faces (Olivola & Todorov, 2010). Similar studies of “thin slices of behavior,” lasting only a few seconds, indicate that perceivers make judgments significantly above chance levels on relationships, status, and some personality dimensions.

In conversational exchanges, nonverbal behavior also plays a role in shaping the meaning of what people say. That is, vocal cues, facial expression, and body tension can all moderate the specific meaning of a comment. Sarcasm is an example where the tone of voice and accompanying facial expression combine to reverse the meaning of the verbal comment. And evaluative statements directed toward a partner can be finely calibrated with subtle changes in facial expression, gaze, and vocal cues. In some cases, evaluative information may be communicated indirectly and more effectively with nonverbal feedback. For example, a manager’s evaluation of a subordinate’s report might include a comment that “it’s fine.” Depending on the manager’s nonverbal behavior, the practical meaning of such a statement might vary from barely adequate to very good.

Although it is tempting to assume that more thinking is better, both in forming judgments of other people and in managing our own behavior, humans are not wired to operate in such a deliberate fashion. Rapid judgments about others and instantaneous behavioral changes are often required. And, usually, but not always, such automaticity works relatively well in our interactions with other people. Furthermore, increased thought in making a judgment can decrease accuracy, and increased thoughtful control of behavior can decrease its effectiveness (Patterson, 1995). Of course, automatic sending and receiving processes are not always accurate and effective. Correction is possible if individuals have adequate cognitive resources and the
motivation to apply those resources to the immediate issue. Without the necessary cognitive resources and motivation, automatic sending and receiving processes are likely to dominate in our interactions.

Nonverbal behavior has clear informational utility to interaction partners. But what is less obvious is that nonverbal behavior is also self-informing (Patterson, 2011, pp. 83–100). Sometimes we have little insight into our thoughts and feelings about a particular person or issue. It is only after we act, that we “discover” how we actually feel. For example, at the end of a first meeting with a new neighbor, we might realize that we had an engaging (high nonverbal involvement) interaction and conclude that we liked him. Facial feedback theory proposes that automatic facial reactions to our social environment provide neuromuscular feedback to our brains that help to identify what we feel (Laird, 1974). Thus, in some situations, nonverbal behavior is not the product of existing thoughts and feelings but, rather, primary in directing thoughts and feelings about our social environment.

Regulating Interaction

Because the term interaction is often equated with verbal conversations, the influence of nonverbal communication in regulating interactions can be underestimated. In fact, it is likely that most of our day-to-day interactions do not involve conversations. The sociologist Erving Goffman wrote about the variety in interactions in making the distinction between focused interactions and unfocused interactions (Goffman, 1963). According to Goffman, focused interactions are those occasions where people are having conversations. That is, the interactions are focused around the conversation. But people are also interacting when they share a silent presence with others physically close to them. In these situations, people often make subtle nonverbal adjustments to the close presence of others. These unfocused interactions occur in a wide variety of public settings, such as walking in a crowded mall, picking a seat in a train or bus, or entering an elevator and noticing another person. In these settings and many others, people signal their intentions with changes in gaze, facial expression, and distancing.

In effect, these subtle nonverbal adjustments help regulate the amount of contact we have with strangers. The norms for managing these unfocused interactions can vary across culture. A specific example of this comes from a study of pedestrians passing one another on sidewalks in Japan and in the United States (Patterson, Iizuka, Tubbs, Ansel, Tsutsumi, & Anson, 2007). Although Japanese and American pedestrians glanced at a passing confederate at relatively comparable rates (approximately 40%), Americans were much more likely to smile, nod, or offer a greeting. It is also important to appreciate that unfocused interactions are not limited to encounters between strangers. For example, at work, in entering the break room, one might keep a greater distance from and avoid gaze toward an unfriendly coworker than a friendly one.

In contrast, in focused interactions, the verbal content is the primary interest. Nevertheless, as indicated in the earlier discussion of the informational function, nonverbal behavior supplements the meaning of the spoken word. The relevance of nonverbal communication for regulating focused interactions, however, lies in facilitating speaker and listener roles and in facilitating turn taking. Nonverbal communication is a highly efficient means of regulating momentary speaker and listener roles without interfering with the verbal content. Because the momentary goals of speakers and listeners are different, their patterns of nonverbal communication are also different (Patterson, 2011, pp. 101–120). For example, speakers typically gaze less at listeners
than listeners do at speakers. Speaker gaze avoidance may facilitate recall of specific content, whereas increased gaze from listeners allows access to speakers’ nonverbal behavior. Listeners are likely to nod periodically to indicate that they understand and/or agree with speakers’ comments. In fact, the absence of nods or their functional equivalence in brief verbalizations, such as “uh huh,” “yeh,” or “okay,” can lead to speaker uncertainty and even a rephrasing of a comment.

Finally, turn taking in conversations is facilitated by complementary nonverbal signals from speakers and listeners (Duncan & Fiske, 1977). Of course, some of the indicators that speakers are ending their turn are verbal in nature. For example, the trajectory of the comments may be clear enough that a listener can anticipate the end of a turn. More specifically, speakers usually end their turns with the completion of a grammatical clause. Nonverbal cues also occur as speakers are about to end their turns, including the following: (a) a pause longer than pauses in the middle of a turn; (b) a drop in vocal pitch and loudness in the last few syllables; and (c) an increased probability of listener-directed gaze. This increased gaze allows the speaker to read the listener’s reaction to the comments and makes it easier for the listener to switch to the speaker role. As listeners are about to take a speaking turn, they typically initiate some combination of the following cues: (a) an audible inhalation; (b) the start of a postural readjustment; (c) an initial vocalization louder than listeners’ vocalizations, such as “yeh” or “uh huh,” that reinforce the speaker’s comments. It is important to appreciate that these complementary turn-taking cues typically happen automatically as they facilitate the rapid back-and-forth of conversations.

Thus, nonverbal communication is a primary means of managing our social contacts with others. In unfocused interactions, where we simply share a common presence with others and have no intention of initiating a conversation, subtle nonverbal behaviors efficiently regulate the degree of contact with nearby others. In focused interactions, nonverbal behaviors support the maintenance of both speaker and listener roles and manage smooth transitions in turn taking.

### Expressing Intimacy

Intimacy is a basic motive in interpersonal relationships. In the long run, mere statements of love, affection, and commitment are probably not enough to sustain close relationships. More than 50 years ago, the lyrics of a popular Mamas and Papas hit—“words of love, soft and tender, won’t win a girl’s heart anymore”—made an important point. Intimacy between friends, family members, or lovers is reflected, not only in what they say but also, in their nonverbal behavior. In general, as the intimacy between partners increases, they are more comfortable with closer distances, more gaze, touch, and increased facial expressiveness (Guerrero & Wiedmaier, 2013).

Relationship intimacy is signaled, not only by the level of nonverbal involvement between partners, but also by the specific type and timing of coordinated behaviors. Rapport is a construct that integrates different aspects of interpersonal behavior into a dyadic framework at the relationship level. According to Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990), rapport is manifested in partners demonstrating mutual attentiveness, positivity, and interpersonal coordination. Attentiveness and positivity are reflected in several components of nonverbal behavior already described here—close distances, mutual gaze, touch, and positive facial expressions. But the third component, interpersonal coordination, introduces a new behavioral element. Interpersonal coordination involves behavioral matching and synchrony. High-rapport partners
display similar (matched) patterns of behavior and move in a closely synchronized fashion. Interpersonal coordination increases over time in a relationship as experience with a partner’s typical behavior facilitates the efficient coordination of dyadic behavior.

The matching and synchrony of interpersonal behavior, also known as **behavioral mimicry**, has been widely researched in recent decades (Lakin, 2013). In general, the more positive one person feels toward a partner, the higher the probability of behavioral mimicry. This might take the form of a matching a smile, head movement, postural adjustment, or even foot jiggling. This behavioral mimicry typically happens automatically and outside of awareness in synchrony with a partner’s initial behavior. And this link between liking and mimicry is bi-directional. The recipient of behavioral mimicry typically views the initiating partner more positively after the mimicry. The example of behavioral mimicry highlights an important principle of bi-directionality in the intimacy-nonverbal communication link. Obviously, initial liking or love of a partner precipitates subsequent higher nonverbal involvement and behavioral mimicry with the partner. But the opposite causal direction is also operating. As close distances, increased gaze, smiling, and behavioral mimicry occur automatically and outside of awareness, people discover that they like their partners more.

### Exercising Influence

Influence is pervasive in everyday life. In our digital age, influence is commonly peddled on the Internet and social media, whether it takes the form of selling products or selling political candidates. But face-to-face influence in interactions is particularly powerful because of the immediacy of the other person’s presence. Much of this interpersonal influence takes the form of nonverbal communication. Exercising influence is goal-oriented behavior, both conscious and unconscious in nature, designed to affect the behavior, attitudes, and feelings of others. In many instances, nonverbal communication supplements a verbal message, but the nonverbal message can also stand alone. It is useful to distinguish among several different categories of nonverbal influence. First, **power and dominance** can engage environmental features, appearance, and behavioral routines (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002). For example, in business and institutional settings, dominant individuals may claim larger territories and occupy central, elevated locations that permit easier monitoring of those around them. Individuals who are taller and appear stronger have the advantage of signaling greater potency to surrounding others. In addition, dominant individuals often have the prerogative of being more expressive and taking the initiative in interactions with others (Burgoon & Dunbar, 2006).

Next, nonverbal communication can provide **feedback and reinforcement** to others. One example of this is parental interaction with infants and young children. Before children have extensive language facility, a parent can reinforce a young child with a smile or a hug and can discourage behavior with a stern look and a shake of the head. But such nonverbal patterns are not only directed at children. Subtle nonverbal exchanges between friends, family members, or co-workers can signal approval or disapproval. Of course, the positive routines can reinforce the partner’s behavior and increase the probability of its future occurrence.

Nonverbal communication also plays a critical role in **compliance and persuasion**. The focus of compliance is on changing a person’s specific behavior pattern. For example, in one study, a light touch on subjects’ arms as an experimenter made a request for help, increased subjects’ time helping, compared to those receiving the verbal request without any touch (Patterson et al., 2002).
1986). In the case of compliance, underlying attitude change is not assumed, but, in contrast, persuasion does involve attitude change. Consequently, different nonverbal tactics might be recommended to influence compliance than to influence attitude change. Often, high involvement, in the form of a close approach, gaze, and touch, can be more successful in gaining compliance than lower levels of involvement would be. That is, the high nonverbal involvement simply may pressure targets to comply, and compliance may be the easiest way to end an uncomfortable interaction. Because persuasion requires some cognitive processing of a verbal message, the pressure of high nonverbal involvement can be counter-productive by interfering with message processing. In such a case, more moderate or appropriate levels of nonverbal involvement can facilitate message processing and eventual persuasion (Albert & Dabbs, 1970).

A final category of exercising influence is deception. In theory, successful deception requires that liars manage their nonverbal behavior to be consistent with the content of a lie. Presumably, when liars are apprehensive about getting caught in their lies, or even feel guilty about lying, there is a higher probability of their displaying some inconsistency between their words and the accompanying nonverbal behavior. These inconsistencies might be seen in facial expressions, vocal cues, or body movement, and can alert the targets of such comments to their deceptiveness. Nevertheless, across scores of studies on deception, the hit-rate in detecting deception averages about 55%, only slightly above chance (Vrij, 2006). There are a number of possible reasons for the poor accuracy in detecting deception. According to Vrij, people are more likely to believe attractive and baby-faced individuals, even when they are lying. And there are large individual differences in people’s baseline behavior. For example, it is easy to misinterpret the behavior of normally anxious individuals as indicating deception. Additionally, individuals often want to believe their partners and may be less sensitive to behaviors that might signal deception. Finally, people often look at the wrong behaviors. For example, people commonly believe that liars do not maintain eye contact, but gaze avoidance is not a reliable cue for deception.

Managing Impressions

Appearance cues and nonverbal behavior are basic elements in managing impressions. In first meetings, before a word is said, physical appearance and nonverbal behavior automatically precipitate impressions of a partner. Appearance, clothing and grooming, and nonverbal behavior can be used strategically to create a particular image (DePaulo, 1992; Keating, 2006). It is also important to appreciate that successful impression management requires more than a pleasing appearance and expressive behavior—that is, more than just the sending side of nonverbal communication. In interactions, individuals also have to read the nonverbal behavior of their partners, the receiving side of nonverbal communication. In other words, people simultaneously have to initiate the goal-oriented behavior and attend to their partner’s evaluative reactions to their attempted impression management. Thus, when someone is trying to create a favorable impression, a smile, nod, and relaxed behavior from the partner signal a favorable response. In contrast, a frown and head shake signal an unfavorable response and the need to modify the impression management behavior. In most cases, these parallel sending and receiving processes occur relatively automatically, but sometimes additional cognitive resources are needed to make adjustments (Patterson, 1995). For example, if an initial attempt to create a
particular impression seems ineffective, a person may have to invest more thought in managing subsequent behavior.

In some circumstances, partners collaborate behaviorally in presenting a couple identity or image. For example, a romantically involved couple is likely to hold hands as they enter a social gathering with many strangers. That is, the hand holding establishes their couple identity to people who do not know them. Sometimes, similar attachment cues can be used deceptively. A feuding husband and wife on the verge of divorce might enter the family holiday dinner holding hands and smiling at one another. This “performance” might be designed to create the impression of a happily married couple in front of family members and cover their discord. But when they leave the dinner, their next communication is with their respective lawyers. Finally, a different kind of deceptive identity may enlisted by a romantic pair trying to hide their true relationship. In the work place, lovers in a frowned-upon affair may exaggerate their avoidance of one another. That is, the avoidance of even the casual exchanges common among co-workers is designed to establish the absence of a relationship. Of course, if such impression management is too extreme, it may lead to suspicion among co-workers and may sabotage the lovers’ goal.

Conclusion

This article employs a systems approach in discussing the nature and complexity of nonverbal interpersonal communication. That is, understanding the utility of specific nonverbal exchanges requires attention to a variety of distal and proximate factors that combine in affecting the course of interaction. Several basic themes of this systems approach merit attention including: (a) a functional emphasis; (b) a focus on patterns of behavior; (c) specification of the role of basic determinants of nonverbal communication; and (d) a highlighting of the importance of settings and the immediate environment.

This discussion has focused primarily on the important role of the determinants in, and the functional utility of, nonverbal interpersonal communication. Before interactions commence, biology, culture, gender, and personality combine to set relative limits on (a) people’s conscious and unconscious goals, (b) the social settings selected, and (c) the likely range of nonverbal communication patterns. In effect, these determinant factors constitute the “baggage” that individuals bring to any setting in influencing patterns of nonverbal communication. The environment plays an additional role in further directing the course of interaction. In particular, the specific behavior setting, with its complementary selection pressures, social norms, physical structure, and goal-cueing properties, provides further constraint on nonverbal exchange. Understanding specific interaction sequences is facilitated by a functional perspective. That is, what is the practical utility of particular patterns of nonverbal communication between partners? The functions posited here—providing information, regulating interaction, expressing intimacy, exercising influence, and managing impressions—constitute a useful categorization of the utilities of nonverbal communication. Continuing research will help in assessing the merits of this systems approach to nonverbal communication and will lead to even more interesting questions about interpersonal interaction.

Further Reading
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References


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Notes:

(1.) Although gestures can be an important element in interactions, they are not included in this list of dynamic components in the nonverbal system. Most gesture researchers classify gestures as part of the linguistic system because they are so closely tied to speech processes (e.g., McNeill, 1985).

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