Nonverbal Communication

from Dictionary of Information Science and Technology

the messages conveyed through gesture, body language, facial expression, eye contact, or prosodic features such as intonation and voice quality (Park, 2008)

Nonverbal Communication

from The Corsini Encyclopedia of Psychology and Behavioral Science

Although language is obviously important in interactions, the nonverbal side of communication usually has a greater impact on how we think about others and relate to them. Nonverbal communication may be defined as the sending and/or receiving of information and influence through one’s immediate environment, appearance, and nonverbal behavior (Patterson, 2002). Unlike verbal communication, nonverbal communication is always “on” in social settings, with the sending and receiving sides operating simultaneously. That is, even in the absence of conversation, we are continually sending and receiving nonverbal signals. Although verbal communication requires some attention and deliberation, nonverbal communication often operates automatically and outside of awareness. In turn, this leads to another characteristic—cognitive efficiency. Thus, the nonverbal system typically runs with minimal effort, freeing cognitive resources for more demanding activities.

Component Elements

A number of loosely related cues and behaviors comprise the nonverbal system of communication. First, the immediate physical environment for interactions may often be selected, or even manipulated, to affect the course of interaction. Room size, the design and arrangement of furniture, and the quality of furnishings also reflect status and reinforce power differences, especially in the workplace. Appearance cues quickly signal gender, race, age, attractiveness, and other characteristics affecting expectancies about others and how we interact with them. Next, distance and arrangement are important in overall involvement between people and constrain other components in nonverbal communication. The visual channel is the primary means of gathering information about others, and sustained mutual gaze increases the intensity of interactions.

Facial expressions are not only signs of emotions, but also of intentions, that is, they indicate how people are likely to act (Fridlund, 1994). For example, an “angry” face is not simply an indicator of underlying anger but, more importantly, a threat. Posture and movement reflect mood, interest, and openness to interaction. Gestures are a specific form of movement that typically accompany speech, qualify its meaning, and facilitate fluid speaking. Touch is an intimate behavior that can signal affection, support, comfort, and power. Vocal cues are characteristics of speech, such as pitch, loudness, tempo, and intonation that modify the meaning of verbal comments and indicate speakers’ feelings. Finally, olfactory cues, including naturally occurring scents called pheromones, have powerful effects on our judgments and behavior. Although it is convenient to focus on these components in isolation, they are sent and received in a holistic fashion as relatively coordinated patterns. Thus, the meaning and impact of any single component is always qualified by the larger pattern of components.

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Determinants

Several factors contribute to habitual tendencies in sending and receiving nonverbal communication. First, over the course of evolution, biology has shaped how we communicate with one another. Hardwired preferences for specific characteristics in mate selection, attention to and nurturing behavior with offspring, and sensitivity to expressive behavior have been selected over the course of evolution because they are adaptive. Culture provides another level of influence, learned over time, promoting a common, beneficial pattern of communicating within a particular society. For example, people in Eastern cultures that are more collectivistic in orientation tend to be less expressive in public settings than are people in Western, more individualistic cultures.

Next, biology and culture combine in determining gender differences in communication styles and nonverbal sensitivity. In general, females are more expressive and better judges of nonverbal communication than are males. Finally, individual differences in personality shape habitual patterns in sending and receiving nonverbal behavior. For example, compared to nonanxious people, socially anxious individuals typically avoid high levels of nonverbal involvement (e.g., close approaches, more gaze, and increased expressiveness) and are less accurate in judging others’ nonverbal behavior. The combination of these determinants shapes habitual patterns of nonverbal communication.

Nevertheless, patterns of nonverbal communication are also affected by the immediate setting, interpersonal goals, and our interaction partners.

Functions of Nonverbal Communication

A first function of nonverbal communication is providing information. Through our immediate physical environment, appearance, and nonverbal behavior, we signal basic information about emotions, intentions, and attitudes. In fact, “thin slices” of behavior lasting from just a few seconds to a few minutes are sufficient for making relatively accurate and adaptive judgments about personality and motivation (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992). These rapid and often automatic judgments help us anticipate how others are likely to act and adjust our behavior appropriately.

Next, regulating interaction refers to the role of nonverbal behavior in facilitating the routine give-and-take between people in social settings. Subtle, often automatic, behavioral changes help to coordinate the give-and-take of conversations without intruding on the verbal content. For example, speakers ending a conversational turn cease gesturing, pause longer, change vocal cues, and usually look at the listener. In a complementary fashion, listeners about to take a speaking turn typically take an audible inhalation, adjust their posture, and start a gesture. Nonverbal behaviors are at the core of our unspoken interactions with strangers. In choosing a seat in a waiting room or simply passing a stranger on the sidewalk, adjustments in spacing, gaze, and facial expression regulate privacy or signal openness to others (Patterson et al., 2007).

Expressing intimacy identifies the affect-driven function at the core of relationships. In general, people in more intimate relationships are more comfortable with closer distances, higher levels of gaze, greater expressiveness, and more frequent touch. Close approaches, eye contact, and touch may also be employed in exercising influence. That is, nonverbal communication may be used to achieve specific interpersonal goals. A smile and a pat on the back may reinforce someone for a desirable behavior. In contrast, a close approach and a stare may be a threat. Nonverbal behavior is also an important part of successful deception. Finally, nonverbal communication is critical in managing impressions. In employment interviews, on first dates, or when meeting someone important, people make deliberate
decisions about what to wear and carefully monitor their behavior to create a positive impression. Sometimes collaborative nonverbal displays are coordinated to create or reinforce particular images. For example, a feuding husband and wife may hold hands and smile in front of family members to cover their conflict.

In summary, the nonverbal system is an adaptive means of communication that typically operates automatically and often outside of awareness. There are a variety of identifiable components in the nonverbal system, but their impact and meaning is a product of how the elements are coordinated in holistic patterns. Biology, culture, gender, and personality are the primary determinants shaping the patterns of nonverbal communication. Finally, the adaptive nature of nonverbal communication is evident in several functions including providing information, regulating interaction, expressing intimacy, exercising influence, and managing impressions.

See also
Interpersonal Relationships

References

Suggested Readings

MILES L. PATTERSON
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