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Reading People

Introduction to the World of Nonverbal Behavior

David Matsumoto

San Francisco State University and Humintell, LLC

Mark G. Frank

University at Buffalo, State University of New York

Hyi Sung Hwang

San Francisco State University and Humintell, LLC

You are walking home late at night. You notice a man is walking toward you. He suddenly quickens his pace, body leaning forward, hands out in fists moving rhythmically with his stride. His eyebrows are drawn down in the middle. His eyes are wide. His lips are tight. He looks right at you.

How did this story make you feel? What did you think was going to happen? Notice that whatever assessment you made was based exclusively on the nonverbal behavior of this man. You did not need to hear a single word spoken; yet you likely got a clear and distinct impression from his behaviors.

This book is about nonverbal communication. We hope to explain the current science of nonverbal communication but also show how it is used in the real world, with perspectives written by professionals from the legal, security, police, medical, marketing, negotiation, and people skills–training worlds. We hope to identify why the man in the vignette would display those behaviors, and why you would have the reaction you did.

This introductory chapter describes some overarching aspects of nonverbal communication that will help us better comprehend the science and experiences spelled out in this book. We will identify where nonverbal communication fits in with science, provide some history of the study, and show how it relates to verbal communication.

What Is Nonverbal Communication?

Although “language” often comes to mind first when considering communication, no discussion of communication is complete without the inclusion of nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication has been referred to as “body language” in popular culture since the publication of Julius Fast’s book of the same name in 1970. Researchers, however, have defined nonverbal communication as encompassing almost all of human communication except the spoken or written word (Knapp, 1972). We also define nonverbal communication as *the transfer and exchange of messages in any and all modalities that do not involve words*. As we discuss shortly, one of the major ways by which nonverbal communication occurs is through *nonverbal behaviors*, which are behaviors that occur during communication that do *not* include verbal language. But our definition of nonverbal communication implies that it is more than body language. It can be in the distance people stand when they converse. It can be in the sweat stains in their armpits. It can be in the design of the room. Nonverbal communication is a broader category than nonverbal behaviors, encompassing the way you dress, the placement of your office within a larger building, the use of time, the bumper stickers you place on your car, or the arrangement, lighting, or color of your room (Henley, 1977). The exact boundary of nonverbal communication, as part of communication, is a point of contention.

One source of messages in nonverbal communication is the *environment* or *context*. Different houses send different messages about their occupants. This is accomplished through the use of color, lighting, heat, fabric textures, photos, and so forth. Restaurants will capitalize on the messages sent by these

environmental factors to influence the behaviors and impressions of diners. Fast-food restaurants use active, bright colors like orange, yellow, and red, in a well-lit environment with hard plastic seating. These messages subtly urge diners to eat more food more quickly and to not feel comfortable lounging around afterward so that the fast-food restaurants can get a quick turnover in order to maximize their profits. In contrast, elegant restaurants use dimmer lighting, softer and darker colors, and more comfortable chairs to communicate a more intimate impression, subtly urging diners to feel comfortable and stay around for dessert and coffee; this will cause diners to spend more per visit, as well as ensure repeat business through positive word of mouth. Designers of gambling casinos also know well about the power of creating an environment to send a message. And people can make relatively accurate judgments of the occupant's personalities just by viewing a room (Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002). Thus the nonverbal messages sent by the environment can help guide the behaviors that occur within that environment.

Another source of nonverbal messages is one's *physical characteristics* or *appearance*. By physical characteristics, we mean the static physical appearance or smell of a person, including one's height and weight, skin color, hair, eyebrows, cheeks, chin, proportion of eyes, nose, and chin size, as well as odors. Sheldon (1940) believed that different body types were predictive of personality; endomorphs (heavier, obese, rounder, softer looking) were sociable and pleasant, mesomorphs (angular, muscular, harder looking) were leaders and strong-willed, and ectomorphs (thin, frail, brittle looking) were withdrawn, smart, and nervous. The media capitalizes on this association by casting actors and actresses accordingly; notice how the leading man is almost always a dynamic mesomorph, the comic relief is almost always the sociable, chubby endomorph, and the smart person is almost always the nerdy, skinny ectomorph. Although these beliefs persist, there is no strong evidence that body types predict personality.

Moreover, people have historically made the same judgments of personality based upon facial appearance. Chinese face reading, for example, is based on observations of the structure of a person's face. The ancient Chinese were not the only ones to do this; in the late 1800s, Europeans led by Caesar Lombroso felt they could characterize criminal personalities based upon the heaviness of one's eyebrows and jaw (Gould, 1981). As with the body research, there has been no evidence that one can pick accurately criminals by their facial appearance. Research in the 1980s by other scientists found that adult humans with more babyish-looking faces—defined by a higher forehead, proportionally larger eyes, and smaller nose—are seen as more naïve, honest, and less likely to be picked as a leader (Berry & McArthur, 1986). However, research in the 1950s still best sums up the findings in this

area: although people have reliably assigned personalities to particular faces, their assignments were not accurate (Secord, Dukes, & Bevan, 1954).

Odors also send messages, both at a conscious and unconscious level. At a conscious level, perfumes and aftershaves and lack of body odor send messages about hygiene in North America, but such messages are not so clear in other cultures. At a subconscious level, males send pheromones that, when placed under the nose of a woman, make her judge a man as more attractive, and men's testosterone levels will rise when they are exposed to the scent of an ovulating woman (Miller & Maner, 2010). Infants can also recognize the smell of their mothers and will show strong preferences for items that smell of Mom. Many adults will also note how they are comforted by the smell of loved ones (reviewed in Knapp & Hall, 2006).

Physical appearance clues also include what are called artifactual clues, such as jewelry, clothes, glasses, and so forth. People wearing glasses are seen as being smarter. Jewelry sends messages about one's socioeconomic or marital status. For example, North Americans signal their married status by wearing a band on their left "ring" finger, whereas Europeans often wear this signal on the right ring finger. Clothing also sends messages about income, group membership, and even respect for others. The person who wears a T-shirt and jeans to a formal occasion sends a message about how he or she feels about that occasion, although, as in the previous instances, this message can be inaccurate.

Nonverbal communication also occurs in the *dynamic actions* of the face, voice, and body. These are known as *nonverbal behaviors*. Nonverbal behavior intrigues us. We see the way a person looks, the way he or she moves, and how he or she sounds. Nonverbal messages are transmitted through multiple nonverbal *channels*, which include facial expressions, vocal cues, gestures, body postures, interpersonal distance, touching, and gaze. We call these *channels* because, like channels on a television, they are each capable of sending their own distinct message. Our biology, learning, and culture influence these actions. This book will focus on these dynamic expressive elements of nonverbal communication, and we will limit our description of the static elements. We will address these dynamic nonverbal behaviors in more detail in Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

What Are the Functions of Nonverbal Communication?

Nonverbal communication serves a number of functions (Harrison, 1973). For example, nonverbal communication can *define* communication by providing the backdrop for communication—quiet, dimly lit rooms suggest to

people that the communication that occurs within that environment should also be quiet and hushed (like in a religious venue). Brightly lit rooms, with active colors like yellow and orange, communicate active, upbeat activities. It could also be the behavior or dress of others in the room. If others are moving calmly, or crying, and/or wearing formal clothes, that sends a message quite distinct from a room full of people moving with a bounce in their step, laughing, and wearing Hawaiian shirts.

Nonverbal communication can also *regulate* our verbal communication. Much of our conversations are regulated by nonverbal cues so subtle that the average person does not notice them. For example, people nod and smile at particular moments during a face-to-face conversation. This signals to the talker that the listener understands and that the talker should continue talking. When the talker is finished, he or she will drop his or her voice tone and loudness to let the listener know. If the talker wishes to continue talking, he or she will fill the pauses that occur with a louder voice, and with many “umms, ahhs” and so forth. These subtle nonverbal signals are called “back channel” communication, because they are not the main focus of communication. Instead they function at the periphery of communication. We will describe in more detail in Chapter 3, *The Voice*, how we can converse without constantly speaking over each other.

Nonverbal communication can *be the message* itself. A smile indicates joy. A frown indicates unhappiness. A wrinkled nose, accompanied by the phrase “I love it” may indicate deception. A wave of the hand signifies “good-bye.” A quiver in the voice signifies distress. Raising your index finger to your lips signifies “shhh” or “be quiet,” yet raising the index finger into the air in a thrusting manner may mean “We’re number one!” (Raising other fingers has entirely different meanings too!) No words are needed to send these messages. Note that most of these meanings are culturally determined, but some of them are not. We will address these in more detail in Chapters 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6 on the face, voice, body, culture, and deception, respectively.

What Are the Structures and Properties of Nonverbal Communication?

Scholars have suggested that nonverbal messages conform to many of the same properties as verbal communication—properties such as structured rules, intentionality, awareness, how much of it is covert or overt, control, and how private or public it is—but in slightly different ways (Andersen, 1999; Burgoon, Buller, & Woodall, 1996). In order to communicate meaning,

nonverbal messages must be rule bound, like speech. For example, the sentence, “Floats otter the on sea the” does not make much sense because it does not conform to certain rules applying to word order. “The otter floats on the sea” does follow those rules and, thus, makes sense. Nonverbal communication has similar properties, and rule violations change their meanings. In North America, there are often unspoken rules that guide where we can touch people and when we can do it. We may not hug our students, but we might give a congratulatory hug when they successfully defend their thesis. Male teachers might at some point touch a female student on her forearm, likely not touch her on the small of her back, and definitely not touch her on her backside. They would apply the same touch rules to a male student. However, under very narrow circumstances, they might be able to touch a male student on the rear end—if they were playing on the same intramural basketball team, and this male student made a great play, he might get a congratulatory slap on the butt. But that same student would not receive that congratulatory slap on the butt when he turned in his term paper two days early. So again culture and situation conspire to set some rules—and if they are violated, we might cause resentment, or even a lawsuit. As we’ll see in Chapter 5, situation and culture drive a lot of these differences.

We assume that the vast majority of spoken communication is *intentional*; we choose the words we speak. Likewise, most nonverbal communication is intentional. We deliberately wave to people or give them an insulting finger gesture. Scientists have argued, however, that a greater proportion of nonverbal communication is unintentional (Ekman, 1985). For example, some people may intend to communicate calmness and maturity about the death of their cat, and yet they often unintentionally communicate sadness through their voice tone and facial expression.

Similarly, people are also less *aware* of their nonverbal communication compared to their verbal communication. Except for unusual circumstances, people can hear all that they speak. People are mostly aware of some of their nonverbal communication, for example, the clothes they wear, the gestures they use, and the expressions they show—but not always. For example, when lying, a person may feel afraid and yet feel he or she was able to hide that fear. Despite their beliefs, liars are often unaware that in fact they are expressing clear signs of fear in their face, posture, or speech (Hurley & Frank, 2011). More on this in Chapter 6.

Verbal communication is also more *overt*, and nonverbal behavior is more *covert*. People are formally trained in their verbal behavior in the schools. Nonverbal communication is less obvious, as in subtle facial expressions and barely perceptible changes in voice tone, and people are not typically formally trained in their nonverbal communication. For example,

children are not as often given lessons on how close to stand to others when talking or how to express anger in a facial expression. Studies of blind and sighted people show that their spontaneous expressions look similar, but their deliberately posed expressions are much easier to tell apart (see Matsumoto & Willingham, 2009, for a review).

Nonverbal communication is also less *controllable* than verbal communication. Verbal communication is easy to suppress, or to express, and people choose the words they use. Although much of nonverbal communication follows the same pattern, e.g., people choose to display a hand gesture, nonverbal communication is much more likely to have an unbidden quality to it. This is the smile that creeps onto one's face when one knows he or she should not be laughing (Frank, 2003). This is the person who is instructed to not smile when being interrogated but still smiles, even though the person admits trying to conceal his or her smile (Hurley & Frank, 2011).

Finally, verbal communication is more *public* than nonverbal communication. Speaking typically requires an audible or visible message that is available for others to hear or see, not just the intended target of the communication. Once public, this communication is also fodder for public discussion. In contrast, nonverbal communication tends to be fodder for private conversation. When political candidates spoke in the past, people publicly discussed and debated their policies, not their shoes or their gestures. This trend has changed in recent times, where it seems there is now as much focus on how the candidate delivers a message as the message he or she delivers. This has gotten to the point that every 24-hour news channel will have on at some point some alleged expert to analyze the nonverbal behaviors of people of interest, such as politicians, criminal suspects, athletes, and so forth.

What Is the Relationship Between Verbal and Nonverbal Communication?

Ekman & Friesen proposed that there are six ways in which verbal and nonverbal communication relate (Ekman & Friesen, 1969). They suggested that nonverbal communication can *substitute* for verbal communication, as well as *repeat*, *contradict*, *complement*, *accent*, and *regulate* verbal communication.

Substitution refers to the idea that nonverbal communication can be substituted for verbal communication. If asked whether we want another helping of our mother's wonderful pasta, we can nod our heads up and down to signify "yes," rather than attempting to utter the word "yes" through a mouthful of spaghetti.

Nonverbal communication can also *repeat* verbal communication. People can simultaneously speak the word “no” and shake their heads side to side. Repeating and substitution seem like the same idea, but *substitute* means someone doesn’t speak the word or phrase represented by the nonverbal gesture, whereas *repeat* means he or she does speak the word or phrase.

But sometimes these verbal and nonverbal signals will *contradict* each other. Someone might utter the phrase, “This will be fun” and yet display a facial expression of disgust as he or she speaks those words. This is sarcasm; the words seem positive, yet the facial expression is negative.

Nonverbal communication can also *complement* verbal communication. People might say, “I’ve had a tough day,” and at the same time their shoulders are slumped, and they drag their feet. Note that slumped shoulders and dragging feet can express a number of things (sadness, fatigue, injury, day-dreaming), but in conjunction with the verbal message of “I’ve had a tough day” they enrich and focus the message.

Sometimes nonverbal communication will simply *accent* a particular part of a spoken verbal communication. Someone might speak the phrase, “It is important to punctuate your speech with nonverbal gestures” while rhythmically moving one hand up and down whilst pronouncing each syllable in the word “punctuate.” In this instance, the moving hand gestures for the word “punctuate” will accent that word, thus letting the listener know that this concept is important.

Finally, nonverbal communication can *regulate* verbal communication. As discussed earlier, there are various unspoken rules regulating conversations that are displayed nonverbally, with what is called backchannel communication. This helps to keep the verbal communication organized and the conversation efficient.

Who Studies Nonverbal Communication?

Nonverbal communication is an area of study that straddles many disciplines—sociology, psychology, anthropology, communication, and even art, computer science, and criminal justice. Each of these fields tends to focus on a slightly different aspect of nonverbal communication. For example, psychology might focus on the nonverbal expression of emotions; anthropology might focus on the use of interpersonal space in different cultures; computer science may focus on making realistic looking and acting human agents or avatars; and communication might focus on the content of the message. But there is more overlap amongst these fields than divergence.

Regardless of modern science in nonverbal communication, it appears that all cultures have had for centuries written or oral traditions expressing the importance of nonverbal communication to their basic understanding of human beings. For example, over thousands of years Chinese culture has developed a set of rules on how to judge the character and personality of an individual by observing the size, shape, and relative positions of the nose, eyes, eyebrows, chin, cheeks, and forehead (known as Chinese face reading). Someone with wide-set eyes would be a “broadminded” person, or someone with a high forehead would be a “smart” person. Although there does not seem to be much scientific evidence that facial characteristics predict personality, modern people still believe this to be valid.

Ancient Greek culture also relied upon nonverbal communication to understand people. The playwright Theophrastus created a list of “31 types of men” that he made available to other playwrights to assist them in the creation of characters for their plays. Theophrastus relied upon insights gleaned from nonverbal communication to describe these personalities; for example, the penurious man doesn’t wear his sandals until noon; or the sanguine man has slumped shoulders. We still rely upon nonverbal insights like these to judge people’s personalities and emotions.

In India, the sacred Hindu texts called the *Veda*, written approximately 1,000 years BCE, described the nonverbal characteristics of a liar as someone who, when questioned, rubs his big toe along the ground, looks down, and doesn’t make eye contact. Late twentieth-century research based on North Americans shows that people still concur with the *Veda* on this description of a liar.

Research into African history has shown that one of the characteristics of an effective chief was his ability to move his subjects with the power of his speeches, made particularly potent by the heavy use of nonverbal communication. This legacy is apparent in the traditions of the predominantly African American churches in America. These same principles of strong body language and voice tone accompanying speeches have now been adopted in various forms by the rest of American society and politics because of their ability to persuade above and beyond well-crafted words. We will discuss in Chapter 5 the role of culture in shaping nonverbal communication.

What Is the Importance of Nonverbal Communication in Everyday Life?

What are you missing in face-to-face interactions? Given the wealth of information that nonverbal behaviors communicate, it is no wonder that studies that have compared the relative contributions of verbal versus nonverbal

behaviors in conveying messages report that the vast majority of the messages communicated are nonverbal (Friedman, 1978). Depending on the study, the estimated amount of information communicated nonverbally ranges between 65% and 95% of the total messages conveyed. This is ironic, especially because people most consciously attend to the verbal language when interacting with and judging others (Ekman, Friesen, O'Sullivan, & Scherer, 1980; O'Sullivan, Ekman, Friesen, & Scherer, 1985). Nonverbal behaviors are part of the “hidden dimension” of communication, a silent language (Hall, 1966, 1973). If you do *not* pay attention to the nonverbal behavior there is a great chance that you are missing much of what is actually being communicated by the other person. Thus, while active listening is always good, active observation is also necessary.

We all have a bias to pay attention too exclusively to the words being spoken, and there's a reason for this bias in our person perception. From the time we are very young we learn to communicate very precisely with words. We go to school and learn about grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, spelling, reading, and writing. In the US we learn to judge others by the words they use, and we are told that we need to be effective communicators via the words we choose to use.

Contrarily, there are no schools or classes on nonverbal behavior. Despite the obvious importance of nonverbal behavior in communication, all of our training in this important aspect of communication is done on the job. We learn how to manage our nonverbal displays from our parents, families, teachers, bosses, and friends. But all of this is done informally, often implicitly.

This bias is even more pronounced if we are in a situation where we are evaluating the credibility of what someone else is saying, evaluating truthfulness, or detecting deception. In these situations, we attend even more strongly to the words being spoken—the stories being told—in order to find some evidence of an inconsistency in what is being said (Ekman et al., 1980; O'Sullivan et al., 1985). This is especially unfortunate because these are precisely the times when nonverbal behavior can be so important, and so telling.¹

Goal and Outline of the Remainder of the Book: Science and Application

This book brings together for the first time a blending of the science and practice of nonverbal behaviors. The book is divided into two parts. In Part I, we will present the state of the art in scientific research literature regarding nonverbal behaviors. These chapters will describe what we have learned through the years through scientific research and the current state of knowledge in the field. Chapter 2 deals with facial expressions; Chapter 3 deals

with voice; Chapter 4 with body and gestures; Chapter 5 with culture. In Chapter 6 we bring all of these together and summarize the research on nonverbal behaviors associated with deception and lying, as this is a topic and concern for all practitioners.

Part II of this book puts nonverbal communication back front and center into everyday life—a world where nonverbal communication affects interpersonal encounters ranging from police interviews, first dates, doctor visits, job interviews, negotiation, airline travel, and advertising. In Part II we bring together chapters from a number of practitioners in a wide variety of professions who use the power of nonverbal behaviors as an active and important part of their professional work. We will hear from practitioners who work in the real world and learn how they have used nonverbal communication in their jobs, how it has helped them, and what they found about some of the limits in using it in the real world. This part of the book is loosely arranged around major categories of professions, including law enforcement and national security, officers of the court (lawyers and judges), negotiators, human skills trainers, and members of the health care profession.

In Chapter 18 we end this book by reapplying the eye of the scientist to these real-world accounts put forth by our practitioners, who are all considered amongst the best people in their fields, to see what principles we can derive from their experience and expertise. We believe that any of our scientific research findings in nonverbal communication, be they from the controlled laboratory conditions or otherwise, really don't count until we can see them in the real world, through the wild and wooly contexts that we face every single day.

Note

1. This is not to imply that paying attention to the words is not important. Of course it is extremely important. But what we are saying is that if you don't pay attention to the nonverbal behaviors as well you will be missing a large amount of the messages being conveyed.

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