ENCYCLOPEDIA OF Social Psychology

SAGE reference

Nonverbal Cues and Communication

Definition

Nonverbal cues are all potentially informative **behaviors** that are not purely linguistic in content. Visible **nonverbal** cues include facial expressions, head movements, posture, body and hand movements, selfand other-touching, leg positions and movements, interpersonal gaze, directness of interpersonal orientation, interpersonal distance, and synchrony or mimicry between people. Auditory **nonverbal** cues include discrete nonlinguistic vocal sounds (e.g., sighs) as well as qualities of the voice such as pitch and pitch variation, loudness, speed and speed variation, and tonal qualities (e.g., nasality, breathiness). Several additional **behaviors** are often included among **nonverbal** cues even though they are closely related to **speech**: interruptions, pauses and hesitations, listener responses (such as "uh-huh" uttered while another is speaking), and dysfluencies in **speech**. Clothing, hairstyle, and adornments, as well as physiognomy (such as height or facial features) are also considered to be **nonverbal** cues.

Psychologists' interest in **nonverbal** cues focuses on its relation to encoded meaning, relation to verbal messages, social impact, and development, and on differences between groups and individuals in their **nonverbal behavior** or skill in using and understanding **nonverbal** cues. **Nonverbal behavior** is ubiquitous throughout the animal kingdom, with numerous documented resemblances between the **nonverbal behaviors** of higher primates and humans. **Nonverbal behavior** is studied in many disciplines, including ethology, anthropology, sociology, and medicine, as well as all the subdisciplines of psychology. The content of the *Journal of* **Nonverbal Behavior** reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the field.

The distinction between **nonverbal behavior** and **nonverbal** communication is important, but not always easy to maintain in practice. **Nonverbal behavior** includes **behavior** that might be emitted without the awareness of the encoder (the one conveying the information), whereas **nonverbal** communication refers to a more active process whereby encoder and decoder (the one receiving the information) emit and interpret **behaviors** according to a shared meaning code. Because it is often difficult to distinguish the two, the terms **nonverbal behavior** and **nonverbal** *communication* are used interchangeably in this entry.

Interpretations

Nonverbal cues emitted by a person are likely to be interpreted by others, whether correctly or not, allowing for misunderstandings to occur. The process of drawing inferences from **nonverbal** cues is often not in conscious awareness; similarly, encoders may or may not be aware of the cues they are sending. The unintentional conveyance of veridical information through **nonverbal** cues is called *leakage.*

Nonverbal cues often accompany spoken words, and when they do, the **nonverbal** cues can augment or contradict the meanings of the words as well as combine with the words to produce unique messages, as in sarcasm, which involves the pairing of contradictory messages through verbal and **nonverbal** channels. Research has explored the impact of mixed verbal and **nonverbal** messages.

Some **nonverbal behaviors** have distinct meanings, most notably the hand gestures called emblems that have

direct verbal translations (such as the "A-okay" sign or the "thumbs up" sign in North American usage). However, most **nonverbal** cues have multiple and often ambiguous meanings that depend on other information for correct interpretation (associated words, situational context, antecedent events, other cues, etc.). Some **nonverbal behaviors** are discrete (i.e., have distinct on-off properties), examples being nodding, blinking, pausing, and gestural emblems. Others are continuous, such as the fluid movements of the hands while speaking (called **speech**-dependent gestures), vocal qualities, and movement style.

The face and voice have been extensively studied relative to emotional expression, with at least six emotions having characteristic configurations of facial muscle movements and a variety of acoustic correlates. **Nonverbal** cues can also contribute to a person's emotional experience and self-regulation via physiological feedback processes; engaging in certain **behaviors** can produce the associated emotions.

Although it is commonly assumed that the main function of **nonverbal behavior** is to convey emotions, this is only one of several important purposes served by **nonverbal behavior** in daily life. **Nonverbal** cues are used to convey interpersonal attitudes, such as dominance, affiliativeness, or insult. **Nonverbal** cues of the face, eyes, voice, and hands are used in the regulation of turn-taking in conversation, and also for purposes of providing feedback regarding comprehension and interest to a speaker. Face and hand movements serve dialogic functions, for example, to illustrate, comment, refer, and dramatize. **Speech**-dependent gestures also contribute to fluent **speech** by facilitating word retrieval; speakers lose fluency and complexity if they are constrained from gesturing while speaking. **Nonverbal** cues can also arise from cognitive activity, as when hard thinking produces a furrowed brow or averted gaze.

The coordination of **nonverbal behavior** between people helps produce and maintain desired levels of arousal and intimacy. People (including infants) often mimic, reciprocate, or synchronize their movements with others. Such **behavior** matching can contribute to rapport. However, behavioral compensation is also a common occurrence; one person adjusts his or her **behavior** to compensate for another's **behaviors**, for example, by gazing less at another, or backing up, if the other is standing too close.

Another important function of **nonverbal behavior** is self-presentation, that is, to represent oneself in a desired way (as honest, nice, brave, competent, etc.). Related to self-presentation are societal display rules, conventions regarding what kinds of expressions are appropriate at what times and by whom. Examples are norms for how to behave nonverbally in different social situations (when disappointed, at a funeral, etc.) and norms that produce different degrees of outward emotional expressiveness in men and women. At one extreme of self-presentation is deliberate deception.

Nonverbal cues convey information, both intentionally and unintentionally, about emotions, attitudes, personality traits, intelligence, intentions, mental and physical health, physical characteristics, social group membership, deception, and roles, to give a few examples. However, the effects are often small in magnitude, indicating much variation in the predictability of such associations.

The following is a very short list of the many associations that have been found: Lying is associated with blinking, hesitations, and finger movements; a smile of true enjoyment can be distinguished from a polite, social smile by the movement of the muscles at the corner of the eyes; in friendly interaction, more gaze signifies a more positive attitude; persons of higher status or dominance engage in relatively less gazing while listening and relatively more gazing while speaking, and also speak louder and interrupt more; under stress, the pitch of the voice rises; more self-touching is associated with anxiety; women differ from men on a wide variety of **nonverbal behaviors** (including more smiling and gazing); Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and Latin American cultures—called contact cultures—display more interpersonal touching and closer interaction distances in public than do noncontact cultures (Asia, Northern Europe); and the personality trait of extraversion is associated with louder and more fluent **speech** and heightened levels of gaze. Of course, these are generalizations for which many exceptions can be found.

Nonverbal cues play a role in social influence, for example, persuasion and interpersonal expectancy effects, also called self-fulfilling prophecies. In the latter, one person's beliefs or expectations for another person can be fulfilled via **nonverbal** cues in a process that can be out of awareness for both parties. Thus, a teacher may be especially warm and nonverbally encouraging to a student believed to be very smart, or a new acquaintance may treat you coolly if he or she has heard you are not a nice person. In both cases, the expected **behavior** will actually be produced if the student responds with heightened motivation and achievement (confirming the teacher's belief) or if you reciprocate the other's coolness (confirming the acquaintance's belief).

Individuals and groups differ in the accuracy with which they convey information via **nonverbal** cues (called encoding, or sending accuracy) and interpret others' **nonverbal** cues (called decoding, or receiving accuracy). Researchers measure encoding accuracy by asking expressors to imagine or pose the intended message, by observing them in specific situations that arouse an intended state, or by observing them displaying their characteristic **behavior** styles. Accuracy in decoding **nonverbal** cues is measured by asking perceivers to watch or listen to **nonverbal behaviors**, either live or recorded, and to make assessments of the meanings of the cues (or to recall what **behaviors** occurred). The measurement of accuracy requires the establishment of a criterion for deciding what state or trait is actually conveyed in the stimulus.

Nonverbal skills advance over childhood and are often higher in females than in males. There is also evidence for cultural expression "dialects" that allow expressions of emotions to be more accurately judged by other members of that culture, or by people with greater exposure to that culture, than by outsiders. Research shows that **nonverbal** communication skills are higher in children and adults with healthy mental and social functioning.

—Judith A. Hall

Further Readings

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