4.2: Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication

Learning Objectives

- List four important characteristics of nonverbal communication and explain each.

Nonverbal Communication Uses Multiple Channels

We use a **single channel** (words) when we communicate verbally versus **multiple channels** when we communicate nonverbally. Try this exercise. Say your first and last name at the same time. You quickly find that this is an impossible task. Now, pat the top of your head with your right hand, wave with your left hand, smile, shrug your shoulders, and chew gum at the same time. While goofy and awkward, our ability to do this demonstrates how we use multiple nonverbal channels simultaneously to communicate.
In the verbal communication chapter, we learned that meaning is in people, not in words. The same is true of nonverbal communication, but even more so. Attempting to accurately decode nonverbal signals such as eye contact, facial expressions, body movements, clothing, personal artifacts, and tone of voice when they all may be happening at the same time can be very difficult. Despite this difficulty, we learn to decode nonverbal communication as babies. How effectively we interpret these nonverbal signals may be influenced by our gender, with some research suggesting that...
women are much better than men at accurately interpreting the many nonverbal cues we send and receive (Gore).

![Image of a person](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Courses/Southwest_Tennessee_Community_College/Competent_Communication/04%3A_Non...

Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\): How do you interpret this student’s nonverbal communication? (CC BY-SA; Spaynton via Wikipedia)

**Nonverbal Communication is Continuous and Ongoing**

Whereas verbal communication is **distinct**, nonverbal communication in face-to-face interactions is **continuous**, ongoing, and in constant motion. Words have a distinct beginning and end, and we can simply stop talking to end verbal communication. However, we can’t turn off nonverbal communication. Our posture, eye contact (or lack of eye contact), facial expressions, and physical appearance are **always** communicating something about us, whether intentional or unintentional.

**Nonverbal Communication Can Be Conscious or Unconscious**

Normally, humans use language or verbal communication **consciously** while we use nonverbal communication **unconsciously**. Conscious communication is communication we **think** about and choose deliberately. If you ever heard the statement as a child, “Think before you speak” you were being told a fundamental principle of verbal communication. Realistically, it’s nearly impossible not to think before we speak. When we speak, we do so consciously and intentionally.

When we engage in unconscious communication, we do not think about or plan the message we communicate. Much of our nonverbal communication is unconscious. For example, when something funny happens, you probably do not think, “Okay, I’m going to smile and laugh right now.” Instead, you react unconsciously, displaying your emotions through these nonverbal reactions.

Of course, not all nonverbal communication is unconscious. At times we certainly make conscious choices to use or withhold nonverbal communication. For example, before and during a job interview, the interviewee makes conscious
decisions about wardrobe, posture, and eye contact. Because much nonverbal communication is unconscious, many of us tend to believe what we see over what we hear.

**Can We "Read" Nonverbal Communication?**

Can we really accurately interpret the nonverbal communication used by others? Some seem to think so. Counselor Michele Meleen lists the following positive nonverbal behaviors:

- learning in
- direct eye contact
- head nodding
- firm handshake

In contrast, here are some negative nonverbal behaviors:

- arms crossed over the chest
- nail biting
- hand placed on the cheek
- tapping or drumming fingers
- head in hands
- locked ankles
- fig-leaf pose
- using a mobile device when someone else is speaking

For a fun take on "reading nonverbal communication, watch these "reads: from the television show, Seinfeld: [https://youtu.be/L8VOuGQD60U](https://youtu.be/L8VOuGQD60U)

**Nonverbal Communication is Culture-Bound**

Researchers such as Psychologist Paul Ekman have come to believe there are certain core emotional expressions conveyed by the face that are **interpreted the same way across cultures**. SADF(I)SH is a mnemonic device to remember the emotions that are recognized (somewhat) across the world:

- Sadness
- Anger
- Disgust
- Fear
- Interest--there is some support for this one, but not as clear as the other ones.
- Surprise
- Happiness

[https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Courses/Southwest_Tennessee_Community_College/Competent_Communication/04%3A_Non…](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Courses/Southwest_Tennessee_Community_College/Competent_Communication/04%3A_Non…)
Although some facial expressions may be recognized all over the world, as you learned in the chapter on Culture and Communication, most nonverbal communication varies greatly from one culture to the next. This is what we mean by nonverbal communication as "culture-bound." For this reason, if you travel to different regions of the world, it is very important to research and find out what is appropriate before you visit.

Key Takeaways

Let us sum up the ways in which nonverbal communication is unique:

- Nonverbal communication uses multiple channels simultaneously as opposed to verbal communication, which uses one.
- Nonverbal communication is continuous, whereas verbal communication is distinct.
- Nonverbal communication can be both conscious and unconscious; verbal communication is conscious.
- Certain nonverbal communication is universally understood, although nonverbal communication for the most part is culture-bound.

Now that you have a definition of nonverbal communication, and can identify characteristics of nonverbal communication, let’s examine what counts as nonverbal communication.

References

Jones, Tricia, PhD. Nonverbal Communication for Educators. CReduction.org. n.d. ://creduction.net/resources/nonverbal_communication/how_does_nvc_differ_from_language.html. Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.5 License.
