4.3: Nonverbal Communication Competence

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and employ strategies for improving competence with sending nonverbal messages.
2. Identify and employ strategies for improving competence with interpreting nonverbal messages.

As we age, we internalize social and cultural norms related to sending (encoding) and interpreting (decoding) nonverbal communication. In terms of sending, the tendency of children to send unmonitored nonverbal signals reduces as we get older and begin to monitor and perhaps censor or mask them (Andersen, 1999). Likewise, as we become more experienced communicators we tend to think that we become better at interpreting nonverbal messages. In this section we will discuss some strategies for effectively encoding and decoding nonverbal messages. As we’ve already learned, we receive little, if any, official instruction in nonverbal communication, but you can think of this chapter as a training manual to help improve your own nonverbal communication competence. As with all aspects of communication, improving your nonverbal communication takes commitment and continued effort. However, research shows that education and training in nonverbal communication can lead to quick gains in knowledge and skill (Riggio, 1992). Additionally, once the initial effort is put into improving your nonverbal encoding and decoding skills and those new skills are put into practice, people are encouraged by the positive reactions from others. Remember that people enjoy interacting with others who are skilled at nonverbal encoding and decoding, which will be evident in their reactions, providing further motivation and encouragement to hone your skills.

Guidelines for Sending Nonverbal Messages

As is stressed in Chapter 2 “Communication and Perception”, first impressions matter. Nonverbal cues account for much of the content from which we form initial impressions, so it’s important to know that people make judgments about our identities and skills after only brief exposure. Our competence regarding and awareness of nonverbal communication
can help determine how an interaction will proceed and, in fact, whether it will take place at all. People who are skilled at encoding nonverbal messages are more favorably evaluated after initial encounters. This is likely due to the fact that people who are more nonverbally expressive are also more attention getting and engaging and make people feel more welcome and warm due to increased immediacy behaviors, all of which enhance perceptions of charisma.

People who are more nonverbally expressive typically form more positive initial impressions, because expressivity in the form of immediacy behaviors is attention getting and welcoming.

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Understand That Nonverbal Communication Is Multichannel

Be aware of the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication. We rarely send a nonverbal message in isolation. For example, a posture may be combined with a touch or eye behavior to create what is called a nonverbal cluster (Pease & Pease, 2004). Nonverbal congruence refers to consistency among different nonverbal expressions within a cluster. Congruent nonverbal communication is more credible and effective than ambiguous or conflicting nonverbal cues. Even though you may intend for your nonverbal messages to be congruent, they could still be decoded in a way that doesn’t match up with your intent, especially since nonverbal expressions vary in terms of their degree of conscious encoding. In this sense, the multichannel nature of nonverbal communication creates the potential of both increased credibility and increased ambiguity.

When we become more aware of the messages we are sending, we can monitor for nonverbal signals that are incongruent with other messages or may be perceived as such. If a student is talking to his professor about his performance in the class and concerns about his grade, the professor may lean forward and nod, encoding a combination of a body orientation and a head movement that conveys attention. If the professor, however, regularly breaks off eye contact and looks anxiously at her office door, then she is sending a message that could be perceived as disinterest, which is incongruent with the overall message of care and concern she probably wants to encode.

Increasing our awareness of the multiple channels through which we send nonverbal cues can help us make our signals more congruent in the moment.
Understand That Nonverbal Communication Affects Our Interactions

Nonverbal communication affects our own and others' behaviors and communication. Changing our nonverbal signals can affect our thoughts and emotions. Knowing this allows us to have more control over the trajectory of our communication, possibly allowing us to intervene in a negative cycle. For example, if you are waiting in line to get your driver’s license renewed and the agents in front of you are moving slower than you’d like and the man in front of you doesn’t have his materials organized and is asking unnecessary questions, you might start to exhibit nonverbal clusters that signal frustration. You might cross your arms, a closing-off gesture, and combine that with wrapping your fingers tightly around one bicep and occasionally squeezing, which is a self-touch adaptor that results from anxiety and stress. The longer you stand like that, the more frustrated and defensive you will become, because that nonverbal cluster reinforces and heightens your feelings. Increased awareness about these cycles can help you make conscious moves to change your nonverbal communication and, subsequently, your cognitive and emotional states (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1995).

As your nonverbal encoding competence increases, you can strategically manipulate your behaviors. During my years as a restaurant server I got pretty good at knowing what tables to engage with and “schmooze” a little more to get a better tip. Restaurant servers, bartenders, car salespeople, realtors, exotic dancers, and many others who work in a service or sales capacity know that part of “sealing the deal” is making people feel liked, valued, and important. The strategic use of nonverbal communication to convey these messages is largely accepted and expected in our society, and as customers or patrons, we often play along because it feels good in the moment to think that the other person actually cares about us. Using nonverbals that are intentionally deceptive and misleading can have negative consequences and cross the line into unethical communication.

As you get better at monitoring and controlling your nonverbal behaviors and understanding how nonverbal cues affect our interaction, you may show more competence in multiple types of communication. For example, people who are more skilled at monitoring and controlling nonverbal displays of emotion report that they are more comfortable public speakers (Riggio, 1992). Since speakers become more nervous when they think that audience members are able to detect their nervousness based on outwardly visible, mostly nonverbal cues, it is logical that confidence in one’s ability to control those outwardly visible cues would result in a lessening of that common fear.

Understand How Nonverbal Communication Creates Rapport

Humans have evolved an innate urge to mirror each other’s nonverbal behavior, and although we aren’t often aware of it, this urge influences our behavior daily (Pease & Pease, 2004). Think, for example, about how people “fall into formation” when waiting in a line. Our nonverbal communication works to create an unspoken and subconscious cooperation, as people move and behave in similar ways. When one person leans to the left the next person in line may also lean to the left, and this shift in posture may continue all the way down the line to the end, until someone else makes another movement and the whole line shifts again. This phenomenon is known as mirroring, which refers to the often subconscious practice of using nonverbal cues in a way that match those of others around us. Mirroring sends implicit messages to others that say, “Look! I’m just like you.” Mirroring evolved as an important social function in that it allowed early humans to more easily fit in with larger groups. Logically, early humans who were more successful at mirroring were more likely to secure food, shelter, and security and therefore passed that genetic disposition on down the line to us.

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Last summer, during a backyard game of “corn hole” with my family, my mom and sister were standing at the other board and kept whispering to each other and laughing at my dad and me. Corn hole, which is also called “bags,” involves throwing a cloth sack filled with corn toward another team’s board with the goal of getting it in the hole or on the board to score points. They later told us that they were amazed at how we stood, threw our bags, and shifted position between rounds in unison. Although my dad and I didn’t realize we were doing it, our subconscious mirroring was obviously noticeable to others. Mirroring is largely innate and subconscious, but we can more consciously use it and a variety of other nonverbal signals, like the immediacy behaviors we discussed earlier, to help create social bonds and mutual liking.

Understand How Nonverbal Communication Regulates Conversations

The ability to encode appropriate turn-taking signals can help ensure that we can hold the floor when needed in a conversation or work our way into a conversation smoothly, without inappropriately interrupting someone or otherwise being seen as rude. People with nonverbal encoding competence are typically more “in control” of conversations. This regulating function can be useful in initial encounters when we are trying to learn more about another person and in situations where status differentials are present or compliance gaining or dominance are goals. Although close friends, family, and relational partners can sometimes be an exception, interrupting is generally considered rude and should be avoided. Even though verbal communication is most often used to interrupt another person, interruptions are still studied as a part of chronemics because it interferes with another person’s talk time. Instead of interrupting, you can use nonverbal signals like leaning in, increasing your eye contact, or using a brief gesture like subtly raising one hand or the index finger to signal to another person that you’d like to soon take the floor.

Understand How Nonverbal Communication Relates to Listening

Part of being a good listener involves nonverbal-encoding competence, as nonverbal feedback in the form of head nods, eye contact, and posture can signal that a listener is paying attention and the speaker’s message is received and understood. Active listening, for example, combines good cognitive listening practices with outwardly visible cues that signal to others that we are listening. We will learn more about active listening in Chapter 5 “Listening”, but we all know from experience which nonverbal signals convey attentiveness and which convey a lack of attentiveness. Listeners are expected to make more eye contact with the speaker than the speaker makes with them, so it’s important to “listen with your eyes” by maintaining eye contact, which signals attentiveness. Listeners should also avoid distracting movements in the form of self, other, and object adaptors. Being a higher self-monitor can help you catch nonverbal signals that might signal that you aren’t listening, at which point you could consciously switch to more active listening signals.

Understand How Nonverbal Communication Relates to Impression Management

The nonverbal messages we encode also help us express our identities and play into impression management, which as we learned in Chapter 1 “Introduction to Communication Studies” is a key part of communicating to achieve identity goals. Being able to control nonverbal expressions and competently encode them allows us to better manage our persona and project a desired self to others—for example, a self that is perceived as competent, socially attractive, and engaging. Being nonverbally expressive during initial interactions usually leads to more favorable impressions. So
smiling, keeping an attentive posture, and offering a solid handshake help communicate confidence and enthusiasm that can be useful on a first date, during a job interview, when visiting family for the holidays, or when running into an acquaintance at the grocery store. Nonverbal communication can also impact the impressions you make as a student. Research has also found that students who are more nonverbally expressive are liked more by their teachers and are more likely to have their requests met by their teachers (Mottet et al., 2004).

Increase Competence in Specific Channels of Nonverbal Communication

While it is important to recognize that we send nonverbal signals through multiple channels simultaneously, we can also increase our nonverbal communication competence by becoming more aware of how it operates in specific channels. Although no one can truly offer you a rulebook on how to effectively send every type of nonverbal signal, there are several nonverbal guidebooks that are written from more anecdotal and less academic perspectives. While these books vary tremendously in terms of their credibility and quality, some, like Allan Pease and Barbara Pease’s *The Definitive Book of Body Language*, are informative and interesting to read.

Kinesics

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal messages sent using your hands, arms, body, and face.

**Gestures**

- Illustrators make our verbal communication more engaging. I recommend that people doing phone interviews or speaking on the radio make an effort to gesture as they speak, even though people can’t see the gestures, because it will make their words sound more engaging.
- Remember that adaptors can hurt your credibility in more formal or serious interactions. Figure out what your common adaptors are and monitor them so you can avoid creating unfavorable impressions.
- Gestures send messages about your emotional state. Since many gestures are spontaneous or subconscious, it is important to raise your awareness of them and monitor them. Be aware that clenched hands may signal aggression or anger, nail biting or fidgeting may signal nervousness, and finger tapping may signal boredom.

**Eye Contact**

- Eye contact is useful for initiating and regulating conversations. To make sure someone is available for interaction and to avoid being perceived as rude, it is usually a good idea to “catch their eye” before you start talking to them.
- Avoiding eye contact or shifting your eye contact from place to place can lead others to think you are being deceptive or inattentive. Minimize distractions by moving a clock, closing a door, or closing window blinds to help minimize distractions that may lure your eye contact away.
- Although avoiding eye contact can be perceived as sign of disinterest, low confidence, or negative emotionality, eye contact avoidance can be used positively as a face-saving strategy. The notion of civil inattention refers to a social norm that leads us to avoid making eye contact with people in situations that deviate from expected social norms, such as witnessing someone fall or being in close proximity to a stranger expressing negative emotions (like crying). We also use civil inattention when we avoid making eye contact with others in crowded spaces (Goffman, 2010).

**Facial Expressions**
• You can use facial expressions to manage your expressions of emotions to intensify what you’re feeling, to diminish what you’re feeling, to cover up what you’re feeling, to express a different emotion than you’re feeling, or to simulate an emotion that you’re not feeling (Metts & Planlap, 2002).

• Be aware of the power of emotional contagion, or the spread of emotion from one person to another. Since facial expressions are key for emotional communication, you may be able to strategically use your facial expressions to cheer someone up, lighten a mood, or create a more serious and somber tone.

• Smiles are especially powerful as an immediacy behavior and a rapport-building tool. Smiles can also help to disarm a potentially hostile person or deescalate conflict. When I have a problem or complain in a customer service situation, I always make sure to smile at the clerk, manager, or other person before I begin talking to help minimize my own annoyance and set a more positive tone for the interaction.

Haptics

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals using touch:

• Remember that culture, status, gender, age, and setting influence how we send and interpret touch messages.

• In professional and social settings, it is generally OK to touch others on the arm or shoulder. Although we touch others on the arm or shoulder with our hand, it is often too intimate to touch your hand to another person’s hand in a professional or social/casual setting.

These are types of touch to avoid (Andersen, 1999):

• Avoid touching strangers unless being introduced or offering assistance.

• Avoid hurtful touches and apologize if they occur, even if accidentally.

• Avoid startling/surprising another person with your touch.

• Avoid interrupting touches such as hugging someone while they are talking to someone else.

• Avoid moving people out of the way with only touch—pair your touch with a verbal message like “excuse me.”

• Avoid overly aggressive touch, especially when disguised as playful touch (e.g., horseplay taken too far).

• Avoid combining touch with negative criticism; a hand on the shoulder during a critical statement can increase a person’s defensiveness and seem condescending or aggressive.

Vocalics

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals using paralanguage.

• Verbal fillers are often used subconsciously and can negatively affect your credibility and reduce the clarity of your message when speaking in more formal situations. In fact, verbal fluency is one of the strongest predictors of persuasiveness (Hargie, 2011). Becoming a higher self-monitor can help you notice your use of verbal fillers and begin to eliminate them. Beginner speakers can often reduce their use of verbal fillers noticeably over just a short period of time.

• Vocal variety increases listener and speaker engagement, understanding, information recall, and motivation. So having a more expressive voice that varies appropriately in terms of rate, pitch, and volume can help you achieve communication goals related to maintaining attention, effectively conveying information, and getting others to act in a particular way.
Proxemics

The following may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to interpersonal distances.

- When breaches of personal space occur, it is a social norm to make nonverbal adjustments such as lowering our level of immediacy, changing our body orientations, and using objects to separate ourselves from others. To reduce immediacy, we engage in civil inattention and reduce the amount of eye contact we make with others. We also shift the front of our body away from others since it has most of our sensory inputs and also allows access to body parts that are considered vulnerable, such as the stomach, face, and genitals (Andersen, 1999). When we can’t shift our bodies, we often use coats, bags, books, or our hands to physically separate or block off the front of our bodies from others.

- Although pets and children are often granted more leeway to breach other people’s space, since they are still learning social norms and rules, as a pet owner, parent, or temporary caretaker, be aware of this possibility and try to prevent such breaches or correct them when they occur.

Chronemics

The following guideline may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to time.

- In terms of talk time and turn taking, research shows that people who take a little longer with their turn, holding the floor slightly longer than normal, are actually seen as more credible than people who talk too much or too little (Andersen, 1999).

- Our lateness or promptness can send messages about our professionalism, dependability, or other personality traits. Formal time usually applies to professional situations in which we are expected to be on time or even a few minutes early. You generally wouldn’t want to be late for work, a job interview, a medical appointment, and so on. Informal time applies to casual and interpersonal situations in which there is much more variation in terms of expectations for promptness. For example, when I lived in a large city, people often arrived to dinner parties or other social gatherings about thirty minutes after the announced time, given the possibility of interference by heavy traffic or people’s hectic schedules. Now that I live in a smaller town in the Midwest, I’ve learned that people are expected to arrive at or close to the announced time. For most social meetings with one other person or a small group, you can be five minutes late without having to offer much of an apology or explanation. For larger social gatherings you can usually be fifteen minutes late as long as your late arrival doesn’t interfere with the host’s plans or preparations.

- Quality time is an important part of interpersonal relationships, and sometimes time has to be budgeted so that it can be saved and spent with certain people or on certain occasions—like date nights for couples or family time for parents and children or other relatives.

Personal Presentation and Environment

The following guidelines may help you more effectively encode nonverbal signals related to personal presentation and environment.

- Recognize that personal presentation carries much weight in terms of initial impressions, so meeting the expectations and social norms for dress, grooming, and other artifactual communication is especially important for impression management.

- Recognize that some environments facilitate communication and some do not. A traditional front-facing business or educational setup is designed for one person to communicate with a larger audience. People in the audience cannot as easily interact with each other because they can’t see each other face-to-face without turning. A horseshoe or circular arrangement allows everyone to make eye contact and facilitates interaction. Even close
proximity doesn’t necessarily facilitate interaction. For example, a comfortable sofa may bring four people together, but eye contact among all four is nearly impossible if they’re all facing the same direction.

- Where you choose to sit can also impact perceived characteristics and leadership decisions. People who sit at the head or center of a table are often chosen to be leaders by others because of their nonverbal accessibility—a decision which may have more to do with where the person chose to sit than the person’s perceived or actual leadership abilities. Research has found that juries often select their foreperson based on where he or she happens to sit (Andersen, 1999). Keep this in mind the next time you take your seat at a meeting.

Guidelines for Interpreting Nonverbal Messages

We learn to decode or interpret nonverbal messages through practice and by internalizing social norms. Following the suggestions to become a better encoder of nonverbal communication will lead to better decoding competence through increased awareness. Since nonverbal communication is more ambiguous than verbal communication, we have to learn to interpret these cues as clusters within contexts. My favorite way to increase my knowledge about nonverbal communication is to engage in people watching. Just by consciously taking in the variety of nonverbal signals around us, we can build our awareness and occasionally be entertained. Skilled decoders of nonverbal messages are said to have nonverbal sensitivity, which, very similarly to skilled encoders, leads them to have larger social networks, be more popular, and exhibit less social anxiety (Riggio, 1992).

There Is No Nonverbal Dictionary

The first guideline for decoding nonverbal communication is to realize that there is no nonverbal dictionary. Some nonverbal scholars and many nonverbal skill trainers have tried to catalog nonverbal communication like we do verbal communication to create dictionary-like guides that people can use to interpret nonverbal signals. Although those guides may contain many valid “rules” of nonverbal communication, those rules are always relative to the individual, social, and cultural contexts in which an interaction takes place. In short, you can’t read people’s nonverbal communication like a book, and there are no A-to-Z guides that capture the complexity of nonverbal communication (DePaulo, 1992). Rather than using a list of specific rules, I suggest people develop more general tools that will be useful in and adaptable to a variety of contexts.

Recognize That Certain Nonverbal Signals Are Related

The second guideline for decoding nonverbal signals is to recognize that certain nonverbal signals are related. Nonverbal rulebooks aren’t effective because they typically view a nonverbal signal in isolation, similar to how dictionaries separately list denotative definitions of words. To get a more nuanced understanding of the meaning behind nonverbal cues, we can look at them as progressive or layered. For example, people engaging in negative critical evaluation of a speaker may cross their legs, cross one arm over their stomach, and put the other arm up so the index finger is resting close to the eye while the chin rests on the thumb (Pease & Pease, 2004). A person wouldn’t likely perform all those signals simultaneously. Instead, he or she would likely start with one and then layer more cues on as the feelings intensified. If we notice that a person is starting to build related signals like the ones above onto one another, we might be able to intervene in the negative reaction that is building. Of course, as nonverbal cues are layered on, they may contradict other signals, in which case we can turn to context clues to aid our interpretation.

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Although cultural patterns exist, people also exhibit idiosyncratic nonverbal behavior, meaning they don’t always follow the norms of the group.

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Read Nonverbal Cues in Context

We will learn more specifics about nonverbal communication in relational, professional, and cultural contexts in Section 4.1 “Principles and Functions of Nonverbal Communication”, but we can also gain insight into how to interpret nonverbal cues through personal contexts. People have idiosyncratic nonverbal behaviors, which create an individual context that varies with each person. Even though we generally fit into certain social and cultural patterns, some people deviate from those norms. For example, some cultures tend toward less touching and greater interpersonal distances during interactions. The United States falls into this general category, but there are people who were socialized into these norms who as individuals deviate from them and touch more and stand closer to others while conversing. As the idiosyncratic communicator inches toward his or her conversational partner, the partner may inch back to reestablish the interpersonal distance norm. Such deviations may lead people to misinterpret sexual or romantic interest or feel uncomfortable. While these actions could indicate such interest, they could also be idiosyncratic. As this example shows, these individual differences can increase the ambiguity of nonverbal communication, but when observed over a period of time, they can actually help us generate meaning. Try to compare observed nonverbal cues to a person’s typical or baseline nonverbal behavior to help avoid misinterpretation. In some instances it is impossible to know what sorts of individual nonverbal behaviors or idiosyncrasies people have because there isn’t a relational history. In such cases, we have to turn to our knowledge about specific types of nonverbal communication or draw from more general contextual knowledge.

Interpreting Cues within Specific Channels

When nonverbal cues are ambiguous or contextual clues aren’t useful in interpreting nonverbal clusters, we may have to look at nonverbal behaviors within specific channels. Keep in mind that the following tips aren’t hard and fast rules and
are usually more meaningful when adapted according to a specific person or context. In addition, many of the suggestions in the section on encoding competence can be adapted usefully to decoding.

### Kinesics

#### Gestures (Pease & Pease, 2004)

- While it doesn’t always mean a person is being honest, displaying palms is largely unconsciously encoded and decoded as a sign of openness and truthfulness. Conversely, crossing your arms in front of your chest is decoded almost everywhere as a negative gesture that conveys defensiveness.

- We typically decode people putting their hands in their pocket as a gesture that indicates shyness or discomfort. Men often subconsciously put their hands in their pockets when they don’t want to participate in a conversation. But displaying the thumb or thumbs while the rest of the hand is in the pocket is a signal of a dominant or authoritative attitude.

- Nervous communicators may have distracting mannerisms in the form of adaptors that you will likely need to tune out in order to focus more on other verbal and nonverbal cues.

#### Head Movements and Posture

- The head leaning over and being supported by a hand can typically be decoded as a sign of boredom, the thumb supporting the chin and the index finger touching the head close to the temple or eye as a sign of negative evaluative thoughts, and the chin stroke as a sign that a person is going through a decision-making process (Pease & Pease, 2004).

- In terms of seated posture, leaning back is usually decoded as a sign of informality and indifference, straddling a chair as a sign of dominance (but also some insecurity because the person is protecting the vulnerable front part of his or her body), and leaning forward as a signal of interest and attentiveness.

#### Eye Contact

- When someone is avoiding eye contact, don’t immediately assume they are not listening or are hiding something, especially if you are conveying complex or surprising information. Since looking away also signals cognitive activity, they may be processing information, and you may need to pause and ask if they need a second to think or if they need you to repeat or explain anything more.

- A “sideways glance,” which entails keeping the head and face pointed straight ahead while focusing the eyes to the left or right, has multiple contradictory meanings ranging from interest, to uncertainty, to hostility. When the sideways glance is paired with a slightly raised eyebrow or smile, it is sign of interest. When combined with a furrowed brow it generally conveys uncertainty. But add a frown to that mix and it can signal hostility (Pease & Pease, 2004).

#### Facial Expressions

- Be aware of discrepancies between facial expressions and other nonverbal gestures and verbal communication. Since facial expressions are often subconscious, they may be an indicator of incongruency within a speaker’s message, and you may need to follow up with questions or consider contextual clues to increase your understanding.

#### Haptics

- Consider the status and power dynamics involved in a touch. In general, people who have or feel they have more social power in a situation typically engage in more touching behaviors with those with less social power. So you may decode a touch from a supervisor differently from the touch of an acquaintance.
Vocalics

- People often decode personality traits from a person’s vocal quality. In general, a person’s vocal signature is a result of the physiology of his or her neck, head, and mouth. Therefore a nasal voice or a deep voice may not have any relevant meaning within an interaction. Try not to focus on something you find unpleasant or pleasant about someone’s voice; focus on the content rather than the vocal quality.

Proxemics

- The size of a person’s “territory” often speaks to that person’s status. At universities, deans may have suites, department chairs may have large offices with multiple sitting areas, lower-ranked professors may have “cozier” offices stuffed with books and file cabinets, and adjunct instructors may have a shared office or desk or no office space at all.
- Since infringements on others’ territory can arouse angry reactions and even lead to violence (think of the countless stories of neighbors fighting over a fence or tree), be sensitive to territorial markers. In secondary and public territories, look for informal markers such as drinks, books, or jackets and be respectful of them when possible.

Personal Presentation and Environment

- Be aware of the physical attractiveness bias, which leads people to sometimes mistakenly equate attractiveness with goodness (Hargie, 2011). A person’s attractive or unattractive physical presentation can lead to irrelevant decoding that is distracting from other more meaningful nonverbal cues.

Detecting Deception

Although people rely on nonverbal communication more than verbal to determine whether or not a person is being deceptive, there is no set profile of deceptive behaviors that you can use to create your own nonverbally based lie detector. Research finds that people generally perceive themselves as good detectors of deception, but when tested people only accurately detect deception at levels a little higher than what we would by random chance. Given that deception is so widespread and common, it is estimated that we actually only detect about half the lies that we are told, meaning we all operate on false information without even being aware of it. Although this may be disappointing to those of you reading who like to think of yourselves as human lie detectors, there are some forces working against our deception detecting abilities. One such force is the truth bias, which leads us to believe that a person is telling the truth, especially if we know and like that person. Conversely, people who have interpersonal trust issues and people in occupations like law enforcement may also have a lie bias, meaning they assume people are lying to them more often than not (Andersen, 1999).

It is believed that deceptive nonverbal behaviors result from nonverbal leakage, which refers to nonverbal behaviors that occur as we try to control the cognitive and physical changes that happen during states of cognitive and physical arousal (Hargie, 2011). Anxiety is a form of arousal that leads to bodily reactions like those we experience when we perceive danger or become excited for some other reason. Some of these reactions are visible, such as increased movements, and some are audible, such as changes in voice pitch, volume, or rate. Other reactions, such as changes in the electrical conductivity of the skin, increased breathing, and increased heart rate, are not always detectable. Polygraph machines, or lie detectors, work on the principle that the presence of signs of arousal is a reliable indicator of deception in situations where other factors that would also evoke such signals are absent.
So the nonverbal behaviors that we associate with deception don’t actually stem from the deception but the attempts to control the leakage that results from the cognitive and physiological changes. These signals appear and increase because we are conflicted about the act of deception, since we areconditioned to believe that being honest is better than lying, we are afraid of getting caught and punished, and we are motivated to succeed with the act of deception—in essence, to get away with it. Leakage also occurs because of the increased cognitive demands associated with deception. Our cognitive activity increases when we have to decide whether to engage in deception or not, which often involves some internal debate. If we decide to engage in deception, we then have to compose a fabrication or execute some other manipulation strategy that we think is believable. To make things more complicated, we usually tailor our manipulation strategy to the person to whom we are speaking. In short, lying isn’t easy, as it requires us to go against social norms and deviate from our comfortable and familiar communication scripts that we rely on for so much of our interaction. Of course, skilled and experienced deceivers develop new scripts that can also become familiar and comfortable and allow them to engage in deception without arousing as much anxiety or triggering the physical reactions to it (Andersen, 1999).

There is no one “tell” that gives away when someone is lying.

Kevin Trotman – You Lie! – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

There are certain nonverbal cues that have been associated with deception, but the problem is that these cues are also associated with other behaviors, which could lead you to assume someone is being deceptive when they are actually nervous, guilty, or excited. In general, people who are more expressive are better deceivers and people who are typically anxious are not good liars. Also, people who are better self-monitors are better deceivers, because they are aware of verbal and nonverbal signals that may “give them away” and may be better able to control or account for them. Research also shows that people get better at lying as they get older, because they learn more about the intricacies of communication signals and they also get more time to practice (Andersen, 1999). Studies have found that actors,
politicians, lawyers, and salespeople are also better liars, because they are generally higher self-monitors and have learned how to suppress internal feelings and monitor their external behaviors.

“Getting Competent”

Deception and Communication Competence

The research on deception and nonverbal communication indicates that heightened arousal and increased cognitive demands contribute to the presence of nonverbal behaviors that can be associated with deception. Remember, however, that these nonverbal behaviors are not solely related to deception and also manifest as a result of other emotional or cognitive states. Additionally, when people are falsely accused of deception, the signs that they exhibit as a result of the stress of being falsely accused are very similar to the signals exhibited by people who are actually engaging in deception.

There are common misconceptions about what behaviors are associated with deception. Behaviors mistakenly linked to deception include longer response times, slower speech rates, decreased eye contact, increased body movements, excessive swallowing, and less smiling. None of these have consistently been associated with deception (Andersen, 1999). As we’ve learned, people also tend to give more weight to nonverbal than verbal cues when evaluating the truthfulness of a person or her or his message. This predisposition can lead us to focus on nonverbal cues while overlooking verbal signals of deception. A large study found that people were better able to detect deception by sound alone than they were when exposed to both auditory and visual cues (Andersen, 1999). Aside from nonverbal cues, also listen for inconsistencies in or contradictions between statements, which can also be used to tell when others are being deceptive. The following are some nonverbal signals that have been associated with deception in research studies, but be cautious about viewing these as absolutes since individual and contextual differences should also be considered.

**Gestures.** One of the most powerful associations between nonverbal behaviors and deception is the presence of adaptors. Self-touches like wringing hands and object-adaptors like playing with a pencil or messing with clothing have been shown to correlate to deception. Some highly experienced deceivers, however, can control the presence of adaptors (Andersen, 1999).

**Eye contact.** Deceivers tend to use more eye contact when lying to friends, perhaps to try to increase feelings of immediacy or warmth, and less eye contact when lying to strangers. A review of many studies of deception indicates that increased eye blinking is associated with deception, probably because of heightened arousal and cognitive activity (Andersen, 1999).

**Facial expressions.** People can intentionally use facial expressions to try to deceive, and there are five primary ways that this may occur. People may show feelings that they do not actually have, show a higher intensity of feelings than they actually have, try to show no feelings, try to show less feeling than they actually have, or mask one feeling with another.

**Vocalics.** One of the most common nonverbal signs of deception is speech errors. As you’ll recall, verbal fillers and other speech disfluencies are studied as part of vocalics; examples include false starts, stutters, and fillers. Studies also show that an increase in verbal pitch is associated with deception and is likely caused by heightened arousal and tension.
Chronemics. Speech turns are often thought to correspond to deception, but there is no consensus among researchers as to the exact relationship. Most studies reveal that deceivers talk less, especially in response to direct questions (Andersen, 1999).

1. Studies show that people engage in deception much more than they care to admit. Do you consider yourself a good deceiver? Why or why not? Which, if any, of the nonverbal cues discussed do you think help you deceive others or give you away?

2. For each of the following scenarios, note (1) what behaviors may indicate deception, (2) alternative explanations for the behaviors (aside from deception), and (3) questions you could ask to get more information before making a judgment.

Scenario 1. A politician is questioned by a reporter about allegations that she used taxpayer money to fund personal vacations. She looks straight at the reporter, crosses one leg over the other, and says, “I’ve worked for the people of this community for ten years and no one has ever questioned my ethics until now.” As she speaks, she points her index finger at the politician and uses a stern and clear tone of voice.

Scenario 2. You ask your roommate if you can borrow his car to go pick up a friend from the train station about ten miles away. He says, “Um, well…I had already made plans to go to dinner with Cal and he drove last time so it’s kind of my turn to drive this time. I mean, is there someone else you could ask or someone else who could get her? You know I don’t mind sharing things with you, and I would totally let you, you know, if I didn’t have this thing to do. Sorry.” As he says, “Sorry,” he raises both of his hands, with his palms facing toward you, and shrugs.

Scenario 3. A professor asks a student to explain why he didn’t cite sources for several passages in his paper that came from various websites. The student scratches his head and says, “What do you mean? Those were my ideas. I did look at several websites, but I didn’t directly quote anything so I didn’t think I needed to put the citations in parentheses.” As he says this, he rubs the back of his neck and then scratches his face and only makes minimal eye contact with the professor.

Key Takeaways

- To improve your competence encoding nonverbal messages, increase your awareness of the messages you are sending and receiving and the contexts in which your communication is taking place. Since nonverbal communication is multichannel, it is important to be aware that nonverbal cues can complement, enhance, or contradict each other. Also realize that the norms and expectations for sending nonverbal messages, especially touch and personal space, vary widely between relational and professional contexts.

- To improve your competence decoding nonverbal messages, look for multiple nonverbal cues, avoid putting too much weight on any one cue, and evaluate nonverbal messages in relation to the context and your previous experiences with the other person. Although we put more weight on nonverbal communication than verbal when trying to detect deception, there is no set guide that can allow us to tell whether or not another person is being deceptive.

Exercises

1. Getting integrated: As was indicated earlier, research shows that instruction in nonverbal communication can lead people to make gains in their nonverbal communication competence. List some nonverbal skills that you think are important in each of the following contexts: academic, professional, personal, and civic.

2. Using concepts from this section, analyze your own nonverbal encoding competence. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Do the same for your nonverbal decoding competence.
3. To understand how chronemics relates to nonverbal communication norms, answer the following questions: In what situations is it important to be early? In what situations can you arrive late? How long would you wait on someone you were meeting for a group project for a class? A date? A job interview?

References


