5.4: Nonverbal Communication Challenges

Nonverbal Expectancy Violation Theory

As in other areas tied to cultural values and behaviors, people develop an expectation of conformity with the conventions of the culture, in this case with the unwritten rules of nonverbal behavior. In the US, we don't expect women to wear headscarves as normal everyday attire. We do expect to shake hands upon meeting someone for the first time, which may not happen if, as a non-related man, we are meeting a Muslim woman. Such occurrences are, in the formulation of Judee Burgoon (1978), violations of nonverbal expectancy. According to this theory, people have expectations about the appropriateness of nonverbal behavior, which is learned and culturally driven. When these expectations are violated, it produces a reaction she describes as "arousal", which can be physiological or cognitive, positive or negative. Our reaction depends on the severity of the violation, the nature of the person (such as attractiveness), and the implicit message associated with the violation. The context and the person will determine our reaction. If a person standing too close at a party (thereby violating personal space) is attractive and well groomed, the reaction is likely to be quite different than if that person is perceived as slovenly and unattractive.

Reactions to violations of nonverbal codes depend as well on the nature of our communicative and cultural environment. If we are accustomed to high-context communications, we may be more dependent on nonverbal messages and are therefore more adept at decoding nonverbal behavior. In that case, for example, silence might be evaluated positively and perceived quite differently than it is in cultures where periods of silence in a conversation run counter to expectations. In intercultural communication contexts, violations of expectations by a non-native could be seen as naïve/endearing or strange/rude depending on how we view that person. Using Hofstede's cultural categories, Burgoon points out that violating norms in strong uncertainty avoidance cultures is likely to be less acceptable. On the other hand, countries with smaller power distance may be more flexible in terms of rules about verbal and nonverbal behaviors.
In the South Asian countries, sitting with one’s back towards someone older in age or authority, or having the soles of one’s feet face someone older in age or stature or authority, or books – the source of knowledge, or the altar, is considered very rude (Malik, personal communication, September 18, 2017). That is the reason why one is unlikely to find bookshelves or altars at the feet of the bed or against or on the wall facing the feet of the bed. It is also considered inappropriate to have an altar or the photographs of one’s ancestors in a bedroom that is likely to be used as a conjugal bedroom.

One of the cultural norms that may lead to adverse reactions is the public display of affection. In most Western cultures, there has long been acceptance of heterosexual couples touching and kissing in public. The degree to which this occurs differs. Researchers have found that this is more common, for example, among French and Italian young couples than in the US (Field, 1999; DiBiase & Gunnoe, 2004). Acceptance of homosexual couples is widespread today in many Western countries, but not in many other parts of the world. In most Muslim cultures, the strict separation of unmarried people disallows even heterosexual contact in public. In India, some public displays of affection are taboo. In 2007, US actor Richard Gere faced widespread condemnation in India, after kissing Indian actress Shilpa Shetty at a televised fund-raising event. A photo of the kiss made front-page news across India, and effigies and photos of both Gere and Shetty were burned. An Indian court issued an arrest warrant for Gere, as he had "transgressed all limits of vulgarity" (Indian Court, 2007).

![Richard Gere kisses Shilpa Shetty](https://socialsci.libretexts.org/Courses/Butte_College/Exploring_Intercultural_Communication_(Grothe)/05%3A_Nonverbal_Pr ...

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would normally. On the other hand, we may oppose particular practices for religious, political, or philosophical reasons, and consciously refuse to adapt to local customs. That might mean, for example, women not accepting the prescribed cultural role in behavior, bearing, or dress expected in a particular culture. In general, it is good practice to anticipate nonverbal expectations to the degree possible. Even if we don’t know the specifics of expectations in a given culture, we can certainly observe and learn. Burgoon’s theory suggests that if we are well-intentioned, yet unaware of specific practices, it is likely others will be lenient in overlooking transgressions. In fact, it may be that expectations for foreigners in this regard are different than they are for natives. Koreans, for example, would likely not expect foreigners be familiar with the intricacies of bowing as they interface with Korean social hierarchies.

Suggestions for Communicating Nonverbally Across Cultures

Here are some considerations in respect to nonverbal communication in intercultural encounters:

– **Be cautious in making assumptions based on nonverbal actions.** The same gestures may have quite different meanings in different cultures. We often tend to assume body language and gestures are universal, but that is not the case.

– **Try to understand the cultural values attached to nonverbal conventions.** Try to penetrate beneath the surface of the behavior. Consider as well whether the behavior may be personal and idiosyncratic, rather than cultural and typical.

– **Watch and imitate as appropriate.** As the saying goes, “when in Rome, do as the Romans.” In some cases, adopting the different nonverbal behavior might be easy and straightforward, for example, bowing in Japan. In other cases, divergence might be more appropriate, for example, refraining from kneeling along with Muslims in prayer services.

Wrapping Up

People may not understand your words, but they will certainly interpret your nonverbal communication according to *their* accepted norms. Notice the word *their*. It is *their* perceptions that will count when you are trying to communicate, and it’s important to understand that those perceptions will be based on the teachings and experiences of their culture—not yours. The ideas and theories presented in the previous sections note how we look at the structures of cultures, values, and communication. They also provide a framework for talking about and comparing cultures, but it’s always important to remember that cultures are heterogeneous, and constantly changing. One size does not fit all and nonverbal communication is ambiguous even in the best of times.

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