PSYCHOLOGY OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION AND INTERPERSONAL INTERACTION

M.L. Patterson

Department of Psychology, University of Missouri-St. Louis, USA

Keywords: Nonverbal communication, nonverbal behavior, interaction, culture, automatic processes

Contents

Summary

Nonverbal communication is critical in the give-and-take of social interaction. Whether interactions involve conversations or merely sharing a common presence, people constantly provide information to those around them through their appearance and nonverbal behavior. Although it is convenient to focus on individual components of nonverbal communication, such as distance or gaze, in isolation, the meaning and impact of nonverbal messages are primarily a product of the overall patterns of nonverbal behavior. On both the sending (behavioral) side and the receiving (judgment) side of nonverbal communication, some patterns seem to be hardwired, that is, the product of natural selection. But cultural differences also affect nonverbal communication by introducing variability in the form and meaning of nonverbal messages. The utility of nonverbal communication is evident in several different

functions, including (1) providing information; (2) regulating interactions; (3) expressing intimacy, (4) exercising influence; and (5) managing impressions. In social settings, these functions are manifested in the specific goals we pursue in our contacts with others. In general, automatic behaviors and automatic social judgments are dominant in the nonverbal system, as long as they seem to work. Thus, nonverbal communication is typically a highly efficient and pragmatic means of managing our social worlds.

1. Introduction

Humans are social animals. We grow up in families, work and play in groups, and share a wide range of experiences with others. As a result, we interact with a great variety of people in many different kinds of situations. Although the verbal content of our interactions is obviously important, the nonverbal side usually has a greater impact on how we feel and think about others and, eventually, how we get along with them. Furthermore, the verbal side of conversation does not exist in a vacuum. That is, the meaning of particular comments can literally be changed by a speaker's facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice. It's also important to appreciate that, in many of our interactions with family, friends, and co-workers, much of the time we share is not filled with conversation. In activities such as having a meal, playing a game, or just going for a walk, there are frequent intervals where no one is speaking. Nevertheless, during these silent periods, we are still interacting with our partners at the nonverbal level. In many social settings, such as sitting in the doctor's waiting room or simply walking through a crowded mall, we have no intention to talk to those around us, but we still "interact" by making subtle behavioral adjustments to the close presence of others. As a result, whether we are having an animated conversation with a friend or standing in line at the grocery store, our social contacts are primarily a product of the nonverbal signals we send to and receive from other people.

2. Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication

What is nonverbal communication? First, it's important to appreciate that communication, whether verbal or nonverbal, is an abstraction, that is, a construct of our own making. We can see two people talking, the sad face of a crying child, or the excitement that comes with winning the big game, but we do not actually see "communication." Instead, communication is a construct applied to processes that cannot be directly observed, but are inferred from other events that are observable. In this way, communication is like other constructs such as "personality" or "attitudes" that we cannot see or touch but they do help us to describe and understand events that we can directly experience. Although communication scholars differ on the best way to define nonverbal communication, a case can be made for an inclusive definition that captures as broad a range of phenomena as possible. Thus, the definition proposed here is simply the sending and receiving of information and influence through one's immediate environment, appearance cues, and behavior.

To appreciate just how nonverbal communication works, it's useful to consider briefly the nature of verbal communication. In face-to-face contacts with others, verbal communication is an intermittent, rule-driven event. People typically take turns

speaking to one another and usually try to avoid talking at the same time. But, even in the midst of conversations, the verbal channel is sometimes closed. That is, even when we are interacting with others, there is often a great deal of time in which little or nothing happens in the verbal channel. In contrast, a first and basic characteristic of nonverbal communication is that it is ever present. When we are with other people, we cannot help but to communicate nonverbally. That is, as long as there is some opportunity for visual, auditory, tactile, or olfactory information, the nonverbal channel is open. When we look at the receiving side of nonverbal communication, it's obvious that we cannot notice and process everything that happens in our environments. Attention is selective and pragmatic. We are more likely to notice those cues and behaviors that interest us and bear on our welfare, for example, carefully evaluating the personnel manager's reactions to our answers in an employment interview.

A second characteristic of nonverbal communication follows directly from the first. Not only is the nonverbal system always on in social settings, but also the sending and receiving of nonverbal signals occur simultaneously. At the same time that you are sending information to others with your appearance and nonverbal behavior, you are also taking in information from the appearance and behavior of those around you. Of course, once in a while this happens in conversations, with two people talking at the same time, but the results are rarely satisfying. In contrast, the simultaneous sending and receiving of nonverbal signals is at the very core of the coordination present in social settings.

The order and predictability in our social contacts is facilitated by a third characteristic of nonverbal communication. Specifically, much of the sending and receiving of nonverbal communication occurs automatically and outside of awareness. In contrast, even in the most casual and comfortable conversations, some degree of attention is needed to monitor what we are saying and to listen to our partner. In more demanding and complex conversations, we may struggle to find just the right word to use and we often have to concentrate on what our partners are saying. In contrast, with nonverbal communication, most of the complex behavioral signals are sent in a coordinated, relatively efficient manner without any conscious monitoring.

In a similar fashion, on the receiving side of nonverbal communication, we take in, more or less automatically, a complex array of appearance and behavioral information from those around us. Usually we do not have to think about the meaning of all this input. It simply registers and quickly leads to judgments about others. The friendly smile disarms our concerns about trouble, just as the angry glare alerts us to a threat. Nevertheless, all of this happens in a larger behavioral context. Sometimes the "friendly" smile is inconsistent with the tense posture and hostile words of the approaching stranger. From a functional standpoint, this makes sense. Why work at managing behavior and making judgments when they don't require effort? This reflects a fourth characteristic—nonverbal communication is cognitively efficient. A basic tenet of cognitive psychology (**see *Cognitive Psychology***) is that people are cognitive misers. Usually we do not engage in unnecessary thinking to make sense of our world and, sometimes, not even the thinking that is necessary. Instead, we take shortcuts and often jump to judgment without much deliberation. The obvious advantage in being cognitive misers is that, in our routine contacts with others, our cognitive resources may be

applied to other, more demanding concerns. Although we might make some errors in the process, we are fairly good at understanding our social environments without a great deal of effort.

Nevertheless, specific cues and behaviors do not typically have invariant meanings. Thus, a fifth characteristic is that the elements of nonverbal communication, in isolation, are ambiguous in meaning. There are two reasons for this ambiguity. First, the meaning of any nonverbal message is largely dependent on the overall pattern of cues and behaviors. Changing even a single element affects the overall pattern and can substantially alter its meaning. For example, a smiling, pleasant expression means something different when a person is tense than when she is relaxed. Second, the meaning of both the specific elements and the broader patterns of nonverbal communication is dependent on the social context. For example, across culture, the norms regarding touch, gaze, and expressiveness vary widely and, consequently, the impact of the same nonverbal patterns may be quite different. Sex differences, personality, and the relationships between individuals can also shape the meaning of a particular pattern of behavior. In addition, social norms often dictate what kinds of behaviors are acceptable in public. It's quite all right for our masculine sports heroes to pat one another's behind following a successful play, but we don't expect to see the same kind of behavior in the office hallway following a business meeting.

Thus, we have to be careful in judging specific behaviors in isolation, without knowing the larger behavioral and social contexts. The next section takes a closer look at the component cues and behaviors involved in nonverbal communication and discusses the impact of those components as they are assembled into broader patterns.

3. Components and Patterns of Nonverbal Communication

To understand how nonverbal communication works, it is necessary to identify and discuss the elements that comprise this system. It's important to appreciate, however, that this description is possible at two different levels, that is, the isolated components and the overall patterns. The components are the specific cues and behaviors, whereas the patterns are the combinations of components, typically sent and received as integrated wholes. The components, or elements, may be seen as the building blocks of nonverbal messages, but the meaning of the actual messages is more closely related to the way the elements are assembled into patterns. The term "cue" refers to a relatively fixed or stable characteristic, including any aspects of physical appearance. In contrast, "behavior" refers to a more variable action of the body, face, or voice that can change from moment to moment.

-
-
-

TO ACCESS ALL THE **20 PAGES** OF THIS CHAPTER,
Visit: http://www.eolss.net/Eolss-sampleAllChapter.aspx

Bibliography

Ambady N., Bernieri F.J., and Richeson J.A. (2000). Towards a histology of social behavior: judgmental accuracy from thin slices of the behavioral stream. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 32* (ed. M.P. Zanna), pp. 201–271. San Diego: Academic Press. [This review discusses the extensive research documenting the relatively high accuracy and utility of interpersonal judgments made on the basis of very limited appearance and behavioral information.]

Bargh J.A. (1997). The automaticity of everyday life. *Advances in Social Cognition, Vol. 10* (ed. R.S. Wyer), pp. 1–61. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum. [This chapter discusses the research on automatic social judgments and behavior.]

Burgoon J.K., Stern L.A., and Dillman L. (1995). *Interpersonal Adaptation: Dyadic Interaction Patterns*, 334 pp. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [This book presents a review and analysis of the research and theories on behavior patterns in interactions.]

Fridlund A.J. (1994). *Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View*, 369 pp. San Diego: Academic. [This book examines the animal and human research on facial expression in developing the argument that facial expressions signal intentions to act and not underlying emotional states.]

Hall E.T. (1966). *The Hidden Dimension*, 201 pp. New York: Doubleday. [This early discussion of space in interactions examines the cross-cultural differences in distance preferences.]

McArthur L.Z. and Baron R.M. (1983). Toward an ecological theory of social perception. *Psychological Review* **90**, 215–238. [This article proposes that important social judgments are the likely product of adaptive, hardwired processes selected over the course of evolution.]

Patterson M.L. (1983). *Nonverbal Behavior: A Functional Perspective*, 216 pp. New York: Springer-Verlag. [This book discusses the research on nonverbal behavior from a functional approach.]

Patterson M.L. (2001). Toward a comprehensive model of nonverbal communication. *The New Handbook of Language and Social Psychology* (ed. W.P. Robinson and H. Giles), pp. 159–176. Chichester, U.K.: Wiley. [This chapter discusses a parallel process model of nonverbal communication.]

Russell J.A. (1994). Is there a universal recognition of emotion from facial expression? A review of the cross-cultural studies. *Psychological Bulletin* **115**, 102–141. [This article examines the implications of the cross-cultural research on emotion recognition on the presumed universality in facial expressions.]

Zebrowitz L.A. (1997). *Reading Faces: Window to the Soul?*, 271 pp. Boulder: Westview. [This book discusses the evidence and implications for judging people from facial appearance and facial expressions.]

Biographical Sketch

Miles L. Patterson is a social psychologist who received his Ph.D. from Northwestern University in 1968. Since 1969, he has been in the Department of Psychology at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. He is the author of two books, 15 chapters in edited volumes, and more than 50 other articles on nonverbal communication. From 1986 to 1991, Dr. Patterson served as the editor of the *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*. He has also been on the editorial boards of several other journals in psychology, communication, and sociology. Since the mid 1970s, Dr. Patterson has been especially involved in the development of theories describing the subtle processes of nonverbal communication in interactions. His current empirical research interests focus on the factors affecting person perception accuracy and on the nonverbal adjustments people make as they walk past others in public settings. He is also working on a third book on nonverbal communication.