

Difference in Nonverbal Communication:

Cultures Edition

ALI OMIDY

University of Kentucky

## Abstract

The following paper is focused on the similarities and differences amongst various cultures in respect to nonverbal behavior. By exploring many peer-reviewed articles as well as other scholarly works, a diverse realm of information was collected to share insight on the matter. Many of the articles overlapped with much commonality. However, within the field of nonverbal communication many differences are still present. All cultures share three common types of nonverbal communication. These include: Body Language, Body Space and Body Touch, and Paralanguage. The commonalities between all cultures also extend to six types of behaviors: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise. This paper will investigate the various forms of nonverbal communication as well as the various forms of behaviors. Many of the gathered papers have provided research study experiments. This will prove to be valuable in attempt to bring the diverse topic of the paper together. The paper will finally propose future research as well as possible limitations.

*Keywords:* Nonverbal Communication, Cultures, Behaviors

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As global communications continues to grow, an understanding of nonverbal communication of other cultures must be understood in order to more effectively communicate. There are countless reasons to why one may communicate with someone of another culture. Some examples include, but are not limited to: educational, business, political or social. Whatever the reason, it is apparent that clear communication must be present between two parties in order to transfer information effectively and efficiently. Without this, little ground can be made between the two parties. A, widely known, vital component of communication is that in which is not spoken. This component is often over looked when it comes to communication with other cultures. Although it is commonly known that different cultures speak different languages, not everyone thinks about how different cultures present the information they are communicating. This paper will investigate how various cultures present information in 3 different metrics: Body Language, Body Space and Body Touch, and Paralanguage. The 6 common behaviors (anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise) will also be analyzed.

There are many cultures within the world we live in today. Because of this, the study builds a natural limitation due to the number of cultures that can be included. This paper will only take into consideration the nonverbal communication of selected cultures. Once the focus groups have been identified and examined, a comparison will be able to take place looking for similarities and differences. The proceeding section of this study will attempt to propose new experiments or new questions that will aid the continuation of this widely growing topic.

### **Introduction to Nonverbal Communication**

In past years, several studies have been performed which analyze various aspects of nonverbal communication of various cultures. Some of these studies have produced conclusive conclusions that abide by common hypothesis amongst lead researchers in the field. However, not all studies produced such conclusive data. Some experiments yielded data in which not only deviated from the common hypothesis but also was complete opposite. These inconclusive results shows the need for further future research experiments on the topic.

As discussed previously, nonverbal communication may arguably be one of the most important forms of communication. The broad topic is composed of a diverse range of forms of communication. Anything from the pitch of your voice to a slight flaring of the nostril can be constituted as nonverbal communication. Although there are many aspects to this form of communication, nonverbal communication can be broken down into 3 separate subcategories. As Hui (2007) discusses in *Nonverbal language in cross-cultural communication*, nonverbal communication can be broken into 3 main groups: Body Language, Body Space and Body Touch, and Paralanguage.

It is important to define the various types of nonverbal communication in order to categorize movements. However, it is equally important to define human behaviors that are common amongst all human beings. This allows the ability to give a common base line amongst all peoples reaction of similar culture or not. As Matsumoto (2206) discusses in *Culture and Nonverbal Behavior*, all human behavior can be broken down into 6 separate characteristics: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness and surprise. Once all behaviors are identified, each category can be set to have an absolute zero. This is of importance because it allows for the ability to quantify the amount of movement an individual possesses in a given situation. These

movements can be analyzed individually and compared to various cultures giving separation and commonality amongst culture groups.

### **Olympic Judo Match Experiment**

In Matsumoto's (2009) paper *Is There an Ingroup Advantage in Recognizing Spontaneously Expressed Emotions?* a research experiment focused on an individual's judgment of facial expression of another that is within the individual's culture. For this research, the judge had to be capable to distinguish between posed expressions and natural expressions. Not knowing the difference between the two could falsify the results for four reasons: posed expressions may lack or over-exaggerated facial muscle movements, posed expressions may cause inadvertent facial movements, posed expressions typically do not follow natural timing patterns, and posed expressions typically cause asymmetric facial expressions. For this experiment, the author chose to examine Olympic judo matches of American and Japanese athletes. Two groups of judges were formed that examined both the American and Japanese athletes and hypothesized if they won or lost due to their facial expressions. Theoretically, it was hypothesized that the American judges would be more capable of judging the American athletes correctly as the Japanese judges judged the Japanese athletes more correctly. After the experiments were run and the possibility of errors were accounted for, the results came back to be quite surprising compared to the original hypothesis. American judges ended up being more efficient at determining the true result for the Japanese athlete while the Japanese judge was more efficient at determining the results for the American athlete. Other interesting trends were also uncovered. The American judges were better at judging emotions while the Japanese judges were better at judging the actual winner. Because the results were very unintuitive, the author suggests to further research in the area to verify or rebuttal the results found.

### **Judo in the Workforce**

As discussed earlier, there are many instances where nonverbal communication comes to of importance. Often an individual's work environment can be a prime instance where knowledge of nonverbal communication would be of importance. As Matsumoto's (2009) Olympic Judo experiment presented, it can often be difficult to accurately assess an individual's emotions, feelings or intent solely on facial expression. The experiment's results show that although we may think we know our own culture, we can often take certain movements for granted when trying to make judgment of our own kind. However, when we are put in the situation to make judgment of people that are unfamiliar to us we often pay more attention to make a more accurate decision. This conclusion becomes of great importance when applied to a business or political situation. From verbal communication to ambient noise, often in these situations there are countless numbers of distractions. Because of this can be difficult to give the attention needed to collect enough individual data to make a truly educated assessment of a messenger's true intent. Especially instances where verbal communication is either difficult to comprehend or translation is necessary. In these instances, the receiver must put more attention into nonverbal keys to develop a true understanding of the message.

### **Forms of Nonverbal Communication**

As discussed previously Hui (2007) categorizes nonverbal communication into 3 separate categories: body language, body space and body touch, and paralanguage.

Body language includes various gestures, body movements, facial expressions, and eye contact. Different cultures use these components to express different messages. One example of this would be the interpretation of a simple head nod. In the United States, we commonly nod our head up and down to express to the receiver of agreement, while the shake of the head represents disagreement. This however is not the case in different parts of the world. For instance, a nod of the head in a downward direction in many of the Middle Eastern countries

would represent agreement while a nod of the head in the upward direction would mean quite the opposite. Conversely, in Japan the nodding of the head only represents an upholding of ones attention. This in itself poses plenty of opportunities for misunderstanding.

Body space and body touch can be quite simply defined by the way two or more communicators interact with one another in relation to socially acceptable distance between people and the physical interaction they share with each other. Although it may seem relatively elementary but different cultures use spaces differently. Americans tend to separate approximately 30" (arms length) between each other. However, this cannot be used as a global norm. South American's, Middle Easterners and Chinese tend to move in much closer than this while Europeans typically need more space (grater than 30") to feel comfortable while communicating. Because of this, to an American point of perspective South American's, Middle Easterners and Chinese tend to appear pushy while Europeans may seem cold and standoffish. These cultures also use the form of touch in different manures. It is not uncommon to great someone in America with a hearty handshake where as in France this is seen to be a crude way greeting another and only a quick gentle handshake is used. With this category it is clear to see how nonverbal communication can be misinterpreted to form first impressions of a college that maybe inaccurate to there true intent.

Lastly, this paper covers paralanguage to discuss the difference between cultures to emphasize the clarity of the message from the sender to the receiver. This category covers pitch, speed, volume, pause and silence. The author points out common American usage of speed, pitch and volume to dictate the receivers understanding of a message. Compared to Chinese, Americans tend to speak more quickly. The author attributes this difference in speed to the make up of the actual language opposed to cultural differences. The author's argument is that Chinese language has more meaning per syllable than that of the English language. Because of this

difference, Chinese has more room to space out syllables and words making it a slower spoken language. The author also spoke about the interpretations of silence between cultures. In an American society silence is often viewed as shyness or uncertainty while the Chinese view silence as wisdom, deep thought or compliance. The author provides a fascinating example of how a woman's response of silence during a marriage proposal maybe interpreted negatively in American culture however it would be quite the opposite in a Chinese society.

### **Limitations**

Any experiment performed cannot be completed without limitations. Although the Olympic Judo Experiment inherently has many limitations, the primary limitation is in its sample size. The experiment only takes into consideration of just few cultures. Because of this, no real assessment can be done or assumed of other existing cultures. Another limitation that was present in this experiment was the fact that there was not a base line that was performed. By including a neutral group, individual of neither culture groups, an assessment of readability the athlete of a specific culture would have been gained. This would allow for a more interesting comparison.

### **Future Research**

As research on this topic continues, it would be interesting to see the relationship of Matsumoto's experiment with similar experiments that focus on the other 6 natural human behaviors. It would be interesting to see if a culture shows stronger or weaker movements that are more easily detectable for other individuals of the same culture or outside the culture. By completion of these experiments, more data would be readily available so that trends would be more apparent.

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