

Mark L. Knapp,  
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and Terrence G. Horgan



# Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction

Eighth Edition

# NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN HUMAN INTERACTION



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EIGHTH  
EDITION

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# PREFACE

Normally, the final thing authors do in a preface is to thank those who have been instrumental in the development of their book. We'd like to depart from that tradition by starting with our heartfelt thanks to the thousands of students and instructors who have used this book and provided feedback to us during the past 40 years. More than anyone else, you are responsible for the longevity of this book. With this in mind, we undertook this eighth edition by putting what we believe to be instructor and student needs at the forefront of our writing. As with previous editions, we encourage you to let us know whether we have succeeded.

The fact that this book is coauthored is worth noting. One of us represents the field of communication and the other two social psychology. This collaboration, which requires the blending of two distinct perspectives, is symbolic of the nonverbal literature we report in this volume. The theory and research addressing nonverbal phenomena comes from scholars with a wide variety of academic backgrounds and perspectives—communication, counseling, psychology, psychiatry, linguistics, sociology, management, speech, and others. Understanding the nature of nonverbal communication is truly an interdisciplinary enterprise.

In revising this book, we retained the features that students and instructors valued from the previous editions while adding and changing other things that we believe will improve the book. One change that we hope students like is the inclusion of text boxes in each chapter. These text boxes cover important, interesting, or current topics relevant to the field of nonverbal communication. We recognize how important photographs and drawings are in a book like this, so we have continued to use visual representations to aid comprehension of certain nonverbal actions. Because an increasing amount of communication is mediated by some form of technology, we have incorporated new research findings and topics in that area that are relevant to the lives of students and teachers, such as Facebook, online dating, and text messaging, to name a few.

In every new edition, we incorporate the most recent theory and research while retaining definitive studies from the past. Readers will find that some areas

of study have fewer recent references than others. This simply means that there hasn't been a lot of recent research in that area or that the recent work, in our judgment, does not substantially change the conclusions from earlier studies. If something we know about human behavior today was first revealed in a study from 1958, we want readers to know that, and we will maintain the 1958 reference. Research on a particular topic often has an ebb and flow to it. During the 1960s and 1970s, the fear that a worldwide population boom would create terrible problems spawned a lot of research on space, territory, and crowding. In recent years, far less research has been done in this area. The study of gestures, on the other hand, has gone from an area of relatively little research activity during the 1960s and 1970s to an area that is of primary interest to numerous scholars today.

Unlike past editions in which extensive bibliographies followed each chapter, we have moved all the references to one bibliography in the back of the book. Similar to previous editions, though, we have tried to retain a writing style that is scientifically accurate as well as interesting to the reader. We are honored that our book serves as both a textbook and a reference work. The *Instructor's Manual* for this book provides the information and imagination necessary for effective classroom learning in nonverbal communication.

The book is divided into five parts. Part I introduces the reader to some fundamental ideas and addresses the following questions: What is nonverbal communication? How do verbal and nonverbal communication interrelate? What difference does a knowledge of nonverbal communication make to your everyday life? Are some people more skilled than others at communicating nonverbally? How did they get that way? With this general perspective in mind, Parts II, III, and IV take the reader through the nonverbal elements involved in any interaction: the environment within which the interaction occurs, the physical features of the interactants themselves, and their behavior—gestures, touching, facial expressions, eye gazing, and vocal sounds. Part V begins with a chapter focused on how all the separate parts of an interaction combine as we seek to accomplish very common goals in daily life—for example, communicating who we are, communicating closeness and distance, communicating varying degrees of status and power, deceiving others, and effectively managing the back-and-forth flow of conversation. Chapter 13 examines nonverbal communication in the context of advertising, therapy, the classroom, politics, culture, and technology. Throughout the book we repeatedly point out how all interactants involved are likely to play a role in whatever behavior is displayed by a single individual—even though this perspective is not always adequately developed in the research we review.

Several helpful online tools are available for use with this text. The online *Instructor's Resource Manual* includes a sample schedule, chapter objectives, discussion questions, test items, audiovisual resources, exercises, and out-of-class assignments. The companion Web site features student self-quizzes. In addition, you can choose to purchase this text with 4 months of free access to InfoTrac<sup>®</sup> College Edition, a world-class, online university library that offers the full text of articles from almost 5,000 scholarly journals and popular publications updated daily, going back more than 20 years. Students can also gain instant access to critical-thinking and paper-writing tools through InfoWrite. Your subscription now includes InfoMarks<sup>®</sup>—instant access to virtual readers drawing from the vast

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Each of us would also like to thank following reviewers for their input during the development of this edition:

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# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

## [ P A R T I ]

What is nonverbal communication? How does nonverbal behavior function in relation to verbal behavior? How does nonverbal communication affect our everyday lives? Do we learn how to perform body language, or is it instinctive? Are some people more skilled at communicating with these face, voice, and body signals? The answers to these fundamental questions are the focus of Part I of this book.



*Those of us who keep our eyes open can read volumes into what we see going on around us.*

—E. T. Hall

# NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION: BASIC PERSPECTIVES

## [ CHAPTER 1 ]

It may come as no surprise to you that, in everyday life, you are an expert in nonverbal communication even though you have yet to read a page of this book. Consider the following questions:

- Have you ever looked at another person in such a way as to communicate your sexual interest in him or her?
- When you enter an elevator full of strangers, do you take a sudden interest in how those buttons light up as the cage moves from floor to floor?
- Do you know when a baby is hungry as opposed to tired, just from hearing how it cries?
- If you cut someone off in traffic, would you have a problem understanding the other driver's reaction if he or she showed you only an upright middle finger?
- How would you use your right hand when you are introduced to a potential boss during an interview?
- Can you tell when a loved one might be mad, sad, or happy by looking at his or her face?
- Imagine entering a dorm room and seeing two men. One is wearing athletic shorts and a tank top over a heavily muscled body, and he has posters of football stars on the wall near his bed and his clothes litter his side of the room. The other man—thin and bespectacled—appears to be neat as a pin, with stacks of math and engineering books around his desk. Would you suspect potential conflict between these two?

Chances are you had no problem answering these questions. That is because everyone possesses a wealth of knowledge, beliefs, and experience regarding nonverbal communication. These questions bring to mind three aspects of nonverbal communication that you make use of during your day-to-day interactions with others. One concerns the sending of nonverbal messages; the second, receiving them; and the last, the complex interplay between the first two. First, you send (or encode) nonverbal messages to others—sometimes deliberately, sometimes not. In the case of the former, your goal is for the other person to understand a particular message that you have sent to him or her along one or more nonverbal cue channels, such as your tone of voice, posture, and facial expression (“She could tell I was mad at her”). Sometimes you succeed. If you do not, it could be because your message was unclear, contradictory, or ambiguous or because the other person missed, ignored, or misread your nonverbal message. You also may send nonverbal messages to others that are not deliberate or even intended by you. For example, you naturally communicate your biological sex to others via a series of static nonverbal cues that include your body shape and facial features, and you can burst into tears when sad. You have sent a powerful nonverbal message to others in each case, even though your goal was not necessarily to do so. There are times in which important information about your emotional state, attitudes, and intentions leaks out of you nonverbally. Your bitterness toward a rival’s remarks might be revealed in a flash of anger across your face despite your best efforts to conceal it. Such facial cues are dynamic in nature because they change during an interaction.

As you might have guessed already, you live in a sea of static and dynamic nonverbal messages. These messages come to you when you are interacting with others and even when you are all alone (“I start to shake when I think about my date tonight”). They come to you from other people, such as strangers, acquaintances, neighbors, coworkers, friends, and loved ones. They even come to you from animals that are part of your world, such as the neighbor’s dog that wags its tail every time it sees you. They also come to you from the physical structure of, and objects contained within, the environments that you move in and out of during your day. These environments are real in a physical sense because you can make physical contact with them. However, one such environment is not physical in this sense: cyberspace. While in cyberspace, you can only hear and see nonverbal messages, such as those delivered by others’ profile “pics” and emoticons. These computer-generated nonverbal messages are probably becoming increasingly important to you in a world where online interactions are taking the place of some face-to-face interactions. Indeed, some of you might be taking this class—of all things, a class in nonverbal communication—online.

Verbal messages are meaningless unless someone is there to interpret them. Nonverbal communication is no different. The process of receiving nonverbal messages, including our own (“Why is my fist clenched when he’s around?”), includes giving meaning to or interpreting those messages. (This process will be defined later as *decoding* a nonverbal message.) As a receiver of nonverbal messages, you may focus on one particular nonverbal cue or several in an attempt to understand the message that another person has sent to you. For example, in an effort to understand the emotional state of your friend James, you might focus on his facial



expression or his posture, facial expression, and tone of voice. Whether you are successful at interpreting that emotional message is another matter altogether. If you succeed, what you think he feels and how he actually feels will be the same. However, as mentioned earlier, you might have missed or ignored that nonverbal message. Or, depending on your skill level at reading others' emotion states, you might have misinterpreted his nonverbal message. Finally, you might have correctly interpreted his message but still do not understand how he truly feels because he used nonverbal behavior to feign a feeling or conceal a particular emotion state from you.

It is obvious that words can be combined in an infinite number of ways, and that the meaning of a sentence may depend upon contextual information, word choice, and the arrangement of the selected words. For example, take the following sentence fragment: "Mia learned about ... She drove to ... Charity ... with a ... in her hand." It is unclear what is going on in this situation. Let us see what happens when we add different contextual information and words to these sentences. (1) Mia learned about the plight of the children. She drove to the Charity with a checkbook in her hand. (2) Mia learned about her husband's infidelity. She drove to the house where Charity lives with a gun in her hand. In a similar fashion, the meaning of nonverbal communication is not as simple as knowing what specific nonverbal behavior, say touching, is seen by you. It depends upon contextual information, the sender (encoder) of the nonverbal behavior, the receiver (decoder) of that behavior, the relationship between the sender and receiver, the arrangement of other nonverbal cues, as well as any words being exchanged by the two.

Let us consider an example to illustrate the complexity of nonverbal communication. You see two people hug. What does that hug mean? Now what comes to your mind when additional information is added?

- There are other people around dressed in black standing near an open casket at a funeral, or the two people are at a high school reunion.
- What if the setting is a nightclub and the two people are a man and woman in the early stages of a romantic relationship as opposed to two men who are there to celebrate their baseball team's victory earlier that evening?
- Would your perception of the hug change if you learned that the setting was a work party and the person initiating the hugging was known to be very warm and outgoing versus of high status and a domineering disposition?
- How might the inclusion and placement of other nonverbal cues, such as posture, affect your perception of the hug? What if the two people are leaning toward each other from a distance, touching shoulders only briefly as opposed to pressing their bodies together and resting their heads on each other's shoulders? Would it matter to you if the person being hugged stiffened his or her body before receiving the hug? Historical and cultural factors are likely to play a role in your perception of that simple hug as well. If you had lived around the turn of the 20th century, you would have looked askance at the two people if you knew that they had just ended their first date, whereas nowadays such behavior would not even raise one of your eyebrows. If the two were Eastern European men, you might not be surprised if they began cheek kissing as well, whereas you would be surprised if they were from the United States.

## CAN PEOPLE READ OTHERS LIKE A BOOK?



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It depends on your definition of *like a book*. There are book titles that tell us a lot about what is inside (e.g., *How to Taste: A Guide to Enjoying Wine*). Similarly, there are nonverbal displays that can tell us a lot about what a person is feeling inside (e.g., red face, eyebrows lowered and drawn together, shaking fists). Book covers and titles also allow us to categorize stories (e.g., nonfiction, history, civil war battles). Likewise, we can categorize people—their age, gender, and personality traits—by looking at their head and facial characteristics (see Chapter 6).



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However, understanding books and people is generally a far more complicated matter. If you read Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, you had to learn about the characters, the events, the setting, and the plot to grasp her story. Understanding people is no different. If you were observing another person, you would want to take into consideration his or her characteristics (physical, social, psychological), his or her nonverbal and verbal behavior, the setting he or she is in, whom he or she is interacting with and why, and so on. Importantly, people's nonverbal cues are only one clue—the meaning of which is dependent upon a host of other factors—to understanding who they are.

- Lastly, consideration would be given to any words exchanged between the two people, as this could significantly alter the meaning of their hug. For instance, in the funeral setting mentioned earlier, it would matter if, during the hug, one person said to the other, “Sorry for your loss,” as opposed to “We can now finally get our hands on our inheritance money!”

Being an expert in using and understanding nonverbal cues, you probably had no problem understanding how the meaning of that hug changed in these scenarios. On the basis of the hugging scenarios (see Figure 1-1), it might be clear to you that a particular nonverbal cue has multiple meanings (or maybe even no apparent meaning at all) and that the particular meaning you settle on depends on a host of other factors, including the presence and absence of other nonverbal cues. Thus, as a sender and receiver of nonverbal cues, you have to make some decisions about

the cues you transmit to and pick up from others, which suggests that there must be some rules that you follow. Some of these rules may be very clear to you, such as knowing that you should not sniff a member of the other sex when you first meet him or her. Other rules that you follow are completely unknown to you, operating outside your conscious awareness. Do you know the array of cues that you send and receive that allow you and a friend to smoothly and effortlessly take turns while talking to each other? Finally, other rules occupy the middle ground between the two; they can be brought to your conscious awareness at times, if only partially. One such rule concerns not standing too close to others when talking with them. Although you are aware of this rule, you probably do not think about it much during your day-to-day interactions. However, although the exact distance of your personal comfort zone may be unknown to you, you certainly know when it has been violated by someone standing too close. Because these rules run the gamut from being explicit to completely outside of your conscious awareness, the decisions you make regarding your use and interpretation of nonverbal cues must as well.

Despite being an expert in the everyday use of nonverbal cues, you are new to the scientific study of nonverbal communication. The need to formally investigate what people do in everyday life becomes quickly apparent when you think about the specifics of nonverbal behavior. For example, how do people's personal comfort zones vary from culture to culture, and how do people manage to take turns smoothly in conversation? The purpose of this book is to introduce you to the scientific study of nonverbal communication, which includes an examination of how nonverbal cues are used—whether intentionally or spontaneously, consciously



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FIGURE 1-1 |  
What will this hug mean?

or not—in human interaction. Of importance, our understanding of nonverbal communication comes from many different disciplines, including anthropology, biology, communication, gender studies, psychology, and sociology, which will become apparent in the chapters to follow.

However, before we get to that, there is a need to discuss five basic perspectives through which we can view these chapters:

1. As with other scientific disciplines, there is a need for a common language for discussing the topic at hand. Thus, nonverbal communication will be *defined*.
2. Nonverbal behavior also will be classified (e.g., territoriality, gestures, touching, eye behavior). By classifying nonverbal behaviors, we will be able to review the relevant research in each area in an organized fashion.
3. Nonverbal behavior that has been defined and classified (e.g., touching behavior) should not be thought of as occurring in isolation from nonverbal behavior that is part of another category (e.g., eye behavior) or, for that matter, from verbal behavior. Indeed, consideration of the interplay between nonverbal cues and verbal cues is a vital part of understanding the *total communication process* that occurs between people in daily life and even on social networking sites.
4. The scientific roots and *historical trends* in nonverbal communication research will be reviewed, as they provide the foundation and framework, respectively, for exploring the current research in this domain.
5. The potential relevance of this scientific endeavor to our *everyday lives* will be discussed, as many of its findings have implications for our personal lives and can be applied to the various settings in which we work.

Each of these basic perspectives will be covered in greater detail in the remainder of this chapter.

## PERSPECTIVE 1: DEFINING NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

To most people, the phrase *nonverbal communication* refers to communication effected by means other than words, assuming words are the verbal element. Like most definitions, this one is generally useful, but it does not account for the complexity of this phenomenon adequately. This broad definition should serve us well, though, as long as we understand and appreciate the following points.

First, we need to understand that separating verbal and nonverbal behavior into two separate and distinct categories is virtually impossible. Consider, for example, the hand movements that make up American Sign Language, a language of the deaf. These gesticulations are mostly linguistic (verbal), yet hand gestures are often considered behavior that is “other than words.” And for those who can hear, their own hand gestures may be used to retrieve the words they wish to speak to others from their mental lexicon (Hadar, Wenkert-Olenik, Krauss, & Soroker, 1998). McNeill (1992) demonstrated the linguistic qualities of some gestures by noting that different kinds of gestures disappear with different kinds of aphasia—the impairment of the ability to use or comprehend words—namely, those gestures with linguistic functions similar to the specific verbal loss. Conversely, not all spoken words are clearly or singularly verbal: for example, onomatopoeic

words, such as *buzz* or *murmur*, and nonpropositional speech used by auctioneers and some people with aphasia.

Second, we need to understand that our definition does not indicate whether the phrase “by means other than words” refers to the type of signal produced—that is, its *encoding*—or to the perceiver’s code for interpreting the symbol—its *decoding*. Generally, when people refer to nonverbal behavior, they are talking about the signals produced, or encoded, to which meaning will be attributed, not the process of attributing meaning. A first step toward understanding the process of attributing meaning to nonverbal behavior is to understand how the brain processes nonverbal stimuli.

## PROCESSING NONVERBAL INFORMATION

Currently, many brain researchers believe that the two hemispheres of the brain process different types of information, but each hemisphere does not process each type exclusively. Nonverbal messages may be processed by either hemisphere, even though the bulk of the work is probably done by the right side. The left hemisphere processes mainly sequentially ordered, digital, verbal, and linguistic information. Nonverbal messages processed by the left hemisphere may involve symbolic gestures and facial expressions that have a closely linked verbal translation: for example, speech-independent gestures that have a direct verbal translation, such as thumbs-up (see Chapter 7). The right hemisphere of the brain is normally credited with processing visual/spatial relationships and analogic, or Gestalt, information. And it seems to be the main processing area for some types of gestures as well as spontaneous, expressive displays of emotion in the face and voice (Buck & VanLear, 2002; Kelly & Goldsmith, 2004). It is important to note, however, that few scientists currently believe that either side of the brain deals *exclusively* with a particular kind of information. In fact, the following case illustrates how adaptable the brain can be.

Bruce Lipstadt had the left hemisphere of his brain removed when he was 5 years old (Koutlak, 1976). Few doctors had hope for the development of his verbal ability, and most thought the operation would paralyze part of his body. Twenty-six years later, Bruce had an IQ of 126—better than 9 out of 10 people. He swam, rode his bike, and got an A in a statistics course. Because his speech was normal, the right hemisphere must have taken over many of the functions formerly conducted mainly by the left hemisphere. Obviously, this does not always happen as a result of operations of this type, especially after puberty. But it does suggest that, although the right and left hemispheres seem to specialize in processing certain types of information, they are by no means limited to processing only one.

Even when information is being processed primarily by one hemisphere, it is unlikely that the other hemisphere is totally inactive. While someone is reading a story, the right hemisphere may be playing a specialized role in understanding a metaphor or appreciating emotional content, whereas the left hemisphere is simultaneously trying to derive meaning from the complex relations among word concepts and syntax. Interestingly, the different functions of the two brain hemispheres do not seem as clearly differentiated in women as in men, and some left-handed people are known to have hemispheric functions the opposite of those just described (Andersen, Garrison, & Andersen, 1979; Iaccino, 1993).