

# NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

## *Readings and Applications*

FIRST EDITION



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**Stephen M. Yoshimura**

NONVERBAL  
COMMUNICATION  
RESEARCH

Readings and Applications

FIRST EDITION

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# Preface

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**N**onverbal Communication is a favorite course of mine to teach. It is a rare gem of a class in which most students enter with a working familiarity with the concept and an obvious enthusiasm for learning more. In just a short period of time, students in this class are able to notice and think about events in their social world in ways that they only recently had not, and that type of realization can generate a lot of energy and enthusiasm among students. The energy that students bring to, and leave this course with, has kept me looking forward to teaching it each year.

Nonverbal Communication instructors have an enormous number of impressive textbooks to choose from when designing their courses. Although I have assigned a few that I have found to be particularly fitting for my class, I have gradually found myself and my students drawn to the lessons taken from specific primary sources outside of the textbook, and I've enjoyed being able to use original studies and essays to generate discussion about timely issues. The readings in this book represent the topics that I have come to most enjoy discussing—and have seen students get the most from—in this course.

Of course, a set of carefully selected readings also holds a lot of potential to help students become familiar with some of the more sophisticated theoretical and empirical issues involved in social scientific research, which can help students as they progress in their other studies. I chose the readings in this book with an eye toward offering readers some readings

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that both appeal to one's normal sense of interest and curiosity and serve as models for how good social scientific scholarship can be conducted.

The book begins with chapters that provide an overview of the basics involved in the study of nonverbal communication, such as the range of codes and the functions of nonverbal communication. Alongside those chapters is an essay on the making of accurate first impressions which I have always found useful as a way of impressing upon students the importance of understanding nonverbal interaction.

The readings in the second section dive deeper into research on specific nonverbal codes. The studies and essays in the second part of the book deal with questions and problems that traverse the study of nonverbal communication, and they reflect the topics that my students have historically shown the most interest in. For example, the chapters address such issues as the rewards and consequences of making choices in physical appearance codes (Chapter 4), the potential for nonverbal codes to change how we feel about ourselves (Chapter 5), the extent to which people are accurate in interpreting the emotions expressed by others (Chapter 6), and the possibility that our emotional experiences are partially communicated subconsciously to others via olfactory cues (Chapter 11). The readings are selective, chosen carefully not only for their relevance and interest value but also for the ability of their conclusions to generate vigorous discussions about socially relevant topics.

The third section of the book deals with two potential applications of nonverbal communication research: attraction and successful interviewing. In the end, understanding how nonverbal communication works is powerful because it can help us accomplish important goals in life. Goals like being liked by others, being successful in our occupational ideals, and gathering information from health-care professionals are goals that everyone in the world can respect and understand. In fact, you will find that the studies included in this book draw from samples across the world, and the essays speak to issues that are universally important. This was an intentional act on my part as a way of illustrating how many issues in nonverbal communication are really issues that are relevant across regions of the world.

As a final offering, each chapter includes questions for discussion, along with questions for your instructor in the classroom and beyond. My intention in writing these questions is to give you, the reader, a way of connecting with your instructor about topics that you might both share an interest in. Some of the most rewarding lessons I've shared with my students have grown out of casual conversations on the way to or from class or in my office during office hours. They've almost always started with questions like the ones I have offered here.

This book was planned and assembled with students in mind, and a portion of the proceeds go back to those at the University of Montana who conduct and present their research at regional academic conferences. The intention is to provide students with increased potential for discovering a love of the study of human communication as I originally did.

I hope you find this book interesting and useful and that it provides a springboard for some excellent, memorable conversations with your instructor. I often remember (and occasionally even see around Missoula) many of my students from my past Nonverbal Communication courses, and I like to think that they would enjoy knowing how much they have influenced my approach to the course. It is a tremendous honor to be able to share the possibility of some of that experience with my current and new students and with my fellow Nonverbal Communication course instructors who might find these readings worth discussing with their own students.

## chapter one

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# Forms of Nonverbal Communication

The study of nonverbal communication extends across many academic disciplines: communication, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, among others. Researchers in each field of study generally ask different questions of nonverbal communication. For example, a psychologist might examine how an individual's thoughts or personality traits predict (or are predicted by) nonverbal actions. A sociologist might want to know about the connection between social status and the use of nonverbal behaviors. A communication researcher would be most interested in how nonverbal messages are constructed, exchanged, or perceived in the context of social interactions. Whatever the specific discipline a given researcher is trained in, all social scientists who study nonverbal communication share a focus on a set of specific codes (i.e., categories) of nonverbal behaviors that are used to communicate messages without words.

In this chapter, Walid Afifi (a communication researcher himself) discusses two important general issues surrounding the study of nonverbal communication. One issue is what exactly the study of nonverbal communication should be called. Perhaps popularized by the 1970 book *Body Language*<sup>1</sup> by Julius Fast (an independent fiction and nonfiction writer), nonverbal communication is commonly referred to as “body language.” As Afifi writes, however, many more

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1 Fast, J. (1970). *Body Language*. New York, NY: Pocket Books.

codes are involved in nonverbal communication than one's bodily movement alone, and nonverbal communication involves many more behaviors than the use of words. Thus, researchers who study "body language" rarely use that term, opting instead to refer to the concept as nonverbal communication or nonverbal behavior. Of course, nonverbal communication is not movement of the body alone, nor does it necessarily involve language.

Another important issue in this chapter regards the codes that nonverbal communication includes. Affi reviews seven codes in this chapter, all of which are generally accepted as unique nonverbal codes, but he also mentions that the specific number of codes that exist in nonverbal communication is a source of scholarly disagreement. The codes reviewed in this chapter are kinesics, haptics, proxemics, physical appearance, vocalics, chronemics, and artifacts. You will find research examining most of these codes in section two of this book.

Third, Affi raises the issue that the meanings of nonverbal messages can change, depending on the situation and the other codes that are simultaneously displayed (or concealed). For example, a smile displayed by someone who has just received a gift can indicate joy, gratitude, humorousness, surprise, or relief; conversely, it could indicate embarrassment, disgust, or disappointment, depending on what the gift was, what the gift means to the receiver, who else is present at the time, the timing of the gift, or who the giver was. In addition, a toothy smile combined with a head tilted back, wide-open mouth, upward gaze, and open posture would carry a different meaning than a closed-mouth smile combined with a downward gaze and forward lean. The exact meanings inferred from such displays are arbitrary, which is the point. Just because someone engages in a specific nonverbal behavior or set of nonverbal behaviors does not necessarily mean that people will interpret the message in the way that the actor intended.

By the time you finish reading this chapter, you will likely discover that the study of nonverbal communication is far richer than popular journalistic accounts have often conveyed. I hope the variety of nonverbal codes discussed here will pique your interest and curiosity about further questions around nonverbal communication. Just for example, you might begin to consider that the types of nonverbal codes that most strongly catch your attention when enacted by others are not necessarily the same codes that you tend to focus on in yourself while communicating with others. You might also see that some codes are more important than others in certain situations. Of course, you might also begin to see that nonverbal communication, whether intentionally or unintentionally enacted, can affect our moment-by-moment experiences as well as our long-term personal and relationship outcomes.

## CHAPTER ONE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. Which nonverbal codes do you tend to notice about others and yourself? Why do you suppose we focus on some codes about ourselves and pay attention to those same or other codes in others?
2. What occasion(s) have you had in which you purposefully tried to enact a specific nonverbal code or set of codes to accomplish something important to you? What was the outcome of that (or those) attempts?
3. What recollections do you have of experiences in which you misunderstood something someone was communicating because of how they were acting nonverbally? Why do you suppose you misperceived their message?

### QUESTIONS FOR YOUR INSTRUCTOR IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

1. How did you become interested in the study of nonverbal communication?
2. What are the main current trends in the study of nonverbal communication?
3. What can you tell me about the most interesting or enjoyable study you have read on nonverbal communication?
4. Do you have any recommendations for someone who is interested in learning more about research on, or the practical applications of, nonverbal communication?

## chapter two

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# Nonverbal Communication in Intercultural Contexts

**N**onverbal communication scholars have long sought the answer to a key question: What purposes does nonverbal communication serve? That is, why would such a large portion of our everyday interaction be comprised of nonverbal communication, and why would it be so prevalent across cultures?

In this chapter, Stella Ting-Toomey explains the functions, or goals, that nonverbal communication helps people accomplish across cultures. Importantly, Ting-Toomey points out that nonverbal communication can be both humanly universal and culturally variable. So, for example, even though all humans might want to effectively present their identities to others, culture helps determine exactly how, when, and where they use specific nonverbal codes to do that.

Ting-Toomey examines space and time as particularly rich examples of communication domains that serve both human universal and culturally specific functions. She writes that humans are by nature territorial, and a variety of nonverbal codes help us either regulate boundaries or maintain our identities. This is why, for example, when someone “crosses a line” (either psychologically or physically), we might feel an urge to react, and we often do something nonverbal in response, whether it be a small micromovement in one’s face or body or a larger action such as physically moving toward or away from the perceived transgressor. Conversely, when humans feel the need to affiliate with others, they will engage in a variety of nonverbal behaviors to close

## CHAPTER TWO QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

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### REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is your definition of culture? Given that definition of culture, what does it mean to communicate interculturally?
2. What is the most recent example you can think of in which someone from a different culture than your own communicated with you in a way that was interesting to you? Having read this chapter, what is or was your explanation for the variation in their expression?
3. Ting-Toomey emphasizes the importance of being flexible and adaptive in one's thinking. What are some specific actions that you believe would help an individual build his or her capacity for thinking flexibly and adaptively—either in intercultural interactions or otherwise?

### QUESTIONS FOR YOUR INSTRUCTOR IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

1. Can you tell me more about the study of intercultural communication? What are the latest trends in that research?
2. In addition to the recommendations that Ting-Toomey makes in her chapter, what suggestions might you have for me about effectively communicating interculturally?
3. Do you have any examples from your own experiences in which you've learned firsthand about the challenges or benefits of intercultural nonverbal communication?