CHAPTER 4

Communicating through Nonverbal Behaviors

Learning Outcomes

1. Identify characteristics of nonverbal communication
2. Identify channels through which we communicate nonverbally
3. Discuss how our self-presentation affects communication
4. Examine how nonverbal communication varies based on culture and gender
5. Understand guidelines for improving nonverbal communication
We’ve all heard—and said—“actions speak louder than words.” Actions are so important to our communication that researchers have estimated that in face-to-face communication as much as 60 percent of the social meaning is a result of nonverbal behavior (Burgoon & Bacue, 2003, p. 179). In other words, the meaning we assign to any communication is based on both the content of the verbal message and our interpretation of the nonverbal behavior that accompanies and surrounds the verbal message. And interpreting these nonverbal actions is not always the easiest thing to do.

We begin this chapter by briefly identifying the characteristics of nonverbal communication. Next, we describe the sources of nonverbal information that we use when we interpret and assign meaning to the behavior of others: body language (kinesics), nonsymbolic vocal sounds (paralanguage), our use of space (proxeemics), and self-presentation cues. Then we explore how the meaning of nonverbal communication may vary based on culture, sex, and gender. Finally, we offer suggestions to help you improve your accuracy at interpreting nonverbal messages and for increasing the likelihood that others are able to accurately interpret your behavior.

In the broadest sense, the term nonverbal communication is commonly used to describe all human communication events that transcend spoken or written words (Knapp & Hall, 2006). Specifically, nonverbal communication behaviors are those bodily actions and vocal qualities that typically accompany a verbal message. The behaviors are usually interpreted as intentional and have agreed-upon interpretations in a particular culture or speech community (Burgoon & Hoobler, 2002, p. 244).

Characteristics of Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is distinct from verbal communication in that it is continuous and multichanneled. It may be unintentional and ambiguous. The nonverbal part of the message is the primary conveyer of emotion.

First, nonverbal communication is continuous. Although you can choose to form and send a verbal message, you do not control whether your nonverbal behavior is interpreted as a communication message. As long as you are in the presence of someone else, that person may perceive your behavior as communication. When Austin yawns and stares off into the distance during a meeting at work, his coworkers will notice this behavior and assign meaning to it. One coworker may interpret it as a sign of

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boredom, another might see it as a sign of fatigue, and yet another may view it as a message of disrespect. Meanwhile, Austin is oblivious to all of the messages that his behavior is sending.

Second, nonverbal communication is multichanneled. We perceive meaning from a variety of nonverbal behaviors including posture, gestures, body movements, body appearance, non-language vocal mannerisms, and so on. When we interpret nonverbal behavior, we usually base our perception on a combination of these behaviors. So, Anna observes Mimi’s failure to sustain eye contact, her bowed head, and her repetitive toe stubbing in the dirt, as cues that mean her daughter is lying about not hitting her brother.

Third, nonverbal communication can be intentional or unintentional. Although we can carefully control the verbal messages we send, because nonverbal behavior is continuous, we often display behaviors that we are not controlling. For example, President George W. Bush’s noted “smirk,” a nonverbal facial mannerism, may be an intentional message conveying contempt for another’s opinion, or it may be an unintentional nervous reaction to speaking in public. Whether the smirk is intentional or unintentional, however, when we see it, we interpret and assign it meaning. Because nonverbal behavior is not easily controlled, it is perceived to be more accurate than verbal communication. So when your nonverbal behavior contradicts your verbal message, people are more likely to believe the nonverbal communication they perceive.

Fourth, the meaning of a particular nonverbal communication can be ambiguous. Any particular behavior can have many meanings. So regardless of what President Bush intends, the smirk is an ambiguous message and may be interpreted differently by different audience members.

Finally, nonverbal communication is the primary conveyor of our emotions. When we listen to others, we base our interpretation of their feelings and emotions almost totally on their nonverbal behavior. In fact, about 93 percent of the emotional meaning of messages is conveyed nonverbally. (Mehrabian, 1972). So, when Janelle says, “I’m really fine, but thanks for asking,” her sister Renee will understand the real message based on the nonverbal behaviors that accompany it. For example, if Janelle uses a sarcastic tone, Renee will understand that Janelle is angry about something. If Janelle sighs, averts her eyes, tears up, and almost whispers her message, Renee will understand that Janelle is really sad and emotionally upset.

LO2 Sources of Nonverbal Communication

There are a variety of sources or channels for the nonverbal messages that we interpret from others and display ourselves. These include the use of the body (kinesics), the use of the voice (vocalics/paralanguage), the use of space (proxemics), and self-presentation.

Use of Body: Kinesics

Of all the research on nonverbal behavior, you are probably most familiar with kinesics, the technical name for the interpretation of body motions as communications (Wikipedia, 2006). Body motions are the movement of your body or body parts that others interpret and assign meaning. These include your gestures, eye contact, facial expression, posture, and your use of touch.

**Gestures**

Gestures are the movements of your hands, arms, and fingers that you use to describe or to emphasize. People vary, however, in the amount of gesturing that accompanies their spoken messages; for example, some people “talk with their hands” far more than others. Some gestures, called illustrators, augment the verbal message. So when you say “about this high” or “nearly this round,” we expect to see a gesture accompany

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**kinesics**
the interpretation of body motions used in communication

**gestures**
movements of our hands, arms, and fingers that we use to describe or to emphasize

**illustrators**
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Communication through Nonverbal Behaviors

Effective public speakers not only use direct eye contact with audience members to monitor how their speech is being received, but also to establish rapport and demonstrate their sincerity. Speakers who fail to maintain eye contact with audience members are perceived as ill at ease and often as insincere or dishonest (Burgoon, Coker, & Coker, 1986).

Facial Expression

Facial expression is the arrangement of facial muscles to communicate emotional states or reactions to messages. Our facial expressions are especially important in conveying the six basic human emotions of happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, anger, and disgust. It appears that the particular facial expression for each of these emotions is universal and does not vary by culture. But we can consciously choose to mask the feeling expressed by our face or to feign feelings that we do not have (Ekman, 1999).

Facial expressions are so important to communicating the emotional part of a message that people have invented emoticons, a system of typed symbols to convey facial expressions online. For example, :-) conveys a smile, while :-( conveys a frown (Walther & Parks, 2002).

Posture

Posture is the position and movement of your body. From your posture, others interpret how attentive, respectful, and dominant your verbal description is. One type of gesture, called emblems, can stand alone and substitute completely for words. When you raise your finger and place it vertically across your lips, it signifies “Quiet.” Emblems have automatic agreed-upon meanings in a particular culture, but the specific meaning assigned to a specific gesture can vary greatly across cultures. For example, the American hand sign for “OK” has an obscene sexual meaning in some European countries. Gestures called adaptors occur unconsciously as a response to a physical need. For example, you may scratch an itch, adjust your glasses, or rub your hands together when they are cold. You do not mean to communicate a message with these gestures, but others do notice them and attach meaning to them.

Eye Contact

Eye contact, also referred to as gaze, is how and how much we look at others when we are communicating. Although the amount of eye contact differs from person to person and from situation to situation, studies show that talkers hold eye contact about 40 percent of the time and listeners nearly 70 percent of the time (Knapp & Hall, 2006).

Through our eye contact, we both express our emotions and we monitor what is occurring in the interaction. How we look at a person can convey a range of emotions such as anger, fear, or affection. Shakespeare acknowledged how powerfully we express emotions through eye contact when he said, “The eyes are the windows of the soul.” With eye contact, you can tell when or whether a person or audience is paying attention to you, whether a person or audience is involved in what you are saying, and the reaction a person or audience is having to your comments.

Although the use and meaning of eye contact varies from one cultural group to another, in the United States, effective public speakers not only use direct eye contact with audience members to monitor how their speech is being received, but also to establish rapport and demonstrate their sincerity. Speakers who fail to maintain eye contact with audience members are perceived as ill at ease and often as insincere or dishonest (Burgoon, Coker, & Coker, 1986).
you are. **Body orientation** refers to your posture in relation to another person. If you face another person squarely, this is called direct body orientation. When two people’s postures are at angles to each other, this is called indirect body orientation. In many situations, direct body orientation signals attentiveness and respect, while indirect body orientation shows nonattentiveness and disrespect. Think of how you would sit in a job interview. You are likely to sit up straight and face the interviewer directly because you want to communicate your interest and respect. Interviewers tend to interpret a slouched posture and indirect body orientation as inattentiveness and disrespect. Yet, in other situations, such as talking with friends, a slouched posture and indirect body orientation may be appropriate and may not carry messages about attention or respect. When you are making a speech, an upright stance and squared shoulders will help your audience perceive you as poised and self-confident. So when you are giving a speech, be sure to distribute your weight equally on both feet so that you maintain a confident bearing.

**Haptics**

Haptics is the interpretation of touch. Touching behavior is a fundamental aspect of nonverbal communication. We use our hands, our arms, and other body parts to pat, hug, slap, kiss, pinch, stroke, hold, embrace, and tickle others. Through touch we communicate a variety of emotions and messages. In Western culture, we shake hands to be sociable and polite, we pat a person on the back for encouragement, we hug a person to show love, and we clasp raised hands to demonstrate solidarity.

Because of individual preference, family background, or culture, people differ in their use of touching behavior and their reactions to unsolicited touch from others. Some people like to touch others and be touched; other people do not. Although American culture is relatively noncontact oriented, the kinds and amounts of touching behavior within our society vary widely. Touching behavior that seems appropriate to one person may be perceived as overly intimate or threatening by another. Moreover, the perceived appropriateness of touch differs with the context. Touch that is considered appropriate in private may embarrass a person when done in public or with a large group of people.

**Use of Voice: Vocalics**

The interpretation of a verbal message based on the paralinguistic features is called **vocalics**. **Paralanguage** is the voiced but not verbal part of a spoken message. Six vocal characteristics that comprise paralanguage are pitch, volume, rate, quality, intonation, and vocalized pauses.

**Pitch**

**Pitch** is the highness or lowness of vocal tone. People raise and lower vocal pitch and change volume to emphasize ideas, indicate questions, and show nervousness. They may also raise the pitch when they are nervous or lower the pitch when they are trying to be forceful. Lower pitch voices tend to convey more believability and credibility.

**Volume**

**Volume** is the loudness or softness of tone. Whereas some people have booming voices that carry long distances, others are normally soft-spoken. Regardless of their normal volume level, however, people do vary their volume depending on the situation and topic of discussion. For example, people talk loudly when they wish to be heard in noisy settings. They may vary their volume when they are angry, or they may speak more softly when they are being romantic or loving.

**Rate**

**Rate** is the speed at which a person speaks. People tend to talk more rapidly when they are happy,
perceive her message as sarcasm. But if her voice pitch rises with each word, we might perceive the vocalics as supplementing the message and understand that she is asking a question.

Use of Space: Proxemics

Have you ever been in the midst of a conversation with someone that you felt was “standoffish” or “pushy”? If you had analyzed your feeling, you might have discovered that your impression of the person or what was being said stemmed from how far the person chose to stand from you. If the person seemed to be farther away than you are accustomed to, you might have interpreted the distance as aloofness. If the distance was less than you would have expected, you might have felt uncomfortable and perceived the person as being overly familiar or pushy. Proxemics is the formal term for the interpretation someone makes of your use of space. People will interpret how you use the personal space around you, the physical spaces that you control and occupy, and the artifacts that you choose to decorate your space.

Personal Space

Personal space is the distance you try to maintain when you interact with other people. Our need for and use of personal space stems from our biological territorial natures, which view space as a protective mechanism. How much space you need or view as appropriate depends on your individual preference, the nature of your relationship to the other person or people, and your culture. While the absolute amount of space varies from person to person, message to message, and from culture to culture, in general the amount of personal space we view as appropriate decreases as the intimacy of our relationship increases. For example, in the dominant U.S. culture, four distinct distances are generally perceived as appropriate:

- **Quality**: The sound of a person’s voice. Each human voice has a distinct tone. Some voices are raspy, some smoky, some have bell-like qualities, while others are throaty or nasal.

- **Intonation**: The variety, melody, or inflection in one’s voice. Some voices have little intonation and sound monotone. Other voices have a great deal of melody and may have a childlike quality to them. People prefer to listen to voices with a moderate amount of intonation.

- **Vocalized Pauses**: ExTRANeous sounds or words that interrupt fluent speech. The most common vocalized pauses that creep into our speech include “uh,” “um,” “er,” “well,” “Ok,” and those nearly universal interrupters of American conversations, “you know” and “like.” At times we may use vocal pauses to hold our turn when we momentarily search for the right word or idea. Because they are not part of the intended message, occasional vocalized pauses are generally ignored by those who are interpreting the message. However, when you begin to use them to excess, others will perceive you as nervous or unsure of what you are saying. As your use increases, people will be less able to understand what you are saying, and they may perceive you as confused and your ideas as not well thought out. For some people, the use of vocalized pauses presents interferences that are so pervasive that listeners are unable to concentrate on the meaning of the message.

We can interpret the paralinguistic part of a message as complementing, supplementing, or contradicting the meaning conveyed by the verbal message. So when Joan says, “Well, isn’t that an interesting story?” How we interpret her meaning will depend on the paralanguage that accompanies it. If she alters her normal voice so that the “Well” is varied both in pitch and tone while the rest of her words are spoken in a staccato monotone, we might interpret the vocalics as contradicting the words and perceive her message as sarcasm. But if her voice pitch rises with each word, we might perceive the vocalics as supplementing the message and understand that she is asking a question.
the unwritten rules. For instance, people will tolerate being packed into a crowded elevator or subway and even touching others they do not know, provided that the others follow the "rules." The rules may include standing rigidly, looking at the floor or the indicator above the door, but not making eye contact with others. The rules also include ignoring or pretending that they are not touching.

Physical Space

Physical space is the part of the physical environment over which you exert control. Our territorial natures not only lead us to maintain personal distance, but also lead us to assert ownership claims to parts of the physical space that we occupy. Sometimes we do not realize the ways that we claim space as our own; in other instances, we go to great lengths to visibly "mark" our territory. For example, Ramon arrives early for the first day of class, finds an empty desk, and puts his backpack next to it on the floor and his coat on the seat. He then makes a quick trip to the restroom. If someone comes along while Ramon is gone, moves his backpack and coat, and sits down at the desk, that person is violating what Ramon has "marked" as his territory. If you regularly take the same seat in a class, that habit becomes a type of marker, signaling

![Figure 4.1](https://example.com/figure41.png)

**Figure 4.1**

Distance Levels of Personal Space in the Dominant U.S. Culture

Zone a, intimate space: spouses, significant others, family members, and others with whom we have an intimate relationship

Zone b, personal distance: friends

Zone c, social distance: business associates and acquaintances

Zone d, public distance: strangers

and comfortable, depending on the nature of the conversation. These distances are illustrated in Figure 4.1. Intimate distance is defined as up to 18 inches and is appropriate for private conversations between close, intimate friends. Personal distance, from 18 inches to 4 feet, is the space in which casual conversation occurs. Social distance, from 4 to 12 feet, is where impersonal business such as a job interview is conducted. Public distance is anything more than 12 feet (Hall, 1969).

Of greatest concern to us is the intimate distance—that which we regard as appropriate for intimate conversation with close friends, parents, and younger children. People usually become uncomfortable when "outsiders" violate this intimate distance. For instance, in a movie theater that is less than one-quarter full, people will tend to leave one or more seats empty between themselves and others whom they do not know. If a stranger sits right next to you in such a setting, you are likely to feel uncomfortable or threatened and may even move away. Intrusions into our intimate space are acceptable only in certain settings and then only when all involved follow

What do the artifacts in this room and their arrangement tell you about the person who works there? How do you think they influence this person's interactions with other people?
to others that a particular seat location is yours. Other students will often leave that seat empty because they have perceived it as yours. Not only can we interpret someone’s ownership of space by their markers, but we also can understand a person’s status in a group by noting where the person sits and the amount of space over which ownership is claimed. In a well-established group, people with differing opinions will often choose to sit on opposite sides of the table, while allies will sit in adjacent spots. So if you are observant, you can tell where people stand on an issue by noticing where they have chosen to sit. There are many other meanings that can be discerned from how people use physical space.

Artifacts

Artifacts are the objects and possessions we use to decorate the physical space we control. When others enter our homes, our offices, or our dorm rooms, they look around and notice what objects we have chosen to place in the space and how we have arranged them. Then they assign meaning to what they see. For example, when Katie visited her boyfriend Peter at school, the first thing she noticed was a picture hanging on his bulletin board of him hugging a really cute woman that she did not recognize. The second thing she noticed was that the framed picture she had given him of her before he left for school was nowhere to be found. From this, she concluded that Peter wasn’t honoring his promise not to see anyone at school.

The way that we arrange the artifacts in our space also can nonverbally communicate to others. Professors and businesspeople have learned that by choosing and arranging the artifacts in their space, they can influence interactions. We once knew a professor who was a real soft touch. So when he had to handle the students who were petitioning to enter closed classes, he turned his desk, which normally faced out the window, so that it was directly in front of the door. That way, the students couldn’t get into his office, sit down, and break his resolve with their sad stories. Instead, they had to plead their case standing in the very public hall. In this case, his desk served as a barrier and protected him from his soft-hearted self.

People choose artifacts not just for the function of the object, but also for the message that the object conveys about them. So when Lee, the baby of his family, got his first job, the first items he purchased for his new apartment were a large, flat-screen TV and a stuffed leather couch and chair. He chose these primarily to impress his older and already successful brother. Whether the artifacts you choose are conscious attempts to impress or whether they simply reflect your taste or income, when others enter your space, they will notice the artifacts and draw conclusions.

**LO 3** Self-Presentation Cues

People learn a lot about us based on how we look. This includes our physical appearance, our clothing and grooming, and our use of time.

**Physical Appearance**

People make judgments about others based on how they look. We can control our physique to some extent through exercise, diet, cosmetic surgery, and so on. But we also inherit much of our physical appearance, including our body type, and physical features such as hair and eyes. Our body is one of the first things that others notice about us and there are culture-based stereotypes associated with each of the three general body shapes. **Endomorphs**, who are shaped round and heavy, are stereotyped as kind, gentle, and jovial. **Mesomorphs**, who are muscular and strong, are believed to be energetic, outgoing, and confident. **Ectomorphs**, whose bodies are lean and have little muscle development, are stereotyped as bratty, anxious, and cautious. While not everyone fits perfectly into one of these categories, each person tends toward one body type. Even though these stereotypes are far from accurate, there is ample anecdotal evidence to suggest that many of us form our first impression of someone using body type stereotypes. Yet, the messages we infer from body type also vary by culture.

**Clothing and Grooming**

Your clothing and personal grooming communicate a message about you. Today, more than ever, people use objects and possessions we use to decorate the physical space we control.

- **endomorph**: round and heavy body type
- **mesomorph**: muscular and athletic body type
- **ectomorph**: body type that is lean and has little muscle development
For example, George, who is polychronic, shows up for a noon lunch with Raoul at 12:47 p.m. because as he was leaving his office, his coworker stopped him to ask for help on a problem.

How Margarite’s sister or Raoul interpreted the time behavior they experienced depends on their own time orientation. If Margarite’s sister is also monochronic, she probably apologized, perceiving her own behavior to have been at fault. If Raoul is polychronic, he will not be offended by George’s arrival time because he will have viewed George’s delay as understandable. We tend to view other’s use of time through the lens of the culture from which we come. So if we are monochronic in our orientation to time, we will view the polychronic time behavior of someone else as being “rude” and vice versa.

**Use of Time**

**Chronemics** is the way others interpret your use of time. Cultures differ in how they view time (Hall, E. T., 1959). Some of us have a monochronic time orientation, or a “one thing at a time” approach to time. We concentrate our efforts on one task, and only when it is finished or when the time we have allotted to it is complete, do we move on to another task. If we are monochronic, we see time as “real” and think about “spending time,” “losing time,” and so on. As a result, we subordinate our interpersonal relationships to our schedule (Dahl, 2004, p. 11). So when Margarite’s sister, who is excited to share some good news, comes into the room and interrupts her “study time,” Margarite, who is monochronic, screams, “Get out! Can’t you see I’m studying!” Others of us have a polychronic time orientation and tackle multiple tasks at once. We see time as flexible and fluid. So we view appointment times and schedules as variable and subordinate to our interpersonal relationships, and we easily alter or adapt our schedule to meet the needs of our relationships (Dahl, 2004, p. 11).

**Kinesics**

As we have said, the use of kinesics, or body motions and the meanings they convey, differs among cultures. Several cultural differences in body motions are well documented.

**Eye Contact**

A majority of people in the United States and other Western cultures expect those with whom they are communicating to “look them in the eye.” Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2007) explain, however, that direct eye contact is not a custom throughout the world (p. 210). For instance, in Japan, prolonged eye contact is considered rude, disrespectful, and threatening. People from Latin America, Caribbean cultures, and Africa tend to avoid eye contact as a sign of respect.

In the United States, women tend to have more frequent eye contact during conversations than men do (Cegala & Sillars, 1989). Moreover, women tend to hold eye contact longer than men, regardless of the sex of the person they are interacting with (Wood, 2007). It is important to note that these differences, which we have described according to biological sex, are also related to clothing choices, body art, and other personal grooming to communicate who they are and what they stand for. Likewise, when we meet someone, we are likely to form our impression of them from how they are dressed and groomed. Because we can alter our clothing and grooming to suit the occasion, others rely heavily on these nonverbal cues to help them understand who we are and how to treat us. As a result, you can change how people perceive you by altering your clothing and grooming. For example, a successful sales representative may wear an oversize white T-shirt, baggy shorts, and a backward ball cap when hanging with his friends; put on khakis and a golf shirt to go to the office; and dress in a formal blue suit to make a major presentation to a potential client group. In each case, he uses what he is wearing to communicate who he is and how others should treat him.
notions of gender and standpoint in society. In other words, people (male or female) will give more eye contact when they are displaying feminine-type behaviors than when they are displaying masculine-type behaviors.

**Facial Expression and Gestures**

Studies show that there are many similarities in nonverbal communication across cultures, especially in facial expressions. For instance, several facial expressions seem to be universal, including a slight raising of the eyebrow to communicate recognition, wriggling one’s nose, and a disgusted facial look to show social repulsion (Martin & Nakayama, 2000, pp. 183–184).

Across cultures, people also show considerable differences in the meaning of gestures. For instance, the forming of a circle with the thumb and forefinger signifies the OK sign in the United States, but means zero or worthless in France, is a symbol for money in Japan, and is a vulgar gesture in Germany and Brazil (Axtell, 1999, pp. 44, 143, 212).

Displays of emotion may also vary. For instance, in some Eastern cultures, people have been socialized to downplay emotional behavior cues, whereas members of other cultures have been socialized to amplify their displays of emotion. Research has shown some sex and gender effects in facial expressions and gestures. Women and men using a feminine style of communication tend to smile frequently. Gender differences in the use of gestures are so profound that people have attributed masculinity or femininity on the basis of gesture style alone (Pearson, West, & Turner, 1995, p. 126). For instance, women are more likely to keep their arms close to the body, are less likely to lean forward with the body, play more often with their hair or clothing, and tap their fingers more often than men.

**Haptics**

According to Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2007), touching behavior is closely linked to culture. In some cultures, lots of contact and touching is normal behavior, while in other cultures, individual space is respected and frequent touching is not encouraged. According to Neuliep (2006), some cultures such as South and Central American countries, as well as many southern European countries, encourage contact and engage in frequent touching. By contrast, many northern European cultures are medium to low in contact, and Asian cultures are mainly low-contact cultures. The United States, which is a country of immigrants, is generally perceived to be medium in contact, though there are wide differences among individual Americans due to variations in family heritage.

Women tend to touch others less than men do, but women value touching more than men do. Women view touch as an expressive behavior that demonstrates warmth and affiliation, whereas men view touch as instrumental behavior, so that touching females is considered as leading to sexual activity (Pearson, West, & Turner, 1995, p. 142).

**Paralanguage**

There are a few cultural and gender variations in the use of paralanguage. It is in the use of volume where cultural differences are most apparent (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2007). Arabs speak with a great deal of volume to convey strength and sincerity, while soft voices are preferred in Britain, Japan, and Thailand.

In the United States, there are stereotypes about what are considered to be masculine and feminine voices. Masculine voices are expected to be low-pitched and loud, with moderate to low intonation; feminine voices are expected to be higher-pitched, softer in volume, and more expressive. The voice characteristic of breathiness is associated with femininity. Although both sexes have the option to portray a range of masculine and feminine paralanguage, most people probably conform to the expectations for their sex (Wood, 2007).
Interpreting Nonverbal Messages

When interpreting nonverbal messages, here are some things you might want to remember.

• Do Not Assume
When interpreting others’ nonverbal cues, do not automatically assume that a particular behavior means a certain thing. Except for the category of emblems, there is no automatic meaning of nonverbal behavior. And even the meaning of emblems varies culturally. There is much room for error when people make quick interpretations or draw rapid conclusions about an aspect of nonverbal behavior. Instead of making automatic interpretations of nonverbal cues, we should consider cultural, gender, and individual influences on nonverbal behavior.

• Consider Influences
Consider cultural, gender, and individual influences when interpreting nonverbal cues. We have shown how nonverbal behavior varies widely based on culture or expectations of masculinity and femininity. Note also that some people are totally unique in their display of nonverbal behavior. You may have learned over time that your friend grinds her teeth when she is excited. You may never encounter another person who uses this behavior in this way.

• Pay Attention to Nonverbal Communication
Pay attention to multiple aspects of nonverbal communication and their relationship to verbal communication. You should not take nonverbal cues out of context. In any one interaction, you are likely to get simultaneous messages from a person’s eyes, face, gestures, posture, voice, and use of space and touch. Even in electronic communication, where much of the nonverbal communication is absent, there can be facial expression and touch communicated through emoticons, paralanguage through capitalization of words, and chronemics through the timing and length of an electronic message. By taking into consideration all aspects of communication, you will be more effective in interpreting others’ messages.

• Use Perception Checking
As we discussed in Chapter 2, the skill of perception checking lets you see if your interpretation of another person’s message is accurate or not. By describing the nonverbal behavior you have noticed and tentatively sharing your interpretation of it, you can get feedback on whether your interpretation is accurate or needs correction.

Guidelines for Improving Nonverbal Communication

Because nonverbal messages are inherently continuous, ambiguous, multichanneled, and sometimes unintentional, it can be tricky to accurately decode them. Add to this the fact that the meaning for any nonverbal behavior can vary by situation, culture, and gender, and you begin to understand why we so often “misread” the behavior of others. The following guidelines can help you improve the likelihood that you will make accurate interpretations of others’ behavior, and that your own behavior will lead others to perceive your nonverbal messages correctly.

Proxemics and Territory

As is the case with most forms of nonverbal communication, one’s use of space and territory is associated with culture (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2007). Recall our discussion of individualistic and collectivist cultures in Chapter 2. Cultures that stress individualism generally demand more space than do collectivist cultures and will defend space more closely (p. 217). Seating and furniture placement may also vary by cultural expectations. For example, Americans in groups tend to talk to those seated opposite them, but Chinese prefer to talk to those seated next to them. Furniture arrangement in the United States and Germany often emphasizes privacy. In France or Japan, furniture is arranged for group conversation or participation (pp. 218–219).

Artifacts and Physical Appearance

There are cultural and gender influences regarding artifacts and physical appearance. Different clothing styles signify masculinity and femininity within a culture. In the United States, women’s and feminine clothing is more decorative, while men’s and masculine clothing is more functional (Wood, 2007).

Chronemics

As you probably recognize, the dominant U.S. culture has a monochronic time orientation; Swiss and German cultures are even more oriented in this way. On the other hand, many Latin American and Arab cultures have polychronic orientation. The large-scale immigration that is occurring across the globe is leading to an influx of Arab workers into northern Europe and Latin American workers into the U.S. As a result, it is likely that you will encounter people whose use of time is different from your own.

LO5 Guidelines for Improving Nonverbal Communication

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When interpreting others’ nonverbal cues, do not automatically assume that a particular behavior means a certain thing. Except for the category of emblems, there is no automatic meaning of nonverbal behavior. And even the meaning of emblems varies culturally. There is much room for error when people make quick interpretations or draw rapid conclusions about an aspect of nonverbal behavior. Instead of making automatic interpretations of nonverbal cues, we should consider cultural, gender, and individual influences on nonverbal behavior.

• Consider Influences
Consider cultural, gender, and individual influences when interpreting nonverbal cues. We have shown how nonverbal behavior varies widely based on culture or expectations of masculinity and femininity. Note also that some people are totally unique in their display of nonverbal behavior. You may have learned over time that your friend grinds her teeth when she is excited. You may never encounter another person who uses this behavior in this way.

• Pay Attention to Nonverbal Communication
Pay attention to multiple aspects of nonverbal communication and their relationship to verbal communication. You should not take nonverbal cues out of context. In any one interaction, you are likely to get simultaneous messages from a person’s eyes, face, gestures, posture, voice, and use of space and touch. Even in electronic communication, where much of the nonverbal communication is absent, there can be facial expression and touch communicated through emoticons, paralanguage through capitalization of words, and chronemics through the timing and length of an electronic message. By taking into consideration all aspects of communication, you will be more effective in interpreting others’ messages.

• Use Perception Checking
As we discussed in Chapter 2, the skill of perception checking lets you see if your interpretation of another person’s message is accurate or not. By describing the nonverbal behavior you have noticed and tentatively sharing your interpretation of it,
you can get confirmation or correction of your interpretation. It may be helpful to use perception checking when faced with gender or cultural variations in nonverbal behavior.

**Sending Nonverbal Messages**

When considering what kinds of nonverbal messages you are sending, here are some things you should be aware of.

- **Be Conscious**
  Be conscious of the nonverbal behavior you are displaying. Remember that you are always communicating nonverbally. Some nonverbal cues will always be out of your level of consciousness, but you should work to bring more of your nonverbal behavior into your conscious awareness. It is a matter of just paying attention to what you are doing with your body, voice, space, and self-presentation cues. If you initially have difficulty paying attention to your nonverbal behavior, ask a friend to point out the nonverbal cues you are displaying.

- **Be Purposeful**
  Be purposeful or strategic in your use of nonverbal communication. Sometimes, it is important to control what you are communicating nonverbally. For instance, if you want to be persuasive, you should use nonverbal cues that demonstrate confidence and credibility. These may include direct eye contact, a serious facial expression, a relaxed posture, a loud and low-pitched voice with no vocal interferences, and a professional style of clothing and grooming. While there are no absolute prescriptions for communicating nonverbally, there are strategic choices we can make to convey the message we desire.

- **Do Not Distract**
  Make sure that your nonverbal cues do not distract from your message. Sometimes, when we are not aware of what nonverbal cues we are displaying or when we are anxious, certain nonverbal behaviors will hinder our communication. Fidgeting, tapping your fingers on a table, pacing, mumbling, using vocal interferences, and using adaptors can hinder the other person’s interpretation of your message. It is especially important to use nonverbal behaviors that enhance rather than distract from your message during a formal speech.

- **Make Communication Match**
  Make your nonverbal communication match your verbal communication. When nonverbal messages contradict verbal messages, people are more likely to believe the nonverbal, so it is important to have your verbal and nonverbal communication match. In addition, the various sources of nonverbal communication behavior should match each other. If you are feeling sad, your voice should be softer and less expressive, and you should avoid letting your face contradict your voice by smiling. People get confused and frustrated when receiving inconsistent messages.

- **Adapt**
  Adapt your nonverbal behavior to the situation. Situations vary in their formality, familiarity among the people, and purpose. Just like you would select different language for different situations, you should adapt your nonverbal messages to the situation. Assess what the situation calls for in terms of body motions, paralanguage, proxemics and territory, artifacts, physical appearance, and use of time. Of course, you already do some situational adapting with nonverbal communication. You do not dress the same way for a wedding as you would to walk the dog. You would not treat your brother’s space and territory the same way you would treat your doctor’s space and territory. But the more you can consciously adapt your nonverbal behavior to what seems appropriate to the situation, the more effective you will be as a communicator.