

Theory Reflections: Nonverbal Communication

Ever since the pioneering work of Ray Birdwhistell in the 1950s, virtually all of our contemporary theories of communication, either implicitly or explicitly, take the nonverbal realm into account. For example, in 1967 Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, in their seminal book *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, lay out an axiom, "You cannot *not* communicate." The continuous nature of communication arises from our inability to avoid engaging in nonverbal communication. Others draw conclusions about us by observing our clothing, facial expressions, use of time, space, tone of voice, and body movement. We, of course, do the same about them. This is what makes nonverbal communication so important, we cannot turn it off, either coming in or going out. This also means that nonverbal communication can be both intentional and unintentional, either in our sending of messages or how we interpret them.

When we go to another country for the first time, we take in sights, sounds, smells, the pace of movement, and other aspects of our new environment, and we begin to make sense out of all of these messages. The people who send them may not be doing so with the intent to create an impression on a newcomer, but they have done so anyway. In turn, people may take note of the newly arrived person: how the individual is dressed, carries their self, what expression the person has on their face, etc. The new person may not want all of the attention or may not agree with the assessments made, but the nonverbal communication happens anyway. Communication is happening whether words are spoken or not.

This continuous stream of messaging is assimilated in familiar environments, but can often seem overwhelming when confronting a new situation. Our attempts to sort out all of the possible meanings and make sense of everything require a great deal of effort that we do not ordinarily expend in more familiar surroundings. This can feel frustrating and difficult as well as exciting and invigorating, sometimes all at the same time. We can be nervous about "doing the right thing," which may make us even more nonverbal-communication vigilant than we already may be in the heightened state brought on by being in unfamiliar surroundings. This can be fun or scary, but certainly exhausting. It is helpful for us to understand what is going on, and that nonverbal communication ultimately will prove to be more helpful to us than not. In any case, it will always be there ready to help us make sense of our world and the people in it.

This raises the question of how we make sense of nonverbal communication. W. Barnett Pearce (1989), in his book titled *Communication and the Human Condition*, offers a description of a communication theory known as the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM). This theory has tremendous practical value particularly for helping us sort out intercultural situations. In part, CMM defines communication as the engagement of resources in practices. Resources include the vocabulary, stories, and other means by which we construct meaning (in practices). Thus we analyze nonverbal communication based on the resources to which we have access as we engage in the process of making meaning, putting us at high risk of making ethnocentric interpretations even if we would like to resist doing so. Until we consciously decide to examine nonverbal communication in light of new contextual frameworks, we tend to make sense based on what we already know (our resources), even when the data does not fit well.

Where do those resources come from? Mostly they arise from our previous experience. This means that when we come into new environments we tend to make our initial judgments as to the meaning of nonverbal communication based on resources that may not reflect how meaning is made in the new context. This creates an opportunity for unproductive or even counterproductive interpretations of nonverbal, and by extension, verbal messages.

Just knowing that we do this, and that it is inevitable, enables us to step back from some of our initial judgments and reconsider messages in light of their context rather than the resources we brought to the situation. In this way we both add to our communication resources and create the possibility of more fruitful and mindful sense-making in our processing of nonverbal communication as we forge ahead in a new cultural environment.

Globalization, as much as it brings us ever closer with people and cultures that we otherwise might never confront, can never provide us with all of the resources we might need to understand the world in all its multicultural complexity if we do not work to acquire those resources and put them into practice. Education abroad creates the opportunity to expand the pool, to broaden one's communication skills in both interpretation and practice. While nonverbal communication is both continuous and inevitable, we are choice-making beings and the decision to assimilate new resources and practices into our personal communication repertoire is for each individual to make. We can choose to work with a limited pool of resources and practices, keeping our world view narrow (and our intercultural competence low), or we can work to expand our capabilities. Nonverbal communication embodies resources in practice; both are there for the taking, for free (for a little effort). Nonverbal communication is like air, we live in it and cannot live without it, we can take advantage of it, or not. However, it seems a waste for people to squander such an abundant and useful supply of resources.

– John Parrish Sprowl

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