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Cultural Universals in Nonverbal Communication

Charles Darwin believed that certain nonverbal displays were universal. The shoulder shrug, for example, is used to convey such messages as "I can't do it," "I can't stop it from happening," "It wasn't my fault," "Be patient," and "I do not intend to resist." Michael Argyle has listed a number of characteristics of nonverbal communication that are universal across all cultures: (1) the same body parts are used for nonverbal expressions; (2) nonverbal channels are used to convey similar information, emotions, values, norms, and self-disclosing messages; (3) nonverbal messages accompany verbal communication and are used in art and ritual; (4) the motives for using the nonverbal channel, such as when speech is impossible, are similar across cultures; and (5) nonverbal messages are used to coordinate and control a range of contexts and relationships that are similar across cultures.

Paul Ekman's research on facial expressions demonstrates the universality of many nonverbal emotional displays. Ekman discovered three separate sets of facial muscles that operate independently and can be manipulated to form a variety of emotional expressions. These muscle sets include the forehead and brow; the eyes, eyelids, and base of the nose; and the cheeks, mouth, chin, and rest of the nose. The muscles in each of these facial regions are combined in a variety of unique patterns to display emotional states. For example, fear is indicated by a furrowed brow, raised eyebrows, wide-open eyes, creased or pinched base of the nose, taut cheeks, partially open mouth, and upturned upper lip. Because the ability to produce such emotional displays is consistent across cultures, there is probably a biological or genetic basis that allows these behaviors to be produced in all humans in a particular way.

Another universal aspect of nonverbal communication is the need to be territorial. Robert Ardrey, an ethologist, has concluded that territoriality is an innate, evolutionary characteristic that occurs in both animals and humans. Humans from all cultures mark and claim certain spaces as their own.

Although some aspects of nonverbal code systems are universal, it is also clear that cultures choose to express emotions and territoriality in differing ways. These variations are of particular interest in intercultural communication. Most forms of nonverbal communication can be interpreted only within the framework of the culture in which they occur. Cultures vary in their nonverbal behaviors in three ways. First, cultures differ in the specific repertoire of behaviors that are enacted. Movements, body positions, postures, vocal intonations, gestures, spatial requirements, and even dances and ritualized actions are specific to a particular culture.

Second, all cultures have display rules that govern when and under what circumstances various nonverbal expressions are required, preferred, permitted, or prohibited. Thus, children learn both how to communicate nonverbally and the appropriate display rules that govern their nonverbal expressions. Display rules indicate such things as how far apart people should stand while talking, whom to touch and where, the speed and timing of movements and gestures, when to look directly at others in a conversation and when to look away, whether loud talking and expansive gestures or quietness and controlled movements should be used, when to smile and when to frown, and the overall pacing of communication.

The norms for display rules vary greatly across cultures. For instance, Judith N. Martin, Mitchell R. Hammer, and Lisa Bradford found that Latinos and European Americans differ in their judgments about the importance of displaying behaviors that signal approachability (smiling, laughing, and pleasant facial expressions) and poise (nice appearance, appropriate conversational distance, and appropriate posture) in conversations. The differences are related to whether the interaction is viewed as primarily task oriented or socially oriented, and whether the conversational partners are from their own or from different cultural groups. Specifically, approachability and poise behaviors are most important for Latinos when working with other Latinos and when socializing with people from other cultures. In contrast, European Americans think it most important to display these behaviors only when socializing with another European American.

Such differences in display rules can cause discomfort and misinterpretations. Display rules also indicate the intensity of the behavioral display that is acceptable. In showing grief or intense sadness, for instance, people from southern Mediterranean cultures may tend to exaggerate or amplify their displays, European Americans may try to remain calm and somewhat neutral, the British may understate their emotional displays by showing only a little of their inner feelings, and the Japanese and Thai may attempt to mask their sorrow completely by covering it with smiling and laughter.

Third, cultures vary in the interpretations, or meanings, that are attributed to particular nonverbal behaviors. Three possible interpretations could be imposed on a given instance of nonverbal behavior: it is random, it is idiosyncratic, or it is shared. An interpretation that the behavior is random means that it has no particular meaning to anyone. An idiosyncratic interpretation suggests that the behaviors are unique to special individuals or relationships, and they therefore have particular meanings only to these people. For example, family members often recognize that certain unique behaviors of a person signify a specific emotional state. Thus, a family member who tugs on her ear may indicate, to other family members, that she is about to explode in anger. The third interpretation is that the behaviors have shared meaning and significance, as when a group of people jointly attribute the same meaning to a particular nonverbal act.