

Theory

Nonverbal communication has been considered theoretically from a variety of perspectives. The relational perspective suggests that meaning construction between interactants provides the context for interpersonal communication. In other words, when we meet others interpersonally, our primary task is to communicate who we are, particularly our attitudes toward relevant objects in the environment. Interactants infer similarity to their partner from both verbal and nonverbal cues. If similarity is detected, it is experienced as reinforcement to our own attitudes and often results in increased interpersonal attraction (i.e., making friends, gaining acceptance).

Further, people have perceptual filters for relationship building, particularly for physical appearance cues. These filters help us reduce uncertainty about the other and reassure us that this person is "like me" or "acceptable to me." We thus monitor our communication partner's nonverbal cues to be sure that this is someone with whom a relationship is possible. Clearly, not every interaction evolves into a relationship, yet humans retain the need to be liked and included by their peers.

Further theoretical focus has delved into the outcomes of unexpected or atypical nonverbal behavior. Expectancy violations theory suggests that people hold expectations for what is typical of interaction (nonverbally). These expectations are grounded in culture, relationship, and situational parameters. When an interactant broaches those expectations, it prompts arousal in the communication partner and focuses attention on the violation. If the violator holds greater reward valence (e.g., well-liked, physically attractive, powerful), the decoder will be more likely to accept the violation without consequence (i.e., communication continues). However, if the violator holds less potential reward for the decoder (e.g., stranger), some type of compensation would be expected by the communication partner. For example, in the case of a space violation it could mean moving away or even mentally derogating that violator. In any case, breaches of nonverbal behavior are taken seriously by interactants and accumulate to account for a great deal of impression formation.

Given this theory of expectancy violations, it becomes apparent why our clients who have nonverbal communication deficits are not accepted by their peers. They have difficulty receiving and decoding nonverbal behaviors and, therefore, are unable to adjust their own nonverbal behavior accordingly. Because the communication partner's expectations were not met and behavioral adjustments were not made, the communication partner is likely to exit the conversation. The theory also provides support for clinical assessment and intervention of comprehension and flexible behavioral performance of nonverbal behaviors, a skill that is difficult for many of our clients.

Behaviors

Categories currently exist to provide an idea of the behaviors that constitute nonverbal communication. There are seven classes, also known as codes, of nonverbal signals. Codes are distinct, organized means of expression that consist of both symbols and rules for their use. Although these codes are presented within classes, they occur together and are naturally integrated with verbal expression. The nonverbal codes include:

- ⊙ **kinesics**—messages sent by the body, including gestures, facial expression, body movement, posture, gaze, and gait
- ⊙ **vocalics** (i.e., paralinguistic)—vocal cues other than words, including volume, rate, pitch, pausing, and silence
- ⊙ **physical appearance**—manipulable cues related to the body, including hairstyle, clothing, cosmetics, and fragrance
- ⊙ **haptics**—contact cues, such as frequency, intensity, and type of touch
- ⊙ **proxemics**—spatial cues, including interpersonal distance, territoriality, and other spacing relationships
- ⊙ **chronemics**—the use of time as a message system, including punctuality, amount of time spent with another, and waiting time

☉**artifacts**—manipulable objects in the environment that may reflect messages from the designer or user, such as furniture, art, pets, or other possessions

While these categories provide a framework from which to conceptualize nonverbal communication, it is, in reality, a combination of cues and codes that work together to produce a certain meaning. It is inefficient to look at one cue or code for specific meaning.

A better way to grasp the integration of nonverbal codes is to consider their functions. In general, nonverbal communication helps people accomplish various goals. First, we use nonverbal communication to create impressions. Physical appearance cues weigh heavily on this function, but kinesics, chronemics, and other cues all can contribute to how others form perceptions of competence and character. Second, nonverbal communication is used to manage interaction. Facial expression, vocalics, and even proxemics are used to signal turn taking in conversations as well as leave taking. Third, nonverbal communication is a primary means of expressing emotion. In fact, some experts have identified nonverbal expression to be part and parcel of emotional experience. In addition, each cultural community has its own display rules for emotional expression appropriateness. Fourth, nonverbal communication allows people to send relational messages. We convey affection, power, respect, and dominance through nonverbal cues. Fifth, deception is conveyed and detected via nonverbal cues. Finally, nonverbal communication also is used to send messages of power and persuasion. Leadership is conferred on the basis of nonverbal cues.

The functional approach to nonverbal communication, then, illuminates how people use it. In this way, nonverbal cues can be considered in conjunction with each other in patterns. Several cues contribute to a single message or thread of messages, making treatment focused only on a single nonverbal behavior (e.g., eye gaze), a less effective means of achieving the functional goal of sending messages such as friendship, willingness, sadness, or anger.

Influencing Factors

Not only is it important to understand what behaviors are included in nonverbal communication as well as their purpose, but also to understand what influences how nonverbal messages are sent and received. Nonverbal messages are shaped by three primary factors: the culture (with the understanding that cultural differences exist), the relationship, and the situation.

Although research has identified some universal facial expressions, culture remains a strong influence on nonverbal communication. Cultural values of specific groups affect space and touch norms. Further, gender roles within a culture will determine, to some degree, dress and even baseline kinesics activity (e.g., eye gaze). As culture provides an overall template for nonverbal communication, the specific relationship also determines important norms for interactants. The type of relationship (e.g., helping, adversarial, work, friendship) and the stage of relationship, such as a new friendship vs. a sibling bond, influence what is expected nonverbally between interactants. In addition, each communication situation presents its own parameters for nonverbal behaviors. These could include the physical environment, timing, temporary physical or mental states, or the number of people present.

It is important to note that these factors influence both how people encode nonverbal messages as well as decode them. For our clinical caseloads, this means that we need to be aware when creating treatment activities and hierarchies of the following: an understanding of the client's ability to decode the message; the nonverbal behaviors that the client has difficulty demonstrating; the client's ability to adjust their behavior accordingly; what combination of nonverbal codes constitute the intended message based on the client's age, gender, and relational variables of the communication interaction; and the environment in which the communication interaction is taking place. When considering all possible variables, addressing nonverbal communication can be overwhelming. Realistically, the aim is not to address all impacting factors concurrently, but to be aware of their presence, their possible impact on treatment progression, and their functional importance to each client when selecting treatment goals and activities.

Goals

Nonverbal behaviors are complex to address in treatment both because of the variety of cues that need to be addressed as well as the variables associated with their use. Bear in mind that nonverbal behaviors are simply behaviors and are not inherently "good" or "bad." Their function is to send specific messages that can be either positive (e.g., group acceptance) or negative (e.g., anger) in nature. In order to be efficient nonverbal communicators, our clients need to be able to send a variety of nonverbal messages across an array of situations. Additionally, they must understand these behaviors and adjust their own behaviors based on the expectations of their communication partners. Without the combined skills of encoding and decoding, our clients will still be unable to make functional gains in social settings, which is the ultimate goal of intervention focusing on nonverbal skills.

The goal of this article is to provide a basis for understanding the theoretical support for addressing nonverbal behaviors in the clinical practice of speech-language pathology. We provide only the most basic overview and suggested applications to clinical practice (see [Clinical Applications](#)). If you are interested in furthering your understanding of nonverbal communication, please use the reference list below as a starting point. These articles and books will provide more detailed descriptions and, hopefully, spark your interest to further explore and critically assess the possibilities of nonverbal intervention with your clients.

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