

Cultural Influences on Facial Expressions
and Body Language
Olivia Brenay
South Lyon High School
December 2018

Abstract

The topic of this paper proves that communication is universal whether it be verbal or nonverbal; however, it is different across cultures. Today's society has very advanced technology that allows people to connect with others across the globe, which we were not able to do before. There is more communication happening between cultures and different parts of the world and, aside from verbal language, it is important to understand that not everyone communicates the same nonverbally, or through facial expressions and body language. When doing my research, I tried to focus on articles that dealt with some type of similarities or differences between cultures and communication. I steered clear of articles that focused mainly on just analyzing facial expressions and body language. By doing this, it allowed me to narrow down my research and focus on sources that actually had information I could use to support my paper. Throughout reading the articles I noticed that there was a lot of repetition between them. A lot of them mentioned in some type of way that it is easier to understand other people's nonverbal cues if they are from the same culture or place as you. Each article had very similar results to their experiments being that there are subtle differences between cultures and their nonverbal communication. Even when reading two articles, one on emblematic gestures and one focusing on facial expressions, I found that they still had the same overall message. Therefore, my research is dedicated to show that communication surpasses all borders; however, nonverbal communication is influenced by the differences in cultures.

(262)

Introduction

Communication is a part of our everyday lives no matter where we live and whether it be verbally or non verbally; however, there are nonverbal cues that people use according to their own cultures. Communication is very important and the ability to communicate is essential. There are many different languages all around the world that might restrict us from communicating with other; however, the most important communication is not always what is spoken but what is shown. It is important to understand how to read and interpret nonverbal cues or also known as body language. This poses a question, is nonverbal communication the same all around the world? Or is it similar to language and different everywhere you go? There are many similarities in body language and facial expressions across the globe, but it is crucial to understand that there are subtle differences. Being able to understand this will allow for better connection to others all around the world. Ultimately there is an ingroup advantage to understanding this unspoken language, which means that people from the same culture will be able to understand others from their group better than outsiders. Gestures are used constantly during everyday conversation whether we realize it or not. Some might notice that certain gestures are used in many different countries; however, we need to understand that a certain gesture might not mean the same thing to others as it does to us. Being able to recognize facial expressions is of dire importance when having a conversation with others. Many studies have shown that facial expressions are very similar all around the world.

In-Group Advantage

Many studies have been conducted that determines if there is an in-group advantage and arcane nonverbal cues. The results of these studies prove that there is a correlation between how well you are at understanding another person's body language and how similar you are to that person based on culture. It is obvious that this trend exists; however, many have the query of why. How come this is apparent? Reasons for this advantage can be credited to methodological issues, ethnic bias, or a “tendency to be more motivated toward understanding people from one's own group” (Wickline & Bailey & Nowicki, 2009, Par. 6). These are not the only reasons that people have come up with to explain this in-group advantage. “...other researchers have suggest that emotional expression and recognition are learned and; therefore, are more culturally specific than universal” (Wickline & Bailey & Nowicki, 2009, Par. 4). We all grow up in different environments, so it makes sense that not all of us communicate the same way. We are all influenced differently by where we live and how our own culture is. Also, it is easier to understand something that we have been desensitized to; therefore, we are more likely to understand someone from the same culture or region and it is also more comfortable for people to communicate with others that are similar. If everyone had the same culture worldwide, we would have no problem with communicating to others across the world, so there would be no advantage or disadvantage. This is not limited to just facial expressions but gestures as well.

Emblematic Gestures

When looking at emblematic gestures or conventional gestures; such as, a thumbs up meaning good, there are a select few that are used worldwide with the same meaning while others meaning completely different things. Gestures are used in everyday conversation whether we realize it or not. They are extremely helpful and they make it much easier to communicate

with others. It is lucid that there are many different gestures but it may be surprising that there are certain gestures that mean and are used in the same way across the world considering that all cultures develop different gestures due to their different ways of living and their national linguistic boundaries (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). This makes sense of not only why gestures are different between cultures but also as to why they can be the same. Some cultures are very similar and some may seem very different, but there are similarities between all. Not only does different ways of living affect a culture's emblematic gestures but also their cultural histories and cultural influx throughout the ages (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013). There is a large list of reasons why there are differences and one not mentioned before but very important is ecology or the study of ecosystems. "Groups exist in different ecologies which necessitate differences in the generated cultural solutions...the specific forms by which that communication occurs can be different, both verbally and non-verbally (Matsumoto & Hwang, 2013, Par. 5). According to the study done by Matsumoto and Hwang (2013), some similar emblematic gestures are 'stop' and 'I don't know', it is astounding to find out what gestures are commonly used around the world. People consciously notice these gestures but what many don't realize is that during conversation you are also analyzing others facial expressions.

Facial Expressions

A large part of how we express emotions while communicating is through our facial expressions. It is easy to interpret key emotions; such as, happiness or sadness, but others are more difficult and if we can not read facial expressions properly, what is said can then also be misinterpreted. The question is, do most facial expressions mean the same thing across the world? Unfortunately not all of them, but a few. Gladwell, author of *Blink* (2005), explains

Eckmans study of facial expressions across the globe. He traveled to many different regions and countries and gave people a word or emotion that they had to express with their face. The results show that on a few facial expression, shown in *Figure 1*, are agreed on by most people on what they meant no matter where they are from. It is surprising that there are any facial expressions at all that are the same. Facials expressions can be grouped into two different categories either socially fabricated or biologically ingrained (Scheve, 2012). “There is much to suggest that in most cases the linkages between different components of an emotion are not biologically hardwired and that in fact social and cultural factors have a crucial influence on this link” (Scheve, 2012, Par. 10). This really shows how incredible Eckmans results were considering that the emotions we learn are not so much biological, but more cultural and influenced by our social interactions. Meaning that the facial expressions for these emotions should also be different. An experiment done to judge facial expressions across cultures was conduct and this is what was found out, “... the findings suggested that observers of different cultures utilize the same facial cues when judging emotions, and that the signal value of facial expressions is similar across cultures” (Matsumoto & Olide & Willingham & Callan, 2009, Par. 1). This is more reasoning that supports that even though there are differences, communication is universal and there are similarities with small differences.

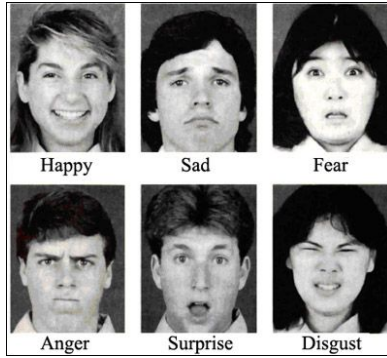


Figure 1. Six Universal Facial Expressions. This figure shows what the six emotions expressed are; as well as, what they look like.

Conclusion

Facial expressions and emblematic are both equally important when it comes to communication. Everyone uses body language as a way to communicate including animals. There is an apparent in-group advantage to understanding nonverbal cues and this is due to the fact that the way you communicate nonverbally is culturally affected. This does not mean that all cultures communicate differently. There are similarities; such as, the six universal facial expressions. This goes to show that communication does go beyond borders, but they are not perfectly the same.

References

- Gabrieli, & John. (n.d.). Discussion: Emotion. Retrieved from
<https://ocw.mit.edu/courses/brain-and-cognitive-sciences/9-00sc-introduction-to-psychology-fall-2011/emotion-motivation/discussion-emotion/>
- Gladwell, M. (2005). *Blink The Power of Thinking Without Thinking*. New York, New York: Back Bay Books/Little, Brown and Company.
- Matsumoto, D., Olide, A., Schug, J., Willingham, B., & Callan, M. (2009). Cross-Cultural Judgments of Spontaneous Facial Expressions of Emotion. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 33(4), 213-238. doi:10.1007/s10919-009-0071-4
- Matsumoto, D., & Hwang, H. C. (2012). Cultural Similarities and Differences in Emblematic Gestures. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 37(1), 1-27. doi:10.1007/s10919-012-0143-8
- Scheve, C. V. (2012). The Social Calibration of Emotion Expression. *Sociological Theory*, 30(1), 1-14. doi:10.1177/07352751112437163
- Wickline, V. B., Bailey, W., & Nowicki, S. (2009). Cultural In-Group Advantage: Emotion Recognition in African American and European American Faces and Voices. *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 170(1), 5-30. doi:10.3200/gntp.170.1.5-30