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NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION FEATURES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter you will be able to do the following:

- List the main principles of nonverbal messaging.
- Distinguish between digital and analog messages.
- Describe how individuals process messages.
- Explain how nonverbal communication is innate for humans.

Chance and Kelly rarely hung out anymore. It's not that they stopped liking each other, but they didn't seem to have as much in common as they did back when they were in high school student government together. Plus, they were busy. Once she got to college, Kelly got a part-time job at a campus coffee shop and a full-time boyfriend; at the same time, Chance got involved with the Pride community and began a minor in gender studies to complement a full load of engineering coursework. When Kelly happened to be near Chance in the student union, she didn't immediately recognize Chance because of the new hairstyle. Chance had been happy to see Kelly from a distance. Happy, that is, until Kelly walked closer and kept walking right on by en route to her shift at the coffee shop without even a word. Chance was concerned that all the recent hours spent at the Pride Resource Center had rubbed Kelly the wrong way, and texted Kelly, fearing their casual friendship had taken a turn for the worse. A later reply from Kelly was just ambiguous enough that it didn't overcome that nonverbal experience and calm Chance's fear that she might be unhappy with their friendship. Regardless of intent, nonverbal behaviors may vary greatly in their ability to be clearly interpreted. For Kelly and Chance, the potential for misunderstanding was only increased by the tension in their already shaky relationship.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What key features of nonverbal communication influence message success?
- How do nonverbal messages differ from verbal messages?
- Through what processes can individuals manage the impressions that they are sending to one another?
- To what extent are humans born with an ability to communicate nonverbally?

PRINCIPLES OF NONVERBAL MESSAGING

In a text that helped lay the groundwork for the study of nonverbal messaging, scholars Judee Burgoon and Thomas Paine highlighted some important characteristics of nonverbal communication that are still significant today.¹ Even though communicators have experienced

dramatic changes in communication technologies over the past years, the basic principles of nonverbal messaging are just as true now as they were decades ago, regardless of nonverbal channel.

Nonverbal Messaging Is Ubiquitous

Nonverbal communication is everywhere. Every single interaction between humans contains some nonverbal component, regardless of whether that interaction occurs face to face, over the telephone, by text, through an email, on a boat, on a train, or on a plane. Whenever humans interact, they use nonverbal messaging in some way. According to a receiver-based perspective of communication, even the unintended behaviors of everyday life can be perceived to have some communicative value, so that student sleeping in class next to you right now may be unintentionally letting your instructor know that they are more *sleepy* than they are *interested* in class. This receiver-based perspective of communication is in keeping with the oft-repeated maxim that you may have heard in an introductory communication class: “One cannot not communicate.”² This statement reminds us time and time again that we are always sending messages regardless of intent. From the facial expressions we make when we think no one is looking, to the amount of time that elapses between when we receive and when we reply to a certain text, other people are constantly ascribing meaning to the behaviors and characteristics we exhibit throughout our lives.

Nonverbal Messaging Functions in Many Ways

We can use nonverbal messages in almost any situation. Nonverbal communication can help people when giving directions to a stranger, influencing someone to buy a fundraising raffle ticket, indicating a desire for a romantic encounter with a new partner, or even deceiving someone about your secret feelings about the horrible birthday gift you just received. Sometimes the nonverbal messages occur alongside the verbal messages (e.g., alongside words) that you are sending and receiving with a communication partner. Other times, the nonverbal messages are



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the sole method of communicating—for example, when you are at a concert that is particularly loud and you want to let your friends know that you are leaving early, but since they wouldn't be able to hear any words you say you must resort to gestures instead.

Nonverbal Messaging Is Widely Used

In every culture and across every location, people use a variety of nonverbal behaviors to send messages to one another. Some scholars have discovered that the facial expressions we use are near *universal*, meaning that people understand some common nonverbal messages no matter their upbringing.³ In almost every situation across most any location on earth, for example, people are likely to know the difference between an angry face and a cheerful face, regardless of the impact of their unique culture or background on the meanings that they ascribe to those facial expressions.⁴

Have you ever traveled abroad? Or maybe spent time with people or with families who don't speak the language you grew up with? You may have found it relatively easy to interact with these people, even if you didn't share a single word of verbal communication between you.

For example, during a gap year before college, Sherold met up with some buddies while traveling in South America. When he arrived, he realized he couldn't speak the local language and also had run out of battery on his mobile device, leaving him with no straightforward way to alert the staff to his significant tomato allergy. By pantomiming the shape of a round fruit, pointing to the color red, and making a choking motion by wrapping his hands around his neck, he was able to communicate enough information that the server appeared to understand. Retreating to the back and returning to the table while holding a medium-size tomato—shaking her head and wagging her finger at it—the server was able to confirm what Sherold meant by his “performance,” and the delicious meal ended up being a highlight of Sherold's trip. Even though Sherold didn't speak a word of the local language, he was able to use nonverbal messaging to communicate a relatively sophisticated message across cultures in a way that felt natural to him. In this chapter's Engage feature we have another example of cultural differences influencing nonverbal behavior.

BOX 2.1 ENGAGE

NONVERBAL BEHAVIORS IN DIVERSE CONTEXTS

North America is filled with a variety of people from all over the world. While Derek's family has lived in his hometown for generations, Derek's boyfriend Marcus has recently emigrated from Europe—and Marcus's extended family is still learning the local language. Although Derek likes Marcus's family a lot, he feels left out because he doesn't understand exactly what they are saying. Plus, there was “the incident.” Last time he visited the house, Derek used the restroom and ran out of toilet paper. Coming out from the bathroom and realizing Marcus had taken a quick trip to the store, Derek had a heck of a time trying to get another roll without having a shared language system. Although he was able to eventually get them to figure it out, Marcus confides that his family still makes some odd gestures every time Derek's name comes up.

Aside from that experience being one of the more awkward moments of his life, Derek has other reasons to feel like an outsider as he navigates his boyfriend's life. At the same time, his best friend Sadie encouraged him to think about all the non-native English speakers he interacts with daily, immigrants and new citizens who don't have his considerable English-speaking skills. Derek realized that he himself may have been complicit in other situations by unintentionally making visitors to his own country feel excluded when they don't understand the majority language, even to the point of dismissing them as people without relevant opinions or feelings simply because he couldn't understand what they were trying to communicate.

ENGAGE: *What is our obligation when communicating with diverse others? Does that obligation change when we don't share a common language? Nonverbal communication is often described as a "universal language." Does that idea of universality impact our opinion at all when realizing that we can, in fact, send nonverbal messages to one another—and that we have shared that nonverbal language system since our earliest years?*

While not *every* nonverbal message translates well across cultures or locations, *many* facial expressions are similar across cultures. In addition, many gestures are directly related to the things that they represent, so the meaning is likely similar among most people. Raising one's hand above your head when describing someone likely means "tall" across cultures, and rotating your arms like you are swimming will likely convey something about water in many places around the world. Other nonverbal messages may not transfer as well, like when mimicking typing on a keyboard to represent a computer or clicking an imaginary mouse; in areas where computer usage is not widespread, obviously describing such technologies would be difficult or impossible even *with* verbal language to assist the process.



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Nonverbal Messaging Impacts Meaning Making

Nonverbal messages can add great significance to an interaction, such as giving a dear friend a comforting hug at a funeral. Such a gesture may convey more than words alone could possibly communicate, helping someone to know the depth of closeness and empathy shared between friends. Nonverbal messages can also inadvertently send a message other than the one intended, however, such as when a coworker puts a hand of support on the shoulder of their colleague, only to have such behavior interpreted as a sexual advance. The behavior that one person intended to use to show friendship and familiarity could be taken for something that could ultimately destroy their collegial relationship.

While nonverbal behaviors can add to one's understanding of an intended message, it can also lead to someone being still further confused about a sender's intent, sometimes even with dramatic results. For example, when Chia-Yen was driving on a steep, winding road in the foothills just outside of the city, she came to a stop sign at a blind corner. Noticing that someone in another car was having trouble using a manual transmission, she waited and waved the other car through and let that other person have her turn. Unfortunately, that car then pulled out and was immediately struck by an oncoming car. Even though it was a minor collision, Chia-Yen felt guilty when she realized that the driver of the other car thought she was giving him the "all-clear" signal when she only meant to give him her turn at navigating the intersection. A relatively simple wave of the hand meant two different things to two different drivers on the road that day.

Nonverbal Messaging Has Primacy

As discussed in Chapter 1, nonverbal messaging is a "first" for us in many ways. It's the first way that we learned to communicate as a species (i.e., phylogenetic primacy), the first way that we

learned to communicate across our individual lifespan (i.e., ontogenetic primacy), and the first way that we continue to learn information about others through first impressions (i.e., interactional primacy).⁵ Because nonverbal communication has primacy by coming before verbal language in so many ways, we have a longer history with—and a greater reliance on—nonverbal messages than we have with words and other linguistic features. When Shelly turned a corner in the mall and suddenly saw her “frenemy” Barbara from down the street, her face naturally turned into a look of contempt before she even had time to think about it. By the time she reached Barbara, Shelly had composed a smile and politely asked how Barbara was doing, but the overall tone of the interaction had already been set by an unintentional facial expression before words were spoken.



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Nonverbal Messaging Is Ambiguous

Even though nonverbal messaging is universal in a variety of ways, there is *just* enough ambiguity across nonverbal behaviors to be useful in certain situations. Occasionally, people may want to send a message that can't (or shouldn't) be put into words, whether it is a criticism of or disagreement with an important relational partner, a statement that needs to be off the record, or even a humorous jab that might be too edgy to say outright. In those cases, nonverbal behaviors offer an opportunity to get a message across without the sender being held accountable for the verbal content that would have replaced that message. In fact, many nonverbal behaviors are **polysemous** in that they have multiple definitions, much like the multiple meanings that can be conveyed by a laugh or a smile.⁶

For example, when Santiago was giving his presentation at work last week, no one wanted to tell him that he was boring and speaking too long; at the same time, someone needed to get the meeting moving along or they would be there all day. Santiago's supervisor helped wrap things up by looking at his smart watch and then making eye contact with Santiago in such a way that he got the hint without being publicly embarrassed. Later that evening, Santiago put

on his favorite silk shirt and was immediately confronted by his wife Stacia, who blocked his path, raised her eyebrows at his shirt, smiled, and handed him a conservative polo shirt to put on in its place. Instead of obviously criticizing Santiago's clothing options, Stacia sent a message in a straightforward yet ambiguous way that did not hurt Santiago's feelings as much as a direct criticism of his favorite shirt might. To further refine your own ways of dealing with cultural differences in communication, check out this chapter's Apply feature where you can consider another example of a difficult communication situation.

BOX 2.2 APPLY

TRUSTED EXPRESSIONS OF EXCITEMENT AND INTEREST

LaShonda was trying to figure out what to get her niece Aaliyah for her eighth birthday party, but was having trouble deciding between some options. As she was looking at possible toys online and trying to figure out which one to get, she decided to FaceTime Aaliyah herself in an attempt to gain some much-needed information without ruining the surprise of a great gift. She mentioned a few toys, and noticed that Aaliyah's face really lit up at the mention of a remote-controlled puppy, and then a few moments later Aaliyah's mother popped on-screen and mentioned that the best option would be a different toy that didn't seem to really grab anyone's attention. After exiting the FaceTime conversation, LaShonda clicked over to the two different options for the birthday present, and her mouse hovered over the "add to my basket" button for each of the two toys. She wasn't sure which one her niece would like better.

LaShonda really struggled with what toy to purchase in this scenario. LaShonda's sister clearly highlighted a toy that her niece probably wanted, but Aaliyah looked so excited at the thought of that remote-controlled puppy. While both toys seemed like great options, LaShonda really wanted her gift to be a hit.

APPLY: Which toy do you think LaShonda eventually purchased for Aaliyah? Why do you think that is the case? How does this entire scenario illustrate how much stock we put in nonverbal messages over verbal messages? Do you think the conversation would have had a different outcome if it had just happened over a normal phone call?

Nonverbal Messaging Is Accepted

For a variety of reasons, people tend to trust nonverbal messages over the verbal messages that may accompany them.^{7,8} This is likely due to either the primacy of the nonverbal channels of communication, or perhaps to the fact that people know that nonverbals can be used to send information that one would otherwise prefer to remain *off* the record. Either way, the receivers of messages often believe the messaging implied by nonverbal communication, even when it is in direct contradiction to the verbal messages sent in the same interaction.⁹

This reliance on the nonverbal components of an overall interaction is one reason why sarcasm works so effectively: The nonverbal messages occur alongside the verbal statements, and the facial expressions or tone of voice serve to negate the words or phrases that are spoken by the messenger.

For example, Ken and Myles have been married for a couple years now, and Myles loves to tease Ken about his family and their habits. When Myles gets a particularly good joke in about the way that Ken's father snores on the couch during a family visit, Ken jabs Myles in the side with his elbow and says, "Oh, stop it. I hate you." Because Ken smiled, spoke in a soft, casual tone, and kept consistent eye contact, Myles is confident that Ken means the exact opposite of what he said – and was actually indicating love and affection with his choice of words. If Myles had responded to Ken's verbal message rather than his nonverbal behaviors, they might have a long and uncomfortable conversation in store for the ride home.



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DIGITAL VS. ANALOG REPRESENTATIONS

In light of our previous discussion of the characteristics of nonverbal messaging, it becomes useful to further clarify the distinction between nonverbal and verbal behaviors. One useful way to think of the difference between nonverbal and verbal behaviors has to do with the distinction between digital representations and analog representations during interactions.^{10,11} In a **digital representation** the message components have an arbitrary relationship to the thing signified. This arbitrary relationship is assigned by cultural experience, much in the same way that a specific set of letters are put together to form a word that is then assigned to represent a concept. Consider, for example, the digital clock face represented in Figure 2.1. If you break it down to its most basic form, the passage of time is signified by a bunch of little lines moving places all over a screen to create easily recognizable patterns that mean something. In the case of the clock face in the picture, the lines have been lit in such a way as to indicate that it is currently 8:54 a.m. A box of vegetables delivered to a store might be clearly labeled *p-u-m-p-k-i-n*, a string of letters that we have arbitrarily decided can be used to represent a particularly delicious ingredient in making a holiday pie.

FIGURE 2.1 ■ A Digital Representation of Time

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Analog representations, on the other hand, assign a direct link between the message and the thing being signified. An analog clock, for example, has minute hands which move around a dial to signal the passing of time. As shown in Figure 2.2, a picture of a pumpkin in front

FIGURE 2.2 ■ An Analog Representation of Pumpkins

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of a farmer's market stand looks enough like the vegetable that people know exactly what the vendor is selling. Unlike digital representations that rely on culture-specific symbols much like language, analog representations use signs that inherently relate to or imply the object of discussion.¹²

Typically, verbal messages are considered to be digital representations of something, because they consist of a string of symbolic letters or sounds that have come to represent a specific concept. Nonverbal messages are often described as analog representations, because one need not have much (or any) cultural background to gain a solid impression of what message a skilled communicator is trying to convey. As discussed in the Upgrade feature, we humans are very good at relying on these analog images, particularly when they represent an individual or group of people in real-time conversations.

BOX 2.3 UPGRADE

GROUP DYNAMICS AND DIGITAL LIFE

Digital devices allow us to accomplish many tasks that might otherwise be more difficult. Consider, for example the ability of folks who are separated by physical distance to use an online platform, such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, to join together in group meetings. With the ability to see nonverbal facial expressions while simultaneously hearing vocal tones, in some ways these group discussions are more likely to mirror an actual face-to-face conversation than a group conference call. At the same time, many of those under-the-radar behaviors that used to be possible in a face-to-face context are impossible now, as it is too easy to have folks see your face as you roll your eyes at a friend or laugh privately at an inside joke or at the absurdity of a statement. That doesn't mean that those behaviors don't still happen in some way, but they often are moved from the more analog world of nonverbal behaviors to the more digital world of chats or texts sent simultaneously-but-separately during the online group experience. As a result, these formerly off-the-record messages (e.g., sarcastic eye rolls) are now available in verbal form (e.g., text messages like "I can't believe he said that!"), and are much less easy to deny should a message accidentally be intercepted by an unintended recipient.

Consider, for example, what might happen if someone typed a private message directly in the group chat when they thought they were just messaging a single close colleague. The distinctly verbal messages of exasperation like "OMG ugh," "come on LOL," or "*eye roll*" are obvious in ways that cannot be taken back. In such a case, the digital representations found in the written word are much harder to nuance than the accompanying analog representations of that similar feeling.

UPGRADE: *What do you do to keep screen-based interactions feeling personal? Do you ever find yourself using words to describe the ways you would reacted in-person (e.g., "LOL" to indicate obvious laughter)? Consider what you might do if you received an offensive text criticizing something you had just said in an online group environment. How might you respond (if at all)? Would using an analog form of messaging, such as emojis or GIFs, help you to keep more ambiguity in such a situation?*

MESSAGE PROCESSING

This ability to successfully send or receive nonverbal messages is an important part of the concept of **message processing**,^{13,14} which is the combination of encoding and decoding messages in human interaction. Think about the models of communication we looked at in Chapter 1. When people are engaging in the *encoding* of messages, they are constructing a message to send to their interaction partner, likely working to figure out how best to produce a message in order to reach the audience. Thinking of the right words to say? Making sure your facial expression matches the emotion that is most appropriate for the situation? Each of these are examples of encoding behaviors that people engage to get their point across to an audience. Once the message is encoded, it is sent through a channel to the receiver, who then begins the process of trying to interpret meaning from a communication act or behavior. The receiver then begins *decoding* the message received, in an attempt to understand or act upon the verbal or nonverbal messages received. We go into the stages of communicating—the encoding and decoding involved in message processing—in the next section as we explore the ways that humans send and receive nonverbal messages among one another. While some early research focused on the ways that nonverbal messaging influenced how we attend to verbal messages,¹⁵ most scholars now understand that nonverbal messages are more than just an extra bonus to the verbal messages that people use in interpersonal interactions. Here we look at a long-standing three-stage model of nonverbal message processing that explains how humans are able to successfully receive messages from one another.¹⁶



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The Attention Stage

For someone to receive a message from an interaction partner, first they must be attending to that partner, a behavior that occurs during the **attention stage**. Rather than just seeing or hearing messages that are being sent, one must listen and observe while engaging with

another person. We are naturally likely to only give our attention to a small subset of verbal and nonverbal messages in any situation, often because of the presence of different types of noise, as highlighted in Chapter 1.¹⁷ The ability to screen out any distractions requires a great deal of mental energy, and only when one is intentionally giving attention to a communicator can they then begin to receive verbal or nonverbal messages. Interestingly, research has shown that people who identify as women are significantly more likely to give attention to nonverbal messages, highlighting a demographic difference that may contribute to their better understanding of nuance in communication.¹⁸ As more and more things compete for our attention in our daily lives, it is increasingly difficult to attend to the verbal and nonverbal messages of a particular individual, or to be attended to by someone else. Some businesses even have a formal training system for employees on how to appear to pay attention to a customer, because a lack of attention is so pervasive.¹⁹ Fortunately, nonverbal communication has the potential to be quite engaging, with people using gestures, vocal variety, direct eye contact, and kinetic movements to reengage an audience that appears to be losing interest quickly.^{20,21} In this chapter's Absorb feature we look at the attention of audience members in a popular late-night talk show.

BOX 2.4 ABSORB

ATTENTION ON POPULAR MEDIA

James Corden is famous for his spontaneous audience interactions during *The Late Late Show with James Corden*. With an audience full of people who came specifically to watch the show, he still highlights the difficulty of paying attention when a lot is going on in his recurring game “Were you paying attention?” in the clip below.

“Were You Paying Attention?” from *The Late Late Show with James Corden*. March 9, 2023. Running Time: 8:08. Available on YouTube.

As someone watching from home, it seems ludicrous that individuals would spend an entire day of their lives focused on trying to see a live recording of a late night talk show, and then not be able to recount details of the very show they are in the middle of observing. That being said, the majority of audience participants were unable to recall both minor and major moments from earlier in the program.

ABSORB: How does the video clip illustrate just how easily individual attention is divided? How do you think you would respond in a similar situation? Quick, without looking, what color was James Corden’s tie? As you might imagine, even the most in-your-face details may be difficult to remember when so many things are competing for our attention.

The Comprehension Stage

The next stage of processing messages has to do with how we engage material to which we have given our attention. Specifically, the **comprehension stage** involves a listener’s attempt to actually understand the verbal or nonverbal messages, rather than just hear or see them (but

not critically engage them). Some scholars successfully argue that there are three main forms of active listening, or attending to a conversational partner in order to create understanding.²² Indeed, these same attempts at comprehension apply for nonverbal messaging as well and are adapted accordingly.

Dialogic Comprehension

Dialogic comprehension can emerge from an active process of paying attention to one another's verbal and nonverbal messaging. In this active form of engagement and observation, both parties seek to co-construct shared meaning and understand each other's thoughts and feelings through conversation and dialogue, while also attending to the nonverbal displays of one another. In this chapter's Measure feature you can assess your own ability to take the perspective of another person.

Empathic Comprehension

Empathic comprehension can also emerge from active attention, in which partners develop an understanding of one another and attempt to use all available information to assist in adopting the perspective of one's conversational partner and interpreting the world through that perspective. For example, Celina tried hard to understand what it must have been like for her parents to harness the early world of social media a couple decades ago, suddenly realizing how different those early experiences must have been without the experience of growing up with an online sensibility.

Analytic Comprehension

Analytic comprehension is a form of active comprehension in which one party seeks to analyze or critique the message and the implications of a communication interaction to determine the truth or veracity of the verbal and nonverbal messages. Some people might be tempted to use the term *critical comprehension* to better reflect the close connection that analytical comprehension has to critical thinking.

BOX 2.5 MEASURE

SELF-ASSESSMENTS AND PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

People often are self-involved when it comes to managing their own relationship difficulties. That is, most people naturally want to act in what *seems* like their own best interests, even if it may ultimately damage the relationship that they have with their interaction partner, whether a friend, family member, or romantic partner.

Scholars have figured out a way to measure whether someone is likely to try to understand where their interaction partner is coming from, a behavior often described as perspective-taking.^{23,24} The following is a shortened and modified list of questions inspired by some original research on empathy and perspective-taking.

Instructions: Think carefully about a person that you interact with regularly, someone close enough that you might have normal moments of conflict as part of your relationship. With that person in mind, consider whether the following statements describe you well. Write the number (e.g., 1 through 4) that best corresponds with your fit with each statement.

	1	2	3	4	
	Does Not Describe Me At All	Does Not Describe Me Well	Somewhat Describes Me	Describes Me Very Well	

- _____ 1. I seem to know how this person feels very often.
- _____ 2. When I'm upset with this person, I try to put myself in their position.
- _____ 3. I try to understand this person by imagining how things look to them.
- _____ 4. I try to look at this person's side of things before making a decision.
- _____ 5. I know what it is like to "walk a mile in this person's shoes" (i.e., to see the world from their perspective).
- _____ 6. I am a pretty good judge of this person's feelings.

Add up your score and see what you get. The lowest score you can receive on this assessment is 6, while the highest score is 24. The higher your score, the more likely you are trying to engage in empathy in this relationship. The lower your score, the less likely you try to engage in empathy with this particular relational partner.

MEASURE: *Are you surprised by your score? Was it higher or lower than you expected? Think about the things that may impact whether you try to empathize with your interaction partner, including specific characteristics of the relationship and the context. What might cause you to be more or less likely to consider their perspective during a disagreement?*

The Memory Stage

Finally, the third stage of message processing is called the **memory stage**, and it focuses on our ability to recall information about an interaction. This stage focuses on not only information about the *content* of the interaction but also recall of other features of the interaction. These features include contextual information about how the interaction occurred, relational information implied by the manner of interaction, and information about other nonverbal cues that might have been present to nuance content. Obviously, it is nearly impossible to remember all parts of an interaction, both verbal and nonverbal; that being said, the greater the degree to which communicators attempt to actively engage one another, the more likely they will be able to have significant recall of important features of the interaction. Indeed, although much research on recall focuses on verbal communication, the nonverbal messaging associated with human interaction is among our earliest and most primal communication skills.²⁵

BOX 2.6 EXAMINE

THE ETHICS OF ANALYSIS

Our modern media landscape encourages us to reconsider whether people are telling us the truth. When we are trying to evaluate the truthfulness of someone's words or the sincerity of their actions or emotional displays, it is essential as we are making our analysis to consider our own possible biases toward that person. For example, it is common for people to dismiss the explanations or expressions of politicians from a different political party, or to disregard the explanations of athletes who play on a rival team. When watching a basketball game, people are quick to dismiss something even as provable as a potential foul on the court when it happens to a member of the visiting team.

Although it is tempting to discount a statement of an unliked person as untruthful, or to write off as insincere the perceived remorse of someone publicly confessing a personal failing, good communicators must evaluate others' statements and interpersonal situations based upon a variety of information inputs. For example, what is this person's history of truthfulness? Is there some personal trigger evident when I encounter this person, one that makes me want to jump to conclusions without having heard their statement or without having considered relevant evidence? Do I have reason to doubt the veracity of this individual's verbal or nonverbal messages? In our modern society, we are often tempted to dismiss information that could prove helpful in making judgements of our own, often at our own peril.

EXAMINE: *Considering our own biases allows us to approach message analysis in a more ethical way. What kinds of things trigger you to distrust someone? Are there any sociodemographic categories (e.g., age, gender, race, religion, political party) about which you need to have a broader mind? Oftentimes, we are able to overcome much bias simply by acknowledging the areas in which we might be inclined to jump to conclusions. Even more importantly, interacting with people who are very different from ourselves can allow us to challenge our previously held beliefs.*

NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION—OUR INNATE ABILITY

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, a basic understanding of nonverbal communication is a near-universal skill. There is something inherent in being human that means that most people will be able to communicate in some way without verbal messaging. An inherited trait that is further enhanced throughout a lifetime of cultural learning, the ability to send or receive messages nonverbally is a fundamental characteristic of being a human being. Indeed, scholars regularly note that learning difficulties associated with poor nonverbal skills are often much more difficult to remediate than those associated with verbal skills like speech or reading ability.^{26,27} Relatedly, children who are less skilled at using nonverbal messaging are often frequently the victim of a variety of forms of bullying or social ostracization,²⁸ likely the result of an inability to pick up on the subtleties of human interaction deemed necessary to navigate the nuances of childhood playgrounds.



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Despite this innate ability to send or receive messages nonverbally, it becomes very obvious during adult social situations that some people are more skilled at communicating nonverbally than others. Nonverbal communication is an important part of **social competence** or **social intelligence**, or one's ability or understanding about how to navigate social settings with grace and aplomb.²⁹ Indeed, socially intelligent adults can perceive a wide variety of individual observed characteristics based on subtle nonverbal behaviors, including abstract characteristics like professional success, religious identity, political ideology, sexual orientation, and a variety of other characteristics that may otherwise be available as information only through the process of **self-disclosure** (i.e., revealing personal information about the self through verbal conversation).³⁰ While scholars have worked to try to measure this ability to send or receive nonverbal messages,³¹ without any formal training we can probably still easily identify in our own lives those people who are more or less skilled at communicating nonverbally.

A SUMMARY OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION FEATURES

Our understanding of the characteristics of nonverbal communication is extended even further by highlighting the key principles of nonverbal messaging. First, nonverbal messaging is everywhere, a characteristic highlighted in three of those principles: Nonverbal messaging is ubiquitous, nonverbal messaging is widely used, and nonverbal messaging is widely accepted. Some specific caveats are also highlighted in those principles, highlighting that nonverbal messaging functions in many ways, nonverbal messaging impacts meaning-making, and nonverbal messaging is ambiguous. Lastly, it's important to remember the final principle that was initially discussed in Chapter 1: nonverbal messaging has primacy. One characteristic that helps in that primacy is the direct nature of nonverbal representation; rather than being digital

and therefor arbitrarily related, nonverbal communication is analogic and has a direct relationship to the thing it represents. Finally, we turn our attention to considering the ways that individuals process nonverbal information, highlighting the importance of active attention in human interaction.

CLOSING QUESTIONS

- Now that you know the main principles of nonverbal messaging, how can you better adapt your nonverbal behaviors?
- Where do you notice the distinction between analog and digital messages in your own life?
- What similarities exist among all communicators with regards to message processing?
- How does the innate nature of nonverbal messaging impact our communicative abilities?

KEY TERMS

analog representation
 analytic comprehension
 attention stage
 comprehension stage
 dialogic comprehension
 digital representation
 empathic comprehension

polysemous
 memory stage
 message processing
 self-disclosure
 social competence
 social intelligence

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