**Types of Nonverbal Communication**

We use various types of nonverbal messages to communicate. These include the use of body (kinesics), voice (vocalic /paralanguage), space (proxemics), time (chronemics) and appearance.

**Kinesics:**

what and how body motions communicate

**Gestures:**

Movements our hands, arms, and fingers to communicate

**Emblems:**

Gestures that substitute entirely for a word or words

**Illustrators:**

Gestures that clarify the verbal message

**Adaptors:**

Unconscious responses to physical or psychological needs

**Eye Contact (oculesics):**

How and how much we look at others when communicating

**Use of Body: Kinesics**

**Kinesics** is the technical name for what and how the body communicates (Birdwhistell, 1970). We may use gestures, eye contact, facial expression, posture, and touch.

**Gestures** Gestures are the movements of our hands, arms, and finger. We **emblems** to substitute entirely for a word or words. For example, when we raise a finger and place it vertically across our lips, it signifies "Be quiet." We use **illustrators** to clarify the verbal message. When we say "about this high" or "nearly this round." likely to use a gesture to clarify what we mean. We also often use gestures to emphasize our emotional stance. For example, when expressing anger or frustration, we might act than Euro clench our fists. Particularly when giving formal speeches, we may use gestures moving from one main point to the next, as well as to make reference to a present aid. Some gestures, called **adaptors**, are unconscious responses to physical or psycho logical needs. For example, we may scratch an itch, adjust our glasses, or jingle the keys in our pocket. In these cases, we probably don’t intend to communicate, but others may notice and attach meaning to them (Lakin, 2006).

The use and meaning of gestures can vary greatly across cultures. For example, the American hand sign for "OK" has an obscene sexual meaning in some European countries, means "worthless" in France, is a symbol for money in Japan, and stands for I will kill you in Tunisia (Axtell, 1998), Similarly, in the dominant American culture, people nod their heads to communicate "I am listening to you." In some parts of India, they shift their heads from side to side to demonstrate they are listening. When communicating with people coming from different cultures, be especially careful about the gestures you use their meaning is not necessarily universal.

**Eye Contact** The technical term for eye contact is oculesics. It has to do with how and/ how much we look at others when communicating.

What is considered appropriate eye contact varies across cultures. Studies show that in Western cultures, talkers hold eye contact about 40 percent of the time and listeners nearly 70 percent of the time (Knapp, Hall, & Horgan, 2014). In Western cultures people also generally maintain more eye contact when discussing topics, they are comfortable with, when they are genuinely interested in what another person is saying, and when they are trying to persuade others. Conversely, they tend to avoid eye contact when discussing topics that make them feel uncomfortable, when they aren’t interested in the topic or the person talking, or when they are embarrassed, ashamed, or trying to hide something. In the dominant American culture, people tend to expect those with whom they are communicating to “look them in the eye.” It tends to signal respect and that we are paying attention. But direct eye contact is not universally considered appropriate (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2012). For instance, in Japan, prolonged eye contact is considered rude, disrespectful, and threatening. Similarly, in China and Indonesia, too much direct eye contact is a sign of bad manners. In many Middle Eastern countries, people tend to use continuous and direct eye contact with others to demonstrate keen interest. Various co-cultural groups within the United States use eye contact differently, as well. For instance, African Americans tend to use more continuous eye contact than European Americans when they are speaking, but less when they are listening (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2012). Native Americans tend to avoid eye contact when communicating with superiors as a sign of respect for their authority. And women tend to use more eye contact during conversations than men do (Santilli & Miller, 2011; Wood, 2007).

**Guidelines for Improving Nonverbal Communication**

Because nonverbal messages are inevitable, multi-channeled, ambiguous, and sometimes unintentional, interpreting them accurately can be tricky. Add to this the fact that the meaning of any nonverbal behavior can vary by situation and culture, and the reasons we so often misinterpret the nonverbal communication of others becomes clear. The following guidelines can help improve the likelihood that your nonverbal messages will be perceived accurately and that you will accurately interpret the nonverbal messages of others.

**Sending Nonverbal Messages**

**1. Consciously monitor your nonverbal messages.** Try to be more consciously aware of the nonverbal messages you send through your use of body, voice, space, time, and appearance. If you have difficulty doing this, ask a friend to point them out to you.

**2. Intentionally align your nonverbal messages with your purpose.** When nonverbal messages contradict verbal messages, people are more likely to believe the nonverbal messages, so it is important align your nonverbal messages with your purpose. If you want to be persuasive, use direct eye contact, a serious facial expression, an upright posture, a commanding vocal tone with no vocalized pauses, and professional clothing and grooming. If you want to be supportive and convey empathy, you might use less direct eye contact, a more relaxed facial expression, a softer voice, a nonthreatening touch, and a lean inward toward your partner.

**3. Adapt your nonverbal messages to the situation.** Just as you make language choices to suit different situations, so should you do so with nonverbal messages. Assess what the situation calls for in terms of use of body, voice, space, time, and appearance. For example, you would not dress the same way for a wedding as you would for a workout.

**4. Reduce or eliminate distracting nonverbal messages.** Fidgeting, tapping your fingers on a table, pacing, mumbling, using lots of pauses, and checking your phone often for texts and e-mails can distract others from the message you are trying to convey (Photo 5.6). Make a conscious effort to learn what distracting nonverbal messages have become habitual for you and work to eliminate them from your communication with others.

**Interpreting Nonverbal Messages**

**1. Remember that the same nonverbal message may mean different things to different people.** Most nonverbal messages have multiple meanings that vary from person to person, culture to culture, and even situation to situation. Just because you fidget when you are bored, doesn't mean that others are bored when they fidget. What you perceive as an angry vocal tone might not be intended as such by the person talking. So always try to consider multiple interpretations of the nonverbal messages you receive and seek clarification, particularly when your first interpretation is negative. This guideline becomes even more important when interpreting messages sent via social media and technology. For example, when Larissa read her brother's text, "CALL ME!", rather than jump to any conclusions, she interpreted his meaning as urgent and stepped into the hallway to call him right away to seek clarification rather than waiting until later.

**2. Consider each nonverbal message in context.** Because any one nonverbal message can mean different things in different contexts, take the time to consider how it is intended in a given situation. Also realize that you might not understand all the details of the situation. For example, if you see a classmate sleeping during your speech, you might interpret the nonverbal message as boredom or disrespect. What it might be communicating, however, is utter exhaustion because your classmate just finished back-to-back 12-hour shifts at work while trying to keep up with homework for a full load of courses.

**3. Pay attention to the multiple nonverbal messages being sent and their relationship to the verbal message.** In any one interaction, you are likely to get simultaneous messages from a person’s appearance, eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, posture, voice, as well as use of space and touch. By taking all nonverbal messages into consideration in conjunction with the verbal message, you are more likely to interpret their messages accurately.

**4. Use perception checking.** Perception checking lets you see if your interpretation of another person’s message is accurate. By describing the nonverbal message, you notice, sharing two possible interpretations of it, and asking for clarification, you can get confirmation or correction of your interpretation.