CHAPTER 2

The Communicative Style of Americans

Pushy Greeks. Shy Taiwanese. Opinionated Germans. Emotional Mexicans, Brazilians, and Italians. Cold British. Loud Nigerians. These are among the stereotypes or general ideas U.S. Americans have about some other nationalities. In part these stereotypes arise from differences in what the communications scholar Dean Barnlund called "communicative style."

When people communicate with each other, they exhibit a style that is strongly influenced by their culture. "Communicative style" refers to several characteristics of conversations between individuals, according to Barnlund (1989): (1) the topics people prefer to discuss, (2) their favorite forms of interaction in conversation, (3) the depth to which they want to get involved with each other, (4) the communication channels (verbal or nonverbal) on which they rely, and (5) the level of meaning (factual versus emotional) to which they are most attuned. Each of these is discussed here.

Naturally, people prefer to use their own communicative styles. Issues about communicative style rarely arise when two people from the same culture—and the same age category and gender—are together because

their styles generally agree. Most people—including most Americans—are as unaware of their communicative style as they are of their basic values and assumptions. International visitors who understand something about the Americans' communicative style will be less likely to misinterpret or misjudge Americans than will those who don't know the common characteristics of interpersonal communication among Americans. They will also have a better understanding of some of the stereotypes Americans have about other nationality groups.

PREFERRED DISCUSSION TOPICS

When they first encounter another person, Americans engage in a kind of conversation they call *small talk*. The most common topic of small talk is the weather. Another very common topic is what the speakers "do," meaning, normally, what jobs they have. They may discuss their current physical surroundings—the room or building they are in, the area where they are standing, or whatever is appropriate. Later, after the preliminaries, Americans may talk about past experiences they have both had, such as watching a particular TV program, seeing a certain movie, traveling to a certain place, or eating at a particular restaurant.

Beyond these very general topics of small talk, there is variation according to the life situations of the people involved and the setting in which the conversation is taking place. Students are likely to talk about their teachers and classes; if they are of the same gender, they are likely to discuss their social lives. Adults may discuss their jobs, recreational interests, houses, or family matters. Men are likely to talk about sports or cars. Women are likely to talk about interpersonal relationships or their children or grandchildren, if they have any. It is important to remember that these are general observations and that individual Americans will differ in their preferred topics of conversation. Some men are not interested in sports, for example, and some women are.

U.S. Americans are explicitly taught not to discuss religion and politics unless they are fairly well acquainted with the people they are talking to. In public meetings Americans will openly debate political matters, but we are

talking here about communicative style in interpersonal situations. Politics and religion are thought to be "controversial," and discussing a controversial topic can lead to an argument. Americans, as we will discuss under "Favorite Forms of Interaction," are taught to avoid arguments.

Unlike Americans, people from Germany, Iran, Brazil, and many other countries consider politics, and sometimes religion, to be excellent topics for informal discussion and debate. For them, discussing—and arguing about—politics is a favorite way to pass the time and to get to know other people better.

Americans generally avoid some topics because they are "too personal." Financial matters is one. To many foreigners, this may seem contradictory because Americans seem to value material wealth so highly. However, inquiries about a person's earnings or about the amount someone paid for an item are usually beyond the bounds of acceptable topics. So are body and mouth odors (as already mentioned), bodily functions, sexual behavior and responses, and fantasies. Another sensitive topic for many Americans is body weight. It is considered impolite to tell someone, especially a woman, that he or she has gained weight. On the other hand, saying that someone has lost weight or that he or she "looks slim" is a compliment. Mary, an American woman married to Dieter, a German, told me she encountered a different attitude toward body weight while visiting her husband's family in Bavaria. She was shocked that Dieter's friends and family commented so openly about how much weight he had gained while living in the United States. "If my family said that about me, I would be very insulted!" Mary exclaimed.

Upon first meeting, people from Latin America and Spain may have long interchanges about the health and well-being of each other's family members. Saudis, by contrast, often consider questions about family members, particularly women, inappropriate unless the people talking know each other well. Americans might inquire briefly about family members ("How's your wife?" or "How're the kids?"), but politeness in brief and casual encounters does not require dwelling on the subject.

As was already said, people prefer to use their own communicative styles. That means, among other things, they prefer to abide by their own ideas about conversation topics that are appropriate for a given setting.

People from other countries who have different ideas from Americans about what topics are appropriate for a particular context are likely to feel uncomfortable when they are talking with Americans. They may not feel they can participate in the conversation on an equal footing, and Americans often resist (quite unconsciously) foreigners' attempts to bring up a different topic.

Listening to American small talk leads some people from other societies to the erroneous conclusion that Americans are intellectually incapable of carrying on a discussion about anything significant. Some foreigners believe that topics more complex than weather, sports, or social lives are beyond the Americans' ability to comprehend. Foreigners should keep in mind that this is the communicative style that Americans are accustomed to; it does not necessarily reflect their level of intelligence.

FAVORITE FORMS OF INTERACTION

The typical conversation between two U.S. Americans takes a form that can be called *repartee.* No one speaks for very long. Speakers take turns frequently, often after speaking only a few sentences. "Watching a conversation between two Americans is like watching a table tennis game," a British observer said. "Your head goes back and forth and back and forth so fast it almost makes your neck hurt."

Americans tend to be impatient with people who take long turns. Such people are said to "talk too much." Many Americans have difficulty paying attention to someone who speaks more than a few sentences at a time, as Nigerians, Egyptians, and some others typically do. Americans admire conciseness, or what they call "getting to the point" (about which more is said in the next chapter).

Americans engage in far less *ritual* interaction than do many other cultural groups. Only a few ritual interchanges are common: "How are you?" "I'm fine, thank you," "Nice to meet you," "Hope to see you again," and "We'll have to get together." These things are said under certain circumstances Americans learn to recognize and, like any ritual interchange, are concerned more with form than with substance. That is, the questions are supposed to be asked and the statements are supposed to be made in

particular circumstances, no matter what the people involved are feeling or what they really have in mind.

Among American women, ritual interchanges often entail compliments: "I like your hair that way," or "That dress looks good on you." Among men, gentle insults are a frequent form of interaction: "Are you still driving that old thing?"

In many Americans' opinions, people who rely heavily on the sort of ritual interchanges that are common among Japanese and Arabs are "too shy" or "too polite," unwilling to reveal their true natures and ideas.

Americans are generally impatient with long ritual interchanges about family members' health—common among Latin Americans—or invocations of a Supreme Being's goodwill—common among Arabs—considering them a waste of time and doubting their sincerity.

Of course, people from elsewhere often doubt the sincerity of the Americans' ritual interactions: "They always ask me how I am, but they don't listen to what I say. They don't really care how I am."

A third form of interaction, one that Americans tend to avoid, is *argument*. Americans imagine that an argument with another person might end their relationship. They do not generally consider arguing a sport or a pleasurable pastime. If Americans are in a discussion in which a difference of opinion is emerging, they are likely to say, "Let's not get into an argument about this." Rather than argue, they prefer to find areas of agreement, change the topic, or even physically withdraw from the situation. Not surprisingly, people who like to argue are often labeled "pushy," "aggressive," or "opinionated."

If an argument is unavoidable, Americans believe it should be conducted in calm, moderate tones and with a minimum of gesturing. Loud voices, vigorous use of arms, more than one person talking at a time—to most Americans these are signs that a physical fight, or at least an unproductive "shouting match," might develop.

They believe people should avoid emotional expressiveness when presenting their viewpoints. They watch in astonishment when television news programs show members of the Japanese Diet (parliament) hitting each other with their fists.

This is not to say that Americans in interpersonal conversations never argue. Certainly there are those who do. Generally, though, they prefer not

to. One result of their aversion to arguing is that they get little practice in verbally defending their viewpoints. And one result of that, in turn, is that they may appear less intelligent than they might actually be (see page 35 for more on this subject).

In contrast to Americans' typical avoidance of arguments in their day-to-day dealings with each other, they seem to relish arguments in their public discourse. Linguist Deborah Tannen maintains in *The Argument Culture* (1998) that media and public treatment of controversial issues is marked by oversimplified, raucous "debates" between the "two sides" of the issue. She notes that many issues have more than two sides, or perhaps only one reasonable side. Nevertheless, public-affairs television programs, talk radio, newspapers, and magazines typically engage a representative of each of the two sides who will debate each other, each trying to vanquish the other, rather than trying to illuminate the issue or find common ground. Martial metaphors such as "war," "battle," and "defeat" often frame these encounters, which can entail shouting, arm-waving, finger-pointing, name-calling, and interrupting.

A fourth and final form of interaction is *self-disclosure*. In many cases, conversations with a large amount of small talk (or of ritual interchange) produce little self-disclosure. That is, the people involved reveal little if anything about their personal lives, thoughts, or feelings. This is especially true if the people involved in the conversation do not know each other well. What Americans regard as personal in this context includes their feelings, past experiences involving illegal or otherwise imprudent behavior, and their opinions about controversial matters. In most public situations Americans reveal little that is personal. They often wait until they are in a more private setting (perhaps at home or at a bar or restaurant where fewer people are likely to know them) to discuss personal matters. Women tend to disclose more about themselves to other women than they do to men. Men tend not to disclose much about themselves to anyone. Of course, for both men and women, much more self-revelation takes place in the context of a close friendship or intimate relationship.

Americans are probably not extreme with respect to the amount of self-disclosure that takes place in interpersonal encounters. International visitors who are accustomed to more self-revelation may feel frustrated in

their efforts to get to know Americans. In contrast, those accustomed to less self-disclosure may be embarrassed by some of the things Americans do talk about. As Melissa, an American college student, told me about her new friend from Korea, "Joohwan seemed so uncomfortable when I asked him to tell me more about his dating experiences. I don't understand why. I always talk about dating with my American friends, both guys and girls!"

DEPTH OF INVOLVEMENT SOUGHT

Cultural backgrounds influence the degree to which people want to become closely connected with other people outside their families. People from some cultures are looking for close, interdependent relationships. They value commitment to other people, and they want friendships in which there are virtually no limits to what the friends will do for each other.

U.S. Americans cause immense frustration for many international students and visitors with their apparent inability to become closely involved with other people. "Americans just don't know how to be friends," many people from other countries say. "You never feel that you are free to call on them at any time or that they will help you no matter what."

Many Americans do have what they call close friends, people with whom they discuss intimate personal concerns and to whom they feel special attachments and strong obligations. But as Daniel Akst argues in an article with the provocative title "America: Land of Loners?" such friendships are relatively unusual, particularly among males. Much more numerous are relationships with people who might more accurately be called *acquaintances*. With acquaintances, the degree of intimate involvement or sense of mutual obligation is much lower. Americans are likely to use the term *friend* to cover a wide range of types of relationships, much to the confusion of visitors from abroad.

Americans often relate to each other as occupants of roles rather than as whole people. Another person might be a roommate, classmate, neighbor, coworker, weekend boater, bowler, or teacher. Certain behaviors are expected of people in each of those roles. All is well among Americans if people behave according to the generally accepted notions of what is

appropriate for the role in which they find themselves. Except in the case of public figures, other aspects of their behavior are not considered relevant, as they are in other societies where attention is paid to the "kind of person" one is dealing with. An accountant may be a chain-smoking, hard-drinking adulterer, but if he is a good accountant, I am likely to use his services even if I disapprove of chain-smoking, the heavy use of alcohol, and adultery. His personal life is not relevant to his ability as an accountant.

An exception—and it has become more and more of an exception in the era of the Internet—is public figures such as politicians, performers, and athletes. Former president Bill Clinton, former New York governor Eliot Spitzer, actress Lindsay Lohan, and golfer Tiger Woods are but a few examples of public figures whose careers stumbled—at least temporarily—as the result of revelations concerning sex or drugs.

In the United States the idea of "compartmentalized friendships" is accepted as natural and positive (or at least neutral). That is, instead of having friends with whom they do everything, Americans often have friends with whom they engage in specific activities. For example, they have go-out-to-dinner friends, exercise friends, and friends from whom they might ask advice. Notice that most of these friendship relationships entail doing something together. Simply being together and talking is often not enough for Americans. It seems pointless, a waste of time, as pointed out earlier.

Americans often seem to fear close involvement with other people. They will avoid becoming dependent on others, and they don't want others, with the possible exception of immediate family members, to be dependent on them. Notice that many American self-help books are targeted at people who are "too dependent" on others and who may need help achieving a proper level of self-sufficiency. (Remember, Americans have been brought up to see the ideal person as independent and self-reliant.) Americans are likely to be extremely cautious when they meet a new person who seems to want to get closely involved with them. "What does this person want?" they seem to be asking. "How much of my time will it take?" "Will I be able to withdraw from the relationship if it gets too demanding?"

International visitors will want to realize that Americans often have difficulty becoming "close friends" with each other, not just with unfamiliar people from other countries.

CHANNELS PREFERRED

Verbal Communication

Americans depend more on spoken words than on nonverbal behavior to convey their messages. They think it is important to be able to "speak up" and "say what's on your mind." They admire people who have a moderately large vocabulary and who can express themselves clearly and cleverly, but they distrust people who are, in their view, excessively articulate. A person who uses a large vocabulary is likely to be considered overeducated and perhaps snobbish. A person who is extremely skillful at presenting verbal messages is usually suspect: "Is he trying to sell me something?" "What's she up to?" "He's a smooth talker, so you'd better watch him." "Who is she trying to impress?"

This aversion to smooth talkers may be related to the general U.S. American aversion to higher education and to well-educated people. Someone who has "too much education" or "thinks too much," as President Barack Obama was accused of doing, arouses suspicion and even distaste among many Americans.

People from some other cultures, notably Arabs, Iranians, sub-Saharan Africans, and some (especially Southern) Europeans, prize verbal agility more than Americans do. People from those cultures, when they visit the United States, are likely to have two different reactions to Americans and their use of language. The first is to wonder why Americans seem suspicious of them. The second is to suppose that Americans, since they cannot carry on discussions or arguments very well, must not be very intelligent or well informed. "Americans are not as intelligent as we are," said an Iranian who had been in the States for several years. "In all the time I've been here I've never heard one of them talk about anything more important than sports and the weather. They just don't know anything about politics and they don't understand it."

A Greek diplomat in the United States commented, "It is so difficult to work with Americans. They get business degrees and they can't carry on a dinner conversation about anything but work."

It is no doubt the case that the level of knowledge and understanding of social and political matters is lower in the States than it is in many other

countries. And, even though its higher-education system is supposedly based on the "liberal arts ideal" of the broadly educated person, Americans with advanced education tend to be highly specialized in what they know and can talk about. It does not necessarily follow, though, that they are less intelligent than people elsewhere. To conclude from their relatively limited verbal abilities and range of knowledge that they are unintelligent is to underestimate them.

Other people come to the United States from cultures where people generally talk less than Americans do and rely more on the context and on nonverbal means of understanding each other. Such people tend to find Americans too loud, too talkative, and not sensitive enough to understand other people without putting everything into words. "You Americans!" an exasperated Japanese woman said when she was pressed for details about an unpleasant situation involving a friend of hers. "You have to *say* everything!"

Americans' preference for verbal over nonverbal means of communicating pertains also to the written word. Words are important to Americans, and written words are often more highly regarded than words that are merely spoken. Formal agreements, contracts, and decisions are normally written down—and then reviewed by lawyers to make sure the written words have done as much as possible to forestall potential lawsuits. Official notices and advisories are written. "Put it in writing," the Americans say, if it is important and you want it to receive appropriate attention. Businesspeople and international students sometimes get themselves into difficulty because they have not paid enough attention (by American standards) to written contracts, notices, procedures, or deadlines.

Nonverbal Communication

> "You shouldn't have your office arranged like this," a Nigerian student said to me. "You should have it so your desk is between you and the person you are talking to."
>
> "You shouldn't have your furniture this way," a Chinese student told me. "Having your back to the door when you are at your desk brings bad luck. You should be facing the door."

> "I like the way you have your office set up," a Canadian student observed. "It's nice and informal. You don't have a desk between you and the person you are talking to, so the person feels more at ease."

Furniture arrangements are just one aspect of the large topic of nonverbal communication. The types and relative positions of the furniture in an office or a home convey messages to people about such topics as degrees of formality and concern with social status. And, as the examples just shown make clear, spatial arrangements convey different messages to different people.

Facial jewelry, tattoos, volume and tone of voice, movements of eyebrows, variations in eye contact, clothing styles, and attention to punctuality are among the many other aspects of human behavior that come under the heading of nonverbal communication. The subject is large and complex. A great deal of human communication takes place on the nonverbal level and many aspects of nonverbal communication are heavily influenced by culture.

Much of the discomfort that is typical in intercultural situations stems from differences in nonverbal communication habits. People in cross-cultural interactions may feel uncomfortable for reasons they cannot specify. Something seems wrong, but they are not sure what it is. Often what is wrong is that the other person's nonverbal behavior does not fit what one expects or is accustomed to. As a result of this discomfort, one person may form negative judgments about the other person as an individual or about the group the other person represents.

Some understanding of nonverbal communication is essential, then, for people who want to get along in another culture. This section discusses several aspects of nonverbal communication and makes some observations about typical (but, remember, not universal) U.S. American nonverbal behavior.

Aspects of Nonverbal Behavior

Appearance. With respect to appearance and dress, generalizations about Americans (or any other large and diverse group) are scarcely possible. Suffice it to say that Americans, like people elsewhere, have ideas about which

clothing styles are attractive and unattractive or which are appropriate and inappropriate for any given setting. These ideas change over time because they are subject to fads and fashions. So do ideas about hairstyles, cosmetics, jewelry, and body adornments, all of which are aspects of nonverbal behavior. Foreigners anywhere usually stand out because their hairstyles, clothing (including shoes), and use of cosmetics distinguish them from the natives.

Many culture groups find American dress strikingly informal. In some places in the United States, particularly away from large coastal cities, it is perfectly acceptable to wear blue jeans to church, the opera, or a wedding, occasions that in the past required much more formal clothing.

Body Movements and Gestures. Body movements are another important aspect of nonverbal communication. Many international visitors claim, for example, that there is a characteristic "American walk" in which the walker moves at a rapid pace, holds the chest forward, and swings the arms vigorously. Combined, these body movements create the impression in some foreigners' minds that Americans take up more space than they actually do, and that they are arrogant.

With respect to movements accompanying their talk, Americans consider what can be called "moderate" gesturing to be appropriate. They use hand and arm motions to add emphasis or clarity to what they are saying, but they will not generally use a gesture in which the elbows go above the level of the shoulder except, for example, when waving hello or good-bye, voting by a show of hands, or trying to get attention in a large group. People whose elbows rise above their shoulders while they are talking are considered to be "waving their arms," which may be taken as a symptom of excessive emotionalism and perhaps even anger. In Americans' eyes, Italians, Greeks, and some Latin Americans are likely to be considered "too emotional" or "hot-tempered" because of the vigorous gestures that often accompany their talk. In Asian eyes, this level of gesturing may seem childish or undisciplined.

On the other hand, Americans are likely to regard people who keep their hands and arms still or very close to their bodies while they talk as "too stiff," "too formal," or "uptight." Americans often think of Chinese and Japanese people, particularly women, in this way.

In most societies there are standard gestures for certain everyday situations: greetings (a gesture that goes with "Hello!"), leave-taking (a gesture with "Good-bye"), summoning, head movements to signify agreement or disagreement, and counting and showing numbers with the fingers. It would take more space than is available here to describe the gestures Americans typically use for each of these situations. The easiest way for international visitors to learn about them is to ask an American for a demonstration.

There are also certain gestures that are considered obscene in the sense that they refer disrespectfully to body functions, usually sexual ones. If asking for a demonstration or explanation of these gestures, international visitors had best make their request of an American of the same gender.

Foreign visitors will want to be aware that Americans are likely to overlook or misunderstand gestures that the foreigners use and Americans do not. For example, people from certain parts of India typically move their heads in a sort of figure-eight motion when they are listening to someone talk. To the Indians this gesture means "I am listening; I understand." Americans do not have a similar gesture. The Indian head movement is not the same as the one Americans use to indicate agreement (nodding the head up and down) or disagreement (shaking the head from side to side). It is something quite different. The gesture is likely to suggest to Americans that the Indian has a sore neck or a tight muscle that he is trying to loosen by moving his head around, and the Americans can even get quite annoyed with the Indian's strange behavior.

When conversing with an Indian who seems to have a sore neck, the Americans may become so preoccupied with the head movements that they lose all track of the conversation. This is one of the dangers of differences in nonverbal behavior. Unfamiliar gestures and postures can be extremely distracting.

The meaning of hand gestures can also vary. Consider a gesture made at the University of Texas at Austin, where the school mascot is the longhorn steer. The gesture is made by raising the index finger and the little finger while grasping the middle and ring finger with the thumb. To Texas students, alumni, and sports fans the gesture symbolizes the school motto, "Hook 'em, horns." In many other places, particularly in the Mediterranean, this gesture means "cuckold," a man whose wife is unfaithful. In an incident widely circulated on the Internet, former first lady Barbara Bush, a kindly

woman held in affection by many Americans, flashed the Longhorn hand signal while watching a Texas football game. Not all viewers understood what she was intending to convey!

Facial Expression. Social scientists debate whether certain facial expressions mean the same thing to people everywhere. For instance, some research suggests that the emotion of happiness may be expressed similarly in many cultures. Without entering that debate, however, we can say that Americans generally permit more emotion to show on their faces than many Asians typically do, but less than Latin Americans or Southern Europeans do. International visitors who are uncertain about the meaning of an American's facial expression can ask about it. Remember, you should not assume those expressions mean the same thing they mean at home.

Smiling is a facial expression that causes particular difficulty. Americans associate smiling with politeness, happiness, cheerfulness, and amusement. They rarely realize that many Asians will smile (and even giggle or laugh softly) when they are confused or embarrassed. "I don't know why she kept smiling," an American might say. "I didn't see anything funny!"

Eye Contact. An especially complex, subtle, and important aspect of nonverbal behavior is eye contact. The issue is simple: When you are talking to another person, where do you direct your eyes? Marked cultural variations influence people's answers to that question. Americans are trained to distrust people who do not "look them in the eye" when speaking to them. The fact is that Americans themselves do not gaze continually into the eyes of people they are talking to unless they share an intense romantic relationship. Rather, they make eye contact when they begin to speak, then look away, and periodically look again into the eyes of the person they are talking to. They also typically look at the other person's eyes when they reach the end of a sentence or a point in the conversation where they are prepared to give the other person a turn to speak. When listening to another person, Americans will look for longer periods into the other person's eyes than when speaking, but they will still look away from time to time.

Foreign visitors can watch pairs of Americans who are talking and note what they do with their eyes and how long they maintain eye contact in different circumstances.

Visitors who customarily avoid looking into the eyes of a person they are talking to will be able to tell, if they are observant, that Americans are uncomfortable around them. So will those who are accustomed to looking for longer periods or to staring into the eyes of people with whom they are speaking. Americans, like any other people, feel that something is wrong when the person they are talking with does not share their eye-contact customs.

Space and Touching. Another aspect of nonverbal behavior that is strongly influenced by culture has to do with space and distance. It can be amusing to watch a conversation between an American and someone from a culture where habits concerning "conversational distance" are different. If an American is talking to a Greek, a Latin American, or an Arab, for example, the American is likely to keep backing away because the other person is likely to keep getting "too close." On the other hand, if the conversation partner is Japanese, the American may keep trying to get closer because the Japanese seems to be standing "too far away." Conversation partners in these situations might move clear across the room as one gets closer and the other backs away, each trying to maintain a "normal" conversational distance. All the while, both people are vaguely uncomfortable and are likely to be making negative judgments about each other. "They're cold and unfeeling," Latin Americans might say of North Americans who keep moving away. "They are pushy and overbearing," Japanese might say of the encroaching Americans.

International visitors are also likely to notice characteristic ways that Americans react when they feel too crowded. On elevators ("lifts") or in crowded rooms, Americans usually look down at the floor or up at the ceiling. They often draw their arms and legs in close, and they may not speak to the people around them. For many Americans these movements seem intended to communicate that they are not invading other people's personal space.

With respect to touching, the questions are these: Who touches whom? Where (that is, on what part or parts of the body)? Under what circumstances? What kind of touching (patting, rubbing, hugging)? Dean Barnlund, in his book *Public and Private Self in Japan and the United States* (1975), made an interesting comparison of touching among Japanese and among Americans. He asked his subjects, university students, to show on a diagram

what parts of their bodies had been touched since they were fourteen years of age by their fathers, their mothers, friends of the same sex, and friends of the opposite sex. He found striking contrasts between the two groups. The least-touched American remembered being touched more than the most-touched Japanese did. Some Japanese could not recall having been touched by anyone since age fourteen.

A comparison between Americans and Latin Americans, Arabs, or Southern Europeans, on the other hand, would no doubt show that Americans, while they touch each other more than Japanese typically do, touch less often than do people from some other cultures.

Of course, habits and preferences concerning touching vary not just by culture but by individual and by situation. Some individuals like to touch and be touched more than others do. Careful observation can reveal a particular individual's preferences in this respect. Status differences also affect this form of nonverbal behavior. In general, higher-status people are freer to touch lower-status people than vice versa.

Silence. The final aspect of nonverbal behavior to be mentioned here is silence. Except in the presence of people they know well, Americans are quite uncomfortable with periods of silence in a conversation. If conversation lapses for more than a few seconds, alert foreign visitors will notice Americans quickly devising something to say. Almost any comment, in their view, is preferable to silence. A silence of ten or fifteen seconds will make many Americans nervous.*

Suggestions for International Visitors

International visitors cannot expect to learn and employ all American nonverbal communication habits, but there are some steps that can help minimize the negative effects of differences in these habits.

- Be aware of the wide range of human actions and reactions that come under the label "nonverbal communication," and realize that such behavior is largely culturally based.

* For more expansive discussion of nonverbal communication, see the Knapp and Hall or the Burgoon, Guerrero, and Floyd books listed in the suggested readings.

- Learn as much as possible about American nonverbal communication habits, and practice doing things their way.
- Realize that most often, people's nonverbal behavior reinforces the intended meaning of their words. In such cases, missing or misunderstanding nonverbal behavior is not a major problem. Problems arise mainly when a speaker's nonverbal message appears to contradict the words she is speaking. Foreigners who detect such "mixed messages," if they want clarification, will need the courage to ask for it.
- Try to avoid interpreting what others mean and evaluating their behavior based on your own ideas about appropriate nonverbal behavior. For example, if you are accustomed to standing closer to conversation partners than Americans generally are, be careful not to interpret the Americans' preference for a greater space between you as a sign of coldness, dislike, or disrespect. Such an interpretation might make sense at home but not in the United States.

The more you can learn about how Americans interpret each other's nonverbal behavior, the more constructively you will be able to interact with them. You can learn about these things by watching Americans interact with each other and by asking them questions about the way they do things, particularly when you notice that you are having a strong reaction to something they've done.

LEVEL OF MEANING EMPHASIZED

Americans generally pay more attention to the factual than to the emotional content of messages. As has been mentioned, they are often uncomfortable with displays of more than moderate emotion. They are taught in school to detect—and dismiss—"emotional appeals" in other people's statements or arguments. They are taught to "look for the facts" and "weigh the evidence" when they are in the process of making a judgment or decision.

Some social scientists maintain that American women tend to be less suspicious of people whose main message is emotional rather than "logical" or "rational." Women, according to this set of ideas, will tend to pay more attention than will men to the mood of the person they are talking to. Men,

by contrast, will listen for the "facts" in what the person has to say. Statements or arguments relying heavily on emotional appeals are more likely to be taken seriously by women than by men. These ideas are most closely associated with the work of linguist Deborah Tannen (1990).*

Before continuing, it is important to emphasize two points that have been raised several times already. The first is that people naturally prefer to use their own communicative style. The second is that differences in communicative style can cause serious problems in intercultural—and perhaps inter-gender—interactions. They produce uneasiness, misjudgments, and misinterpretations whose source is often not clear to the people involved. U.S. Americans, for example, believe they are acting "naturally" when they engage in small talk with a person they have just met. They do not expect their level of intelligence to be judged on the basis of such conversations. But if the person they have just met is from a culture where conversations with new acquaintances "naturally" take some form other than small talk, then the person may well be evaluating the American's intellect. The result of all this is likely to be negative feelings and judgments on both sides. The stereotypes listed at the opening of this chapter arise at least in part from judgments made on the basis of communicative-style differences.

International visitors who understand the American communicative style will be far less likely to contribute to these misunderstandings and negative feelings. As a result, their opportunities for constructive interaction will be greater.

* More ideas on this topic can be found in the next chapter, which discusses the closely related subject of American patterns of thinking.