



EXPLORING THE ROLE OF NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS: A STUDY OF GESTURES, POSTURES, AND PROXEMICS

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the role of nonverbal communication in interpersonal relationships, with a focus on gestures, postures, and proxemics (physical distance between individuals). Nonverbal communication, which includes body movements, body language, as well as the use of personal space, has a significant impact on the understanding and dynamics of relationships between individuals. The study uses observation and in-depth interview methods to identify patterns of nonverbal communication in daily interactions. The results showed that gestures, postures, and proxemics can affect the way people respond to and understand each other, thereby strengthening or weakening interpersonal relationships. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the importance of nonverbal elements in building effective and harmonious communication in various social contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication plays an important role in daily life, as it is the primary means for individuals to exchange information, express feelings, and build social relationships. Every day, humans use communication both verbally and nonverbally to convey messages, understand meaning, and shape and maintain social interactions (Koide, 2003). Through communication, individuals can bridge differences in perceptions, understand each other, and create social cohesion in a variety of contexts, from personal to professional life. Effective communication is the key to creating harmonious relationships, overcoming conflicts, and achieving common goals (Ahmed, 2023).

The forms of communication are very diverse, including verbal, nonverbal, written, and visual communication. Verbal communication involves the use of spoken or written language, which is often understood directly through words. Meanwhile, nonverbal communication such as gestures, facial expressions, postures, and the use of space also have a significant role in conveying messages without words (Ibrahim, 2023). In modern life, written communication through digital media and visuals through images or symbols are also becoming more prominent. Each of these forms of communication

complements each other, providing depth and richness in the way humans interact and understand the world around them (Francesco Galvano, 2020).

Nonverbal communication plays an important role in enriching and strengthening verbal communication, as it can provide additional emotional context and nuance to the message conveyed. Often, nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and voice intonation are able to convey deeper meanings than words alone (Bruno et al., 2020). For example, a sentence spoken with a warm smile or a soft tone can give a different meaning than if it is spoken in a cold tone or an angry expression. Thus, nonverbal communication helps to avoid misunderstandings and adds an emotional element that can clarify the intent of the verbal message.

In addition, nonverbal communication can also strengthen verbal messages by providing reinforcement or emphasis on important points that want to be conveyed. For example, when speaking in public, the speaker may use hand gestures to emphasize the main argument or use eye contact to show seriousness and engagement. This nonverbal component helps the audience understand the message better and creates a stronger emotional connection between the speaker and the listener (Patterson et al., 2023). Thus, the integration between verbal and nonverbal communication allows for the creation of more effective, holistic, and meaningful communication.

Nonverbal communication is often a form of conveying information that is more powerful and direct than words. This is because nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, gestures, and postures can convey emotions, intentions, and meanings spontaneously without the need for verbal explanation. For example, a sharp eye look or certain body movements can instantly indicate disapproval or disappointment, even without needing to be spoken (Keck et al., 2022). In certain situations, nonverbal communication can speed up the understanding of a message compared to verbal communication which may require more detailed explanation. This makes it a very effective tool for conveying feelings or direct reactions in social interactions.

In addition, nonverbal communication is also often considered more honest and authentic because it is difficult to fake compared to words. A person may say something that is not verbally correct, but their nonverbal cues, such as tone of voice or body language, may reveal the truth behind the words (Taylor & Ricciardelli, 2024). For example, someone who says "I'm fine" while avoiding eye contact or showing a closed posture can easily be understood as someone who is actually uncomfortable. Therefore, in many contexts, nonverbal communication is able to convey a stronger, more direct, and difficult message to be misinterpreted compared to verbal speech.

In recent decades, academic interest in the study of nonverbal communication has increased significantly. Researchers from various disciplines, such as psychology, communication, sociology, and linguistics, are increasingly interested in exploring the role of nonverbal communication in human interaction. This is driven by awareness of the importance of nonverbal aspects in shaping the dynamics of social relationships, both in daily life and in professional contexts. The study of nonverbal communication has evolved to include various forms, such as facial expressions, gestures, postures, and the use of space (proxemics), all of which have a major impact on how individuals understand and respond to each other (Bedir & Daskan, 2023). This academic interest is also driven by globalization, where cross-cultural interaction is increasingly common, so understanding the differences in nonverbal communication between cultures has become very relevant.

On the practical side, the increase in interest in nonverbal communication is also seen in the world of business, education, and interpersonal relationships. In the workplace, understanding nonverbal communication becomes a highly valued skill, as it can improve the effectiveness of leadership, team collaboration, and negotiation. In the context of education, educators are using research on nonverbal communication to create a better learning environment, by understanding

students' nonverbal cues to detect confusion or interest (Ananda et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in everyday life, a better understanding of nonverbal communication can help individuals strengthen interpersonal relationships and reduce misunderstandings, especially when interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds.

Nonverbal communication plays a crucial role in shaping and nurturing interpersonal relationships, as cues such as gestures, postures, and proxemics can affect how individuals interact and understand each other. Gestures, for example, can replace words or add emotional meaning to a message conveyed, such as when someone waves as a greeting or shows a thumbs up to express agreement (Chitac et al., 2024). Posture can also provide clues about a person's attitude or feelings in social interactions. Open postures, such as standing up straight with relaxed shoulders, often indicate a friendly and open attitude, while closed postures, such as crossing your arms or avoiding eye contact, can indicate discomfort or disapproval (Bedir & Daskan, 2023).

In addition, proxemics, or the use of personal space, also affect the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. Each culture has different norms regarding physical distancing that is considered comfortable in social interactions, and violations of these boundaries can trigger tension or discomfort (Uzun, 2020). For example, standing too close while speaking can be considered invasive in some cultures, while in others, it can be interpreted as a sign of familiarity. Proxemics help regulate unspoken social boundaries and provide signals about the type of relationship that an individual wants in a given situation. Overall, these nonverbal cues affect the quality and dynamics of human interactions, strengthen interpersonal understanding, and help build deeper connections in interpersonal relationships.

Birdwhistell's (2020) research in its study of kinesics revealed that most of the emotional information in human interaction is conveyed through body movements and facial expressions, not words. The study found that nonverbal communication such as gestures, facial expressions, and voice intonation can convey feelings and attitudes more clearly than verbal communication, especially in situations that require a quick emotional response. Furthermore, Mehrabian's (2024) research on the impact of nonverbal communication suggests that 93% of the emotional meaning of a message comes from nonverbal cues, while only 7% comes from words. This shows that nonverbal communication has a great influence in shaping the perception of others in interpersonal interactions.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with in-depth observation and interview methods to explore the role of nonverbal communication in interpersonal relationships, especially in terms of gestures, postures, and proxemics. Observations were made on a number of social interactions in various contexts, such as professional environments, family, and daily social interactions, to understand emerging patterns of nonverbal communication. Participants in this study were selected by purposive sampling, with criteria including diverse cultural backgrounds, ages, and genders to obtain representative data. Each interaction was observed directly and recorded using field notes and video recordings, which were then analyzed to identify the dominant nonverbal cues as well as their impact on interpersonal relationships.

In addition to observation, in-depth interviews were conducted to understand the participants' perspectives on the role of nonverbal communication in their interactions. The interview questions focused on the participants' personal experiences in using and responding to nonverbal cues such as gestures, postures, and proxemics in daily life. The interview data

were analyzed using thematic analysis techniques, in which thematic patterns related to the understanding and use of nonverbal communication in interpersonal relationships were identified and categorized. The use of data triangulation methods, by combining observation and interviews, allows this study to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the role of nonverbal communication in building and maintaining interpersonal relationships.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Nonverbal Communication in Interpersonal Relationships

Nonverbal communication is an important component of human interaction that is often unconscious, but has a great influence on the way we relate to each other. In interpersonal relationships, nonverbal cues such as gestures, postures, facial expressions, and the use of space (proxemics) can provide clues about a person's feelings and attitudes more quickly and clearly than words. As a complement to verbal communication, nonverbal cues help individuals to better understand the emotions, intentions, and dynamics of relationships (Ibrahim, 2023). Although often unspoken, nonverbal communication can convey a stronger and more direct message, and strengthen or weaken the meaning of verbal communication. Gestures are one of the most prominent forms of nonverbal communication in interpersonal interactions. Hand, head, or body gestures can generally be used to add, clarify, or even replace verbal messages. For example, a nod of the head indicates approval, while a quick nod of the hand can imply impatience. In social situations, gestures can help individuals express their feelings more clearly, especially when words are inadequate. Additionally, the use of appropriate gestures can improve the quality of interpersonal interactions, reinforce the message conveyed, and deepen emotional connections between individuals (Francesco Galvano, n.d.).

Posture plays an important role in signaling one's attitude in social interactions. An open posture, such as standing or sitting with your body upright and arms not crossed, shows openness, confidence, and interest in the interlocutor. Conversely, closed postures, such as crossing your arms or bowing your shoulders, can indicate a defensive attitude, discomfort, or disapproval. This posture is often interpreted automatically by the interlocutor and can influence how they respond, shape the dynamics in interpersonal relationships, and create a strong initial impression (Patterson et al., 2023). Proxemics, or the way individuals use personal space in interactions, also greatly influences the quality of interpersonal relationships. Everyone has a certain comfort limit in terms of the physical distance they maintain while communicating. In intimate relationships, physical distance tends to be closer, while in more formal or new relationships, longer distances are often maintained. Being too close or far from cultural norms can lead to discomfort or misunderstanding. Proxemics is also associated with social status; Individuals who have authority or dominance in relationships often control space more freely than others (Taylor & Ricciardelli, 2024)

Nonverbal communication is often considered more honest than verbal communication, as it is more difficult to fake or conceal. Nonverbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expressions, or hand gestures tend to appear spontaneously, reflecting a person's true feelings. In interpersonal situations, when words do not match nonverbal cues, individuals often trust nonverbal communication as a more accurate indication of the interlocutor's intentions or

emotions. For example, a person could say that they are not angry, but a tense facial expression or a high tone of voice may reveal true emotions.

Understanding and awareness of nonverbal communication can greatly improve the quality of interpersonal relationships (Ahmed, 2023). When individuals are aware of the nonverbal cues they are using and are able to read nonverbal cues from others, they can adjust the way they interact to create a more harmonious and effective relationship. For example, by being aware of defensive postures, a person can try to be more open in communicating, so that the interlocutor feels more comfortable and connected. Additionally, in a professional context, effective nonverbal communication can reinforce trust, collaboration, and leadership, all of which are important in building productive working relationships.

The Influence of Gestures in Interpersonal Interactions

Gestures are a form of nonverbal communication that has a significant influence on interpersonal interactions. As a tool of expression that involves hand, head, or body movements, gestures can add meaning, reinforce, or even replace verbal messages. In everyday conversation, people often use gestures to clarify or emphasize what they are saying. Research shows that gestures not only help in conveying messages, but also reinforce understanding between two interacting individuals (Bedir & Daskan, 2023). Thus, gestures play an important role in deepening the quality of interpersonal communication. Gestures effectively serve as a meaning enhancer in a conversation, helping to clarify the information conveyed verbally. For example, when someone explains directions, they may use hand gestures to show the right way, making it easier for the interlocutor to visualize what is being said. Gestures also play a role in expressing emotions more clearly. People often use hand gestures to express joy, anger, or frustration. Thus, gestures can enrich verbal communication and provide a clearer emotional context for the message conveyed (Ananda et al., 2020).

Gestures not only add meaning, but they can also reinforce verbal messages, making them more effective and memorable. For example, when someone is giving a speech or presentation, hand gestures that are in line with the points conveyed can help the audience focus and understand the content of the message better. Additionally, the use of appropriate gestures can add confidence and authority to a person, especially in professional situations. The use of gestures that are measured and aligned with verbal messages creates the impression that the speaker is fully engaged in the conversation and confident in conveying information (Candrasari, 2020). Gestures, like any other nonverbal communication, are often influenced by cultural contexts. In different cultures, the same gesture can have very different meanings. For example, a waving gesture can be considered a greeting in some countries, but it is considered a sign of insult in others. Therefore, understanding the cultural context is essential in interpersonal interactions, especially in a multicultural environment. Failure to understand the differences in gestures between cultures can lead to misunderstandings or even conflicts. This confirms that in cross-cultural interactions, sensitivity to nonverbal cues is indispensable to maintain harmonious relationships (Chitac et al., 2024).

Gestures also have the power to build closeness and strengthen interpersonal relationships. In intimate relationships, such as between close friends or family members, gestures often become more expressive and spontaneous. Gestures such as hugs, pats on the

shoulder, or thoughtful nods of the head create a stronger emotional bond (Bedir & Daskan, 2023). Conversely, in formal or new relationships, more subtle and measured gestures may be used more often to maintain social boundaries. Thus, gestures not only serve as a communication tool, but also as a way to build trust and familiarity in interpersonal relationships. Gestures play an important role in the context of negotiation and persuasion, where nonverbal communication is often used to influence outcomes. In business negotiations, for example, gestures can be used to show openness, assertiveness, or even vulnerability, depending on the strategy adopted. Gestures such as open hands or visible palms are often associated with honesty and openness, which can help build trust between the parties involved. On the other hand, more defensive or closing gestures, such as crossing arms, can be considered a sign of disagreement or rigidity, which can hinder the negotiation process. Thus, the strategic use of gestures in interpersonal interactions can affect power dynamics and conversation outcomes.

The Influence of Social and Cultural Context on Nonverbal Communication

Social and cultural contexts play a crucial role in shaping the way individuals express and interpret nonverbal communication. Every culture has norms and values that influence how people use nonverbal cues such as gestures, postures, facial expressions, and proxemics (use of space). In different social situations, nonverbal cues can have diverse meanings, depending on their cultural background and social situation. Understanding how social and cultural contexts affect nonverbal communication is essential for avoiding misunderstandings in cross-cultural interactions and enriching relationships between individuals (Bruno et al., 2020). Gestures used in one culture may have very different meanings in another. For example, the "OK" gesture made by forming a circle with the thumb and index finger in some Western cultures is considered positive, but in some other countries, such as Brazil or Turkey, it can be considered offensive. This variation in gesture interpretation reflects how cultural contexts shape the perception and use of nonverbal communication. Individuals who do not understand the cultural nuances in the use of gestures are at risk of making communication mistakes that can affect their social interactions and interpersonal relationships.

Proxemics, or the way people use personal space in interactions, are heavily influenced by culture (Ibrahim, 2023). In Western cultures, such as in the United States or Northern Europe, greater personal distance is usually maintained in formal conversations or between strangers. In contrast, in some Middle Eastern or Latin American cultures, closer physical interactions are more common and are considered a form of familiarity. Not understanding cultural preferences regarding the use of space can lead to discomfort or misunderstanding. For example, someone from a culture that values a large personal space may feel intimidated if talking to someone from a culture that prefers closer proximity (Bruno et al., 2020).

Facial expressions are one of the most universal forms of nonverbal communication, but social and cultural contexts also influence how people express and interpret emotions through faces. For example, in East Asian cultures, such as Japan or Korea, expressing emotions openly may be considered inappropriate, and facial expressions are often more subtle. On the other hand, in Western culture, more open and explicit expressions of emotions, such as smiling or

laughing out loud, are often perceived as positive (Patterson et al., 2023). As such, the interpretation of facial expressions is highly dependent on the cultural context, where the same gesture can be interpreted differently in different regions of the world.

Posture and body language are also greatly influenced by social and cultural contexts. In formal situations, such as in a business or academic environment, an upright and formal posture shows respect and professionalism. In contrast, in more relaxed or familiar situations, such as meetings with friends or family, a more relaxed and relaxed posture is more acceptable. In different cultures, body language can also differ in indicative of social status or power. For example, in certain cultures, crossing your legs or sitting with your arms crossed can be considered disrespectful or arrogant, while in other cultures, it is considered normal. Understanding the influence of social and cultural contexts on nonverbal communication is essential in cross-cultural interactions. Ignorance of different nonverbal norms in other cultures can lead to misunderstandings that lead to social tensions or even conflicts. Therefore, individuals who interact frequently in international contexts need to have cultural sensitivity and the ability to read nonverbal cues in a variety of social situations. In this increasingly globalized world, awareness of the social and cultural influences on nonverbal communication can help create more harmonious and effective relationships, both in personal and professional life.

Implications of Nonverbal Communication on Interpersonal Relationships

Nonverbal communication has a major impact on interpersonal relationships, as nonverbal cues often convey important information about a person's emotions, intentions, and attitudes. In daily interactions, gestures, facial expressions, and posture are the main elements that complement or even replace verbal communication. When nonverbal communication is aligned with verbal messages, interpersonal relationships can be strengthened, creating trust and mutual understanding (Maricchiolo et al., 2009). Conversely, mismatches between nonverbal and verbal cues can lead to confusion or distrust, which can ultimately damage the relationship. One of the most significant implications of nonverbal communication in interpersonal relationships is its ability to enhance or undermine trust. Nonverbal cues such as eye contact, open posture, and head nods can reinforce verbal messages and show genuine engagement. For example, in a professional or personal relationship, maintaining consistent eye contact shows care and openness. When nonverbal communication is aligned with what is being said, it creates a deeper sense of trust and makes the interlocutor feel valued. However, if the nonverbal cue seems inconsistent or contradictory to the verbal message, suspicion or discomfort may arise (Mahapatro & Chatterjee, 2024)/

Nonverbal cues often serve as a window to express emotions and intentions that are not expressed verbally. For example, even if someone says they feel fine, a tense facial expression or closed body language can indicate the opposite. In interpersonal relationships, sensitivity to these cues allows individuals to better understand each other beyond the spoken words. The ability to read and respond to subtle nonverbal cues, such as a change in tone of voice or a fake smile, helps to deepen communication and improve the quality of interactions. Nonverbal communication plays an important role in strengthening emotional attachment in intimate

relationships, be it in families, friendships, or romantic relationships. Touch, hugs, and physical closeness are forms of nonverbal communication that are directly related to emotional bonding (Balconi & Fronda, 2020). For example, a gentle touch on the shoulder or a tight hug often has a deeper meaning than words, reflecting emotional support and a sense of security. In romantic relationships, physical contact and intimacy through nonverbal gestures are an important means of building trust and strengthening inner bonds.

Furthermore, nonverbal communication can also be a source of conflict if it is not understood correctly or if there is a mismatch between verbal and nonverbal cues. For example, someone who speaks in a soft tone but has a closed posture or avoids eye contact can give mixed signals that confuse the interlocutor. This often leads to misunderstandings or tension in interpersonal relationships. Proper awareness and interpretation of nonverbal cues is essential to prevent unnecessary conflict and maintain harmony in the relationship. A better understanding of nonverbal communication allows individuals to build stronger and more effective relationships (Khurmi & Gupta, 2005). By becoming more aware of how to use gestures, facial expressions, postures, and eye contact, one can be more responsive to the emotional needs of the interlocutor and tailor their interactions to create a deeper connection. For example, using an open posture and giving full attention when speaking can make the other person feel valued and heard. Through the effective use of nonverbal communication, individuals can strengthen interpersonal relationships, both in personal and professional settings, by creating a deeper sense of mutual understanding.

Conclusion

From the results of this study, it can be concluded that gestures, postures, and proxemics can affect the way people respond and understand each other, thereby strengthening or weakening interpersonal relationships. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of the importance of nonverbal elements in building effective and harmonious communication in various social contexts.

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