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0521583713 - The Social Context of Nonverbal Behavior

Edited by Pierre Philippot, Robert S. Feldman and Erik J. Coats

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Introduction

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1. Introducing Nonverbal Behavior Within a Social Context

PIERRE PHILIPPOT, ROBERT S. FELDMAN, AND
ERIK J. COATS

“A face can tell many tales.” This popular saying expresses well that the information carried by nonverbal behaviors may be ambiguous and may not always convey the intent or internal state of the individual who displays the behaviors. For instance, one of the most common nonverbal behaviors, smiling, may express – or covary with – many different emitter states. It may convey contentment, ecstasy, approval, or seduction, but it may also express contempt, submissiveness, or anxiety. Thus it is commonly agreed that nonverbal behavior cannot be fully understood if contextual information is not taken into account. As most nonverbal communication takes place within a social interaction – even if the interactants are not always physically present – this contextual information is predominantly of a social nature.

In the last decade, the scientific community has generated an impressive wealth of data and theories pertaining to the interrelationships between nonverbal behaviors and their social contexts. The aim of the present volume is to provide an extensive review of the most contemporary theories and bodies of empirical research in this growing area. It provides an integrated account of the latest developments in the field produced by researchers throughout the world. As such, the book offers an overview of an exciting scientific domain that is growing in influence and maturing rapidly.

The Many Faces of Nonverbal Behavior in a Social Context

We have chosen to consider many aspects of social context as well as several facets of nonverbal behavior. Indeed, if the facial expression of emotion remains the predominant object of study in nonverbal behavioral research, other aspects, such as gestures and postures, are

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addressed in several chapters to take full account of nonverbal behavior.

Similarly, a wealth of social contexts are investigated in the following chapters. In introducing a special issue of the *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior* devoted to the communicative function of facial expression, Arvid Kappas (1997) provided a modified Brunswikian lens model to identify the different factors involved in the communicative process. In this useful model, three kinds of social or situational determinants are considered: the situational context, social relationships, and cultural conventions. These factors can be considered as different aspects of the social context, and they are all reviewed in the present volume.

There are two types of interrelationships between nonverbal behavior and social contexts that need to be explored. On the one hand, the ways in which social contexts modulate nonverbal behavior are examined. For instance, the impact of cultures, display rules, and the presence of others, together with the status of these others, are considered in many chapters. On the other hand, we also consider how nonverbal behavior is an effective means to influence the unfolding of a social interaction, or to change a social context, or to regulate one's self-image or internal state within a social context.

Different Perspectives in Nonverbal Behavioral Research

Our intention is also to reflect the different perspectives that have recently been taken in the study of these interrelationships. Indeed, identical behaviors within identical social contexts have sometimes been approached by researchers using very distinct perspectives, researchers who – quite remarkably – reported very different conclusions from their observations of the very same behaviors.

Consider, for instance, two recently published studies in which the same performing athletes were observed. Unknown to them, athletes at the 1992 Olympic games in Barcelona were under the keen scrutiny of several experts in nonverbal behavior. Several researchers observed the facial expressions of winning athletes as they were performing or receiving their prizes. It is instructive to compare the observations reported by Victoria Medvec and her colleagues with those of José Miguel Fernández-Dols and Maria Angeles Ruiz-Belda.

Victoria Medvec, Scott Madey, and Thomas Gilovich (1995) observed athletes' faces after their performance. They found that bronze medalists' faces expressed more "ecstasy" – on a 10-point "ecstasy to

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agony" scale – than silver medalists' faces. This effect was found both immediately after the performance and later while the athletes were standing on the podium. Further, the author controlled for expectations that had been placed on the athletes prior to the games. This coding of facial expressions converged with other data (athletes' reported satisfaction with their performance in postcompetition interviews) in showing that finishing third is, in some ways, easier to accept psychologically than finishing second. In sum, Medvec and her colleagues used the athletes' facial expressions as an index of their internal (emotional) state.

Fernández-Dols and Ruiz-Belda tell a different story about the same behavior (Fernández-Dols & Ruiz-Belda, 1995). They observed that at moments that are supposed to be the peak of athletes' emotional experience (e.g., when they are just learning that they have won), they do not display the prototypical facial expression of happiness but rather a disarticulated grimace. Based on such observations, the authors argue that the emotional display of smiling by the athletes, as they are standing on the podium, is a social signal that is not a direct index of their internal emotional state, but rather what they want to communicate to their social environment (see also Fernández-Dols, this volume).

The opposing viewpoints of Medvec and her colleagues and Fernández-Dols and Ruiz-Belda are illustrative of the current state of the field of nonverbal behavior in general, and of nonverbal expression of emotion in particular. In recent years, heated debates have developed concerning whether emotional facial displays are biologically rooted behaviors whose primary function is to express the internal state of an individual (e.g., Ekman, 1994) or social signals resulting solely from learning and socialization (e.g., Fridlund, 1994). This debate has stressed the theoretical importance of adequately conceiving the role of social factors in nonverbal behavior: Are social variables a primary determinant or are they mere modulators, affecting post hoc primary nonverbal signals, as nonverbal display rules are too often conceptualized (Kappas, 1996)?

The purpose of the present volume is not to take sides in the debate about whether nonverbal behavior represents social, as opposed to biological, forces. Rather, as stated above, our aim is to present the latest empirical and theoretical developments that connect nonverbal behaviors to the social contexts in which they appear, without taking a position about the cultural versus "natural" roots of nonverbal be-

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havior. Our contention is that a wealth of empirical findings demonstrates that nonverbal behaviors serve many social functions and are shaped by many social forces. It is these social functions and determinants of nonverbal behavior that the following chapters aim to review. They consider many facets of social context and nonverbal behavior.

Overview

This book is divided into four parts. The first is dedicated to the ways in which social norms shape nonverbal behavior. In part two, the social factors transmitting these social norms to individuals are examined. In part three, the specific microprocesses – e.g., mimicry or mere social presence – by which social contexts affect nonverbal behavior are analyzed. Finally, part four addresses the functions that nonverbal behavior serves in social interactions.

The Impact of Social Norms on Nonverbal Behavior

The first section of this book considers the social norms that impact nonverbal behavior. It examines different sources of these norms (e.g., culture, gender, and status) as well as the processes by which these norms operate (e.g., via display rules).

One of the most obvious and fundamental sources of social norms is the culture in which nonverbal behavior is embedded. In the second chapter, Cenita Kupperbusch, David Matsumoto, and their co-workers cover several topics that reflect current knowledge and debates regarding the role of culture in the nonverbal expression of emotion. They start with a complete and structured review of the last 30 years of research on the influence of culture on the expression and perception of emotion. They show that the questions addressed by this research have recently evolved, focusing not only on recognition accuracy, but also on the emotional intensity attributed to facial expression and to the perception of secondary emotions in the face. The notion of culture has also shifted, today focusing more on the dimensions that define cultures. The authors discuss as well the current resurgence of the controversy surrounding the universality of emotion, and they rightfully plead for the development of empirical research directly addressing this question. They contend that universality and cultural relativity are not mutually exclusive and that a full picture of nonver-

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bal behavior can only be grasped by jointly considering these two perspectives.

An important contribution of Kupperbusch et al.'s chapter is the development of a theory of how and why culture affects nonverbal expression of emotion. Indeed, cross-cultural research in nonverbal behavior may become a mere compilation of cultural differences and similarities if it is not guided by a theoretical framework. The authors propose that two dimensions are essential to understand cultural determinants of nonverbal display of emotion. Hofstede's (1983) dimension of individualism – the extent to which culture encourages the sacrificing of individual needs and desires for group goals – is suggested to be the primary cultural dimension related to nonverbal behavior. The distinction between ingroup and outgroup membership is the other dimension. Kupperbusch and her colleagues propose that in individualistic cultures several ingroups exist, and it is consequently less threatening for people to express and identify negative emotions with respect to both ingroup and outgroup members. In a collectivistic culture, however, where in general only one ingroup exists, the expression of negative emotion in the ingroup is more threatening and, consequently, regulated by social norms. In contrast, the expression of negative display toward the outgroup would even be encouraged. In their chapter, Kupperbusch and her colleagues report recent empirical findings in support of this theory.

Within every culture, two important determinants of social norms are gender and power. In chapter 3, Marianne LaFrance and Marvin Hecht review the literature pertaining to social power, gender, and smiling, a topic that is also addressed by Kirouac and Hess in chapter 7. LaFrance and Hecht present a model in which it is argued that in a power-asymmetrical relationship, the higher-power person has license to be expressive if he or she so chooses. In other words, high-power people smile if they are indeed positively disposed. In contrast, lower-power people have the obligation to smile a moderate amount, irrespective of their feelings. This amount is related to the need to please and not to their actual feelings. The norms for low-power people can also be applied to women. LaFrance and Hecht's data indicate that among high-status women, smiling is still related to the desire to please, as it is for low-status women and men but not for high-status men. Thus, it seems that smiling serves more and varied social functions for women than for men. These data clearly demonstrate that,

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given the social context, nonverbal behavior might be indicative of the “true” feeling state of individuals or might be disconnected from it.

One of the key concepts developed in the field of nonverbal behavior to account for the shaping of nonverbal displays by social norms is that of display rules. Carolyn Saarni is closely tied to the development of this concept and to its systematic empirical investigation. In chapter 4, together with Hannelore Weber, she elaborates the concept of display rules and its implications for emotional and social regulation. Linking their chapter to the contribution of Kupperbusch et al., Saarni and Weber propose that the functions of nonverbal emotional displays vary according to cultural ethnotheories of emotion. In Western societies, such displays have the important function of indicating how the social interaction will unfold. In other words, they act as indices that regulate social interaction.

Another important aspect of display rules is that, by acting on emotional display, they help regulate emotion. Thus, not only do they regulate social interaction, but, within the social interaction, they also function as affect regulators. In specific social contexts, nonverbal behavior is not determined by an inner feeling state; rather, the social context shapes nonverbal displays, which in turn impact the inner feeling state. The social context thus becomes the explanatory variable of the relation between feeling state and nonverbal display. Saarni and Weber provide an excellent review of the literature pertaining to how the ability to enact display rules is acquired and of individual differences in that domain. Finally, they integrate these different notions to demonstrate how nonverbal display rules, by taking into account both interaction and emotional regulation, play a key role in self-presentation during social interaction. This new area of nonverbal investigation certainly constitutes a promising field for future investigation.

The Transmission of Social Norms Affecting Nonverbal Behavior

Whereas the first part of the book focuses on the social norms shaping nonverbal behavior, the second part examines the social factors that ensure the transmission of these social norms. Three transmission factors are considered in different chapters: family, media, and group belongingness.

In chapter 5, Amy Halberstadt and her colleagues offer an extensive review of the empirical findings on family nonverbal expressiveness.

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They find striking similarities across the life span between family expressiveness style and children's own expressive style. Children's ability to express interpretable nonverbal displays is also related to family expressiveness style. Halberstadt and her colleagues also consider the impact of family expressiveness on many facets of individuals' development, including social, emotional, and cognitive development. Their in-depth and systematic analysis of the literature demonstrates that children clearly benefit from developing in a family high in positive nonverbal expressiveness. However, the association between developmental outcomes and negative expressiveness are more complex. Their analysis suggests many useful paths, at both theoretical and methodological levels, for the development of future research.

A new area of research is presented in chapter 6, which deals with the transmission of nonverbal social norms via the media, and more specifically by the most invasive medium: television. Erik Coats and his co-workers discuss the relationship between children's nonverbal behavior and the nature of their media exposure, focusing particularly on television viewing. They argue that media depictions of emotion are unrealistic (i.e., differ from real-world displays). In a series of follow-up studies, these authors find that television's portrayal of emotional displays appears to affect children's ability to effectively encode and decode nonverbal displays, as well as their ability to use nonverbal displays in the service of social goals. These findings provide a clearer picture of the ontogeny of children's understanding and use of nonverbal behavior.

A final factor involving transmission of the social norms affecting nonverbal behavior is considered by Gilles Kirouac and Ursula Hess in chapter 7. They examine how group membership affects both the display of emotion and the decoding of these displays. Their conception of group membership is broad and reflects the central psychosocial notion of in- and outgroup memberships. Although social cognitive research has amply demonstrated that group membership deeply impacts on the interpretation of many behaviors and individual-relevant information, and although a wealth of nonverbal research has established that during a social interaction considerable information is transmitted nonverbally, almost no empirical research has been devoted to the impact of this central social factor on nonverbal encoding and decoding. In their chapter, Kirouac and Hess develop the theoretical and empirical basis for this area of research. Specifically, they

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consider the influence of culture, gender, and social status, as group membership markers, on the encoding and decoding of emotional display. Their notion of nonverbal behavior as a self-presentation tool is consistent with that developed by Saarni and Weber and may open promising new fields of research.

Immediate Social Factors During Interaction

The third section of the book is devoted to the analysis of the molecular processes by which the social context and nonverbal behavior interact. More specifically, the authors in this section examine the immediate effects of social context on nonverbal behavior.

In chapter 8, Ursula Hess, Pierre Philippot, and Sylvie Blairy examine how our interaction partners' nonverbal displays condition our own through a process of mimicry. Mimicry is a process by which individuals imitate, most often unconsciously, the nonverbal behaviors of other individuals with whom they interact or whom they observe. Hess et al. first review the empirical evidence establishing that, at least in some circumstances, people mimic the facial expressions of others. They then examine the social functions of this phenomenon. The authors show that there is no empirical evidence that mimicking other individuals enhances an understanding of their feeling states or fosters empathy – despite the fact that this claim is often encountered in the literature. However, mimicry has an effect on the individuals who are mimicked: They generally feel better understood by a mimicking partner than by a nonmimicking partner. The authors thus conclude that mimicry plays a function in social interaction by developing a feeling of rapport.

Another analysis of microphenomena is reported by José-Miguel Fernández-Dols in chapter 9. As mentioned earlier, Fernández-Dols observed the facial expressions of people during the seconds surrounding peak emotional experience. In his chapter, Fernández-Dols shows that these displays are transformed by the presence of social observers: The facial displays only take the form of interpretable facial expressions when the expressors know that they are being observed. The work of Fernández-Dols is grounded in a situationist approach of nonverbal behavior. This creative theoretical framework, developed and argued in the chapter, assumes that nonverbal behavior is largely determined by situational factors embedded in a dynamic tension system. According to Fernández-Dols, a nonverbal behavior can only

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make sense when considered with the social context in which it emerges. This original and thought-provoking theoretical approach is supported by intriguing data ranging from the observation of gold-medalists at the Olympic games to bullfighters “in the flow.”

In chapter 10, Hugh Wagner and Victoria Lee examine how the presence of a social partner influences the intensity of nonverbal expression of emotion. They specifically focus on one dimension of this type of situation: whether the social partner is a friend or a stranger. A review of the literature and of the studies conducted in the authors' own laboratory reveals that the inhibition of or the facilitation of emotional display by a social audience depends on the type of relationship existing between the subject and the audience. More precisely, the authors argue that the most important dimension is uncertainty about the partner's role and attitude, coupled with a tendency to conformity in situations of uncertainty. This dimension has an impact not only on the intensity of the nonverbal display but also on its nature. The authors then consider that in most social interactions, nonverbal behavior often co-occurs with verbal utterance. Given the importance of both channels in alleviating the uncertainty inherent in most social situations, Wagner and Lee claim that nonverbal behavior cannot be understood without reference to verbal behavior. In support of this claim, they present preliminary data consisting of the micro-analysis of interviews in which both verbal and nonverbal channels are considered simultaneously.

Finally, in chapter 11, Antony Manstead, Agneta Fischer, and Esther Jakobs examine the effect on nonverbal behavior of the sociality of the context in which it appears. Within this perspective they address the debate evoked earlier in this chapter: Do facial displays express emotional states or do they communicate social motives? These authors carefully analyze both the theoretical arguments and the empirical evidence supporting each position. As often happens when resolving a polarized debate, their conclusion is that neither of the two positions is “right” or “wrong.” Rather, our goal should be to identify the conditions that promote the “expressive” and “communicative” functions of facial displays. The authors develop a model that integrates these two functions. This model comprises four factors that determine the social or expressive function served by a nonverbal behavior: the intensity and the nature of the emotional situation, the type of nonverbal display at stake, and the social role of the expressor in the situation.