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Differences In Nonverbal Communication Styles between Cultures: The Latino- Anglo Perspective

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ABSTRACT: Some of differences in nonverbal communication styles in the Anglo and Latino cultures are examined, with attention given to some of the misunderstandings that can result. The treatment covers proxemics (distance), kinesics (gestures and facial expressions), and oculusics. The importance of studying one's own culture as a way of becoming aware of these cultural differences is stressed. A heightened awareness of the differences can be extremely important to anyone who wants to be effective in a diverse work environment.

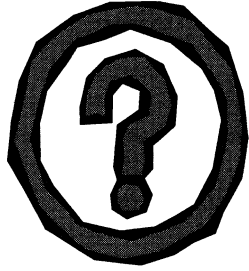


In every social encounter, nearly two-thirds of the meaning in the interaction is conveyed in nonverbal ways, according to such experts in the area of nonverbal communication as Ray L. Birdwhistle and A. Mehrabian. Nonverbal communication is defined as the nonlinguistic messages that are consciously or unconsciously encoded and

decoded through such means as facial expressions, body gestures (kinesics), space (proxemics), touch (haptics), eye contact (oculesics), time (chronemics), tone (paralinguistics), and

the environment in which people communicate. In order for communication between members of the same culture to take place, both the listener and the speaker must be in tune with the nonverbal aspects of the message.

Anthropologists have shown that nonverbal communication styles vary by culture. However, many people are unaware of the nonverbal communication styles not only of their own culture but also of other cultures and erroneously assume that others communicate in the same way that they do, a phenomenon called projected similarity. The result of this false assumption of similarity is that misperceptions, misinterpretations, and misunderstandings occur in cross-



cultural interactions when a person interprets another's non-verbal communication in the light of his or her own cultural norms.

This article examines some of differences in nonverbal communication styles in the Anglo and Latino cultures and calls attention to some the misunderstandings that can take place. The following areas will be addressed: proxemics (distance), kinesics (gestures and facial expressions), and oculosics.

In discussing the differences between the Anglo and the Latino culture, it is inevitable that generalizations will be made. The reader should be aware, however, that there are enormous variations within each culture, variations that depend on age, gender, geographical region, race, socioeconomic status, and personality. For reasons of complexity, these variations within a culture are glossed over. But their very existence should be sufficient warning against stereotyping.

PROXEMICS

Proxemics is the study of space in interpersonal relationships. This is the inviolable distance that people maintain between one another when speaking. It is commonly referred to as personal space. In the business world and in social settings, this distance for Anglos and for people in northern Europe is between 18 and 33 in. In Latino countries and the countries of southern Europe, the distance is between 8 and 18 in. In communication between Latinos and Anglos, the Latino may feel the Anglo is too far away and take a step closer to establish the culturally learned comfort distance. The Latino may not realize that he or she has just invaded the Anglo's comfort space. The Anglo may take a step back to reestablish his or her comfort distance. The Latino may again feel that

the Anglo is too far away and take another step forward. This may continue until the two "waltz" across the room and into a wall. Instead of taking a step back the Anglo may lean back to regain his or her comfort distance. What is the effect on communication of this out-of-awareness behavior? Anglos may misperceive Latinos as pushy and may think they are standing too close or are sending a sexual message. Latinos may misperceive Anglos as being cold, aloof, or uninterested and may interpret the leaning away as a sign that the Anglo is culturally prejudiced. These are all misinterpretations based on differences in culturally learned comfort distance.

KINESICS

Kinesics is the study of body movements and facial expressions as a systematic part of communication. Many Latin American and Caribbean countries have a unique facial expression that does not exist in the Anglo culture. Latinos will point with puckered lips as a way of communicating nonverbally "there," "that one over there," or "him or her." Latinos may point their lips at someone and smile, which can mean "check him or her out," "listen to that," or "says he or she." The Anglo culture does not have this gesture, and those from this culture may think the Latino is blowing a kiss at someone or something.

Another point of departure between the Anglo culture and Latino culture is the smile. In her book *Nonverbal Communication*, Carmen Judith Nine-Curt writes that the Anglo culture uses the smile in friendly circles but rarely in serious situations. Smiles are few and far between in places of worship, in the classroom, and in learning and work environ-

ments. In the Latino culture the smile takes the place of many verbal expressions. For example, a person may smile instead of saying, "Hi. How are you?" A clerk may smile at a customer rather than say, "May I help you?" And a customer may smile at a clerk rather than say, "Thank you." In the Latino culture expressing gratitude verbally may seem formal and impersonal. Friends who express thanks verbally may be perceived as rejecting others or distancing themselves.

The cross-cultural impact of this difference in the use of the smile is that Anglos may misperceive that Latinos smile too much or that they smile when it is inappropriate to do so.

THE CROSS-CULTURAL IMPACT OF THIS DIFFERENCE IN THE USE OF THE SMILE IS THAT ANGLOS MAY MISPERCEIVE THAT LATINOS SMILE TOO MUCH OR THAT THEY SMILE WHEN IT IS INAPPROPRIATE TO DO SO. LATINOS MAY MISPERCEIVE ANGLOS AS STUFFY, COLD, UNFRIENDLY, OR TOO SERIOUS BECAUSE ANGLOS DO NOT USE THE SMILE IN THE SAME WAY.

Latinos may misperceive Anglos as stuffy, cold, unfriendly, or too serious because Anglos do not use the smile in the same way.

Another gesture that can cause confusion is that used by Latino men (and Afro-American men) in greeting another male. The Latino may simply jerk his head up and back. I remember unconsciously using this gesture to greet an Anglo colleague, Leon, as we crossed paths in response to his verbal "Hi, William. How are you doing?" He stopped walking and, in mockery of me, continued the conversation on his own, replying, "Hi, Leon. I'm doing fine. How are you?" I stopped walking, turned around, laughed, and verbally said hello. Leon felt that I had totally ignored him since I did not respond with a verbal salutation. In point of fact I had not ignored him. I greeted him in my culturally learned Latino fashion; that is, I jerked my head up and back. I used the opportunity to explain to Leon how Latino men sometimes greet one another nonverbally.

HAPTICS

Haptics is the study of touch in nonverbal communication. According Stella Ting-Toomey in her book *Communicating across Cultures*, there is very little physical contact among Anglos in corporate settings. Among Africans, Italians, Arabs, Frenchmen, Russians, and Latinos there is a great deal of physical contact. It is common for Latino women who are friends to kiss each other on the cheek to say hello and to touch or grab each other's arms while talking. It is common for Latino men to hug each other, to shake hands, to grab the arm of the other, and to place their hand on their friend's shoulder while communicating. The cross-cultural effect of these differences in touching is that Anglos feel Latinos touch to a degree that is uncomfortable, threatening, or insulting. Latinos, on the other hand, may feel that Anglos are cold, unfriendly, dismissive, or insulting.

OCULESICS

Oculesics is the study of the use of the eyes in personal communication. Anglos tend to look steadily and intently into the eyes of the person to whom they are speaking. Latinos will look into the eyes of the person to whom they are speaking, but only in a fleeting way. Nine-Curt writes that the Latino will look into the other person's eyes and then immediately allow his or her eyes to wander when speaking. Anglos may misinterpret this difference in culturally learned eye contact as betraying a lack of confidence, certainty, or truthfulness. This difference can be particularly crucial in cases where Anglos are interviewing Latinos. The failure of the



Latino to maintain eye contact should not be seen as expressing a lack of self-confidence. In the Latino culture direct, prolonged eye contact means you are challenging the person, that you are angry, or that you have a romantic interest in the person. The Latino may feel uncomfortable during the interview because he or she may interpret the Anglo's direct eye contact as expressing disapproval.

DEALING WITH THE DIFFERENCES

So how do you deal with these cultural differences in the work environment? First of all we should study, learn, and become consciously aware of our own culture. In learning about our own culture we learn how we are different from the cultures of those around us. Then we should become aware of the cultures of others. Then we should undergo acculturation, that is, borrow attributes from other cultures that will help us function effectively without in any way having to relinquish our own cultural identities. In *Nonverbal Communication*, Nine-Curt stresses that "we should develop, refine, and constantly practice the skill of switching cultural channels, as on a TV set, in order to be able to interact with people from other cultures, and oftentimes with people from subcultures within our own, more effectively. This is indispensable if we are to avoid the pain, frustration, and discomfort that usually accompany trying to move and live in a culture different from our own. . . . As we become proficient in this skill, we will find it less difficult and highly satisfying to accept others and their styles of living."

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Willa B. Brown Chappell was trained as an aeronautical engineer and received a master's degree from Northwestern University. She also held a certificate as a master mechanic. She established the Coffey School of Aeronautics, the first black-owned private flight school in the United States to obtain U.S. government approval. She was also the first black to hold the rank of officer in the Civil Air Patrol.
