

Nonverbal Communication

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We use nonverbal communication as much as we speak. Just as there are many cultures in the world, there are many ways to express nonverbal communication. Some eye contact, facial expression, and body language may be acceptable in one culture but offensive in another. This essay reports on the differences in nonverbal communication between Japan and North America.

Eye contact among North Americans is the most common nonverbal communication. While talking to you, many North Americans will look directly in your eyes to see your reaction. Most Japanese will not do so because of the way we were raised. When I first came to Canada from Japan, I could not look directly in the eyes of the person I was speaking to because to me that was strange. In Japan, people will keep more distance between each other when speaking than in North America because Japanese culture does not condone close body contact in public. According to Levin and Adelman, in America it is “common for two strangers to walk toward each other, make eye contact, smile and perhaps even say ‘Hi’” (346). Japanese never say “Hi” to a stranger in Japan because they have learned never to trust strangers. Such greetings are dangerous and could bring trouble.

Facial expressions are very common nonverbal communication that we use daily. North Americans’ facial expression can read like an open book. If they are happy, they smile; if they are sad, they may cry openly; and if they are angry, they may show their temper. In Japanese culture a person’s facial expression does not change much. Japanese people are often quiet and private with their emotions. Daniela Sime, a researcher in education in the U.K., observed that people can look at a person’s face and make judgments about his/her character (Sime). However, it is hard to make judgments on Japanese people by looking at their faces because they often do not show their true emotions on the face.

Body language is another popular form of nonverbal communication, but varies between Japanese and North American cultures. For example, the gesture which means “come” in Japan does not mean that in North America; instead, it means “go away.” Japanese people tend to bow when meeting elder people, but in North America people shake hands, which is the most common gesture. In Japan, when we were in Grades 1 to 13, we had to stand up and bow at the beginning and end of the class. This is not true in North America. Furthermore, North Americans use “thumbs up” for praise, but this gesture is not popular in Japan. North Americans hug each other when meeting friends and relatives, whereas Japanese are more private and merely bow on such occasions.

In conclusion, even though eye contact, facial expressions, and body language are common forms of nonverbal communication, not in every culture are they practiced or practiced in the same way. The differences demonstrate the importance of knowing the customs of the people one is meeting or working with, so misunderstandings can be minimized.

Works Cited

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