

# Nonverbal Communication

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the topic of nonverbal communication through the definition and discussion of:

1. Nonverbal Communication
2. Personal Space
3. Losing Face (Goffman)
4. Idealization

## 1. NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

It's been noted that about two-thirds of communication happens nonverbally, which is a staggering amount. **Nonverbal communication** is extremely important--your facial expressions, gestures, body movements, eye contact (or lack thereof), and touches all combine to either support or undermine what you're saying with your words.

The goal of good communication is to align your body language with what you're saying verbally. The rules of nonverbal communication and what nonverbal communication means are socially constructed. You don't write it down and study it, but you learn it nonetheless, through socialization and through being a member of society.



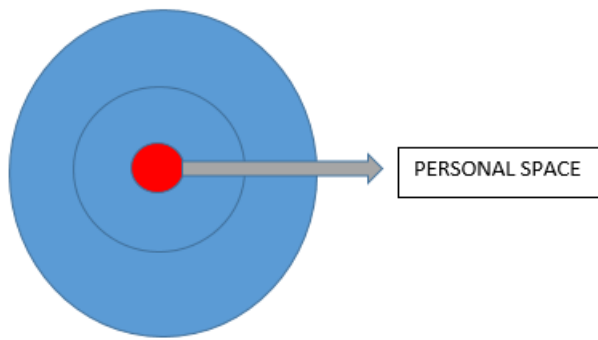
### TERM TO KNOW

#### **Nonverbal Communication**

The process of communication through relaying and receiving cues transmitted using body language, gestures, touches, and movements.

## 2. PERSONAL SPACE

Personal space, or where you place your body, is a socially constructed aspect of body language. Different cultures have different parameters governing how close you can get to somebody. Essentially, personal space is the space nearest your body that you can claim as your own.



The center circle represents your personal space. There are concentric circles around your personal space that delineate the use of space around you. In American culture, it's not really acceptable to get too close to somebody you don't know, but the rules are different depending on the relationship and the culture.

## IN CONTEXT

Suppose you're riding the city bus home late at night. It's a relatively empty bus, and when the next person gets on, rather than taking an empty seat ten feet away, they decide to sit right next to you.

That's likely going to unnerve you. Simply moving their body through space like that is violating your cultural constructions of how people should move and comport themselves. You might think, "What is this person trying to do? Do they want to rob me? Are they going to try to hurt me?" Instantly, you assume they have some malicious intent, all because you don't understand why they are so close to you.

You do this because they are violating your culturally encoded notions of how to move one's body through personal space. What's fascinating about personal space is how it is constructed through society and social interaction.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Personal Space

The region surrounding a person that they regard as private.

## 3. LOSING FACE (GOFFMAN)

It's interesting to note how people give different meanings to different forms of nonverbal communication.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Using the face is the most powerful channel of nonverbal communication. There was a particular episode of the television show *Seinfeld* in which George gets some grapefruit in his eye at breakfast which causes him to walk around and wink involuntarily the rest of the day. George gets into all kinds of problems because of this, because culturally, people understand a wink to mean certain things. It can mean you're being let in on a secret, like a covert way to acknowledge to another person, "I want you to do this, I know what you're saying." Therefore, it's a violation then of our cultural ways to wink.

Sociologist Erving Goffman stated that people communicate in two ways: they have expressions that they give with their words, and expressions that they give off with their body language and demeanor. **Demeanor** refers to the overall way that people carry themselves in interactions--their postures, facial expressions, the combined experience of watching each other. Goffman was interested in the expressions people give versus expressions that they give off.

When you're communicating verbally and nonverbally with somebody, you're 'taking a face,' which is a term of Goffman's. A face is a posture that is striven for, a stance you take, in social interaction. You may wear many faces simultaneously throughout your life.

## IN CONTEXT

When you go to work, you put on a face of professionalism, but when you go home, you can take off that face of professionalism around your family or friends. This idea of professionalism is nothing more than a recognition of having a face. Given that a face is something you wear, a stance that you cultivate, you want to not lose face. In other words, you want to save face or keep face. **Losing face** can be embarrassing, so people typically want to avoid it at all costs.

If you're at the office and you are talking about something inappropriate in front of your boss, this could potentially cause you to lose face. You run the risk of losing your face of professionalism in the eyes of your boss, which could be uncomfortable for all parties involved. It could also result in **embarrassment**, which is a public loss of face, or more simply, the discomfort of making a social error publicly. Therefore people want to avoid embarrassment as much as possible.

If your body language--the expressions that you give off--don't necessarily align with the expressions that you give, this can send others a meaning that you don't intend and could cause you to lose face.



### THINK ABOUT IT

Suppose your teacher asks you to watch a video for class and then sees you at your desk watching it, and notices that you're slouching in your chair, talking on your cell phone, eating, etc. When your teacher asks you after class, how would you respond? Likely, you might say that the tutorial was great, that you loved it, and you can't wait to watch more. In reality, though, the expression you were giving off doesn't match the expression you give. If your teacher calls you out on it, it would cause embarrassment, and in social interaction, embarrassment is to be mitigated at all costs. People want to give others a positive impression of themselves, and aligning verbal and nonverbal communication is a way to do that.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Demeanor

The way that people carry themselves, an overall aspect or presentation.

#### Losing Face (Erving Goffman)

The idea of face relates to the notion that one's presentation of self is a mask that people work to maintain in social situations, thus losing face is the result of a social misstep that results in emotional pain or embarrassment.

## Embarrassment

Discomfort after making a social error.

# 4. IDEALIZATION

Along with saving face, keeping positive images of yourself, impression management, and making sure others see you in a positive light, is the idea of idealization. **Idealization** is the process of people trying to create positive images of themselves. It's the act of convincing others, and maybe even themselves at times, that what they're doing and why they want to do it reflects cultural values and socially sanctioned values, rather than more selfish motivations.

➦ **EXAMPLE** If you're volunteering for an organization to do some charity work, you might idealize your motivations for doing so. You might really want to do it to improve your resume or some other self-serving reason, which coincidentally might be the real reason why a lot of people do altruistic volunteer activities, but you don't want to say that. You want to try to convince others and yourself that what you're doing reflects culturally sanctioned motives, so instead, you claim that you're volunteering for the Red Cross because it's a noble thing to do and it's great to help others. You conceal your selfish motivations, which is idealization.



### TERM TO KNOW

#### Idealization

Occurs when people create highly favorable impressions of themselves and their intentions so as not to appear selfish.



### SUMMARY

Today you learned about an introduction to **nonverbal communication**, including the concepts of **personal space**, Erving Goffman's idea of **losing face**, and **idealization**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



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