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NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN DIFFERENT COUNTRIES

Modern life is impossible without cross-cultural communication. According to experts, a substantial portion of our communication is nonverbal. Nonverbal communication is very important and its importance is multiplied across cultures. To live successfully in our diverse world, we need to be culturally aware and learn how to be effective cross-cultural communicators.

Nonverbal communication can be divided into several categories: greeting, physical space, touching, eye contact, facial expression, hand and arm gestures and physical postures. Here are some noteworthy examples in each of the categories.

Greetings are used worldwide, but types of greeting vary from culture to culture: British verbal greetings may be accompanied by a handshake. A small kiss may be given between females, or perhaps between a female and a male, but not between two males. One common French greeting is a light handshake. Another common greeting is a kiss on the left cheek followed by a kiss on the right cheek. A “Hongi” is a traditional Maori greeting in New Zealand. It means “sharing of breath”. In this greeting, the two people press their noses and foreheads together and inhale. It is used at traditional meetings among Maori people and on major ceremonies. In the USA, a common greeting between males is a firm handshake; it happens between a male and a female too although sometimes just a smile accompanies the greeting in the USA. Women tend to shake hands with one another only at their first meeting, or in business situations. Female friends often greet with a hug. In Mexico, handshakes are common, and may be accompanied by a strong hug and a few hearty pats on the back between men, if they know each other well [1].

Greeting is connected with the categories of physical space, touching, eye contact and facial expression. In Latin America and the Middle East the acceptable

distance between communicators is much shorter than in most European countries and USA. Touching is also culturally determined. Cultures with high emotional restraint concepts (English, German, Scandinavian, Chinese, Japanese) have little public touch; those which encourage emotion (Latino, Middle-East, Jewish) accept frequent touches. As to eye contact, in Western cultures, it indicates a degree of attention and interest while in Japan people avoid eye contact to show respect. A smile is one of the most common examples of a facial expression in different cultures. While Americans smile friendly at strangers, in Asian cultures a smile is not necessarily an expression of joy but it can be used to convey pain and embarrassment. For many Scandinavians a smile or any facial expression of emotions is not natural because it is considered a weakness to show emotions in these cultures [2].

There are a lot of examples of nonverbal gestures which have different meanings in different cultures. The “ring” or “OK” gesture indicates “everything is OK” in English speaking countries. In Japan it can mean “money”. In France it can be interpreted as “zero” or “nothing”. In Indonesia this gesture also means “zero”. In the United States, beckoning people to come with the palm is acceptable. But in some parts of Latin America, in Korea and in many other countries, this gesture is considered very rude.

Every day, we respond to thousands of nonverbal cues and behaviors including postures, facial expression, eye gaze, gestures and tone of voice. From our handshakes to our hairstyles, nonverbal details reveal who we are and impact how we relate to other people. As you see, there are a lot of differences in nonverbal communication between cultures. This means that when you need to communicate with people from different cultures, it makes sense to learn in advance about their nonverbal communication.

References

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2. Richmond, V. A., & McCroskey, J. C. Nonverbal behavior in interpersonal relations. – Boston: Pearson. 2010.