

## **Observations on the Impact of Nonverbal Communication during Conversation**

My short film is an examination of how body language, facial expressions, and other forms of nonverbal communication shape our interactions and unique identities. The story of the film - two people experiencing a turbulent phase of their relationship - drew upon my past experiences with failed friendships and how they caused both parties to adapt and mature as individuals. My research has been guided by my interest in the origins of nonverbal communication as well as how individuals apply their own personal nuances and differences to take ownership of the same gestures.

My film centers around a phone call, with someone audibly speaking but never seen, and the only semblance of a response occurring through the actions of the actor (played by Elliott Aiena). Throughout my film, I make use of neutral facial expressions to evoke “the Kuleshov effect,” a phenomenon in which viewers attribute their own emotion to ambiguous facial expressions based on the context of the previous shot. The motif of red emphasizes the intimate connection, either platonic or romantic, between the two people.

My desire for this film is to convey the narrative of an individual with their own identity, stories, and relationships through their nonverbal communication and responses from the caller. Through this narrative, I allow the viewer to develop their own perception on who the main character is and an understanding of their identity solely based upon their nonverbal communication.

Daniel X.  
Pennsylvania

# Non-Verbal Communication & Identity on an Individual Scale

Daniel X.



**WRITER'S NOTE:**

*The intention of this paper is to examine the purpose of nonverbal expression and understand how individuals develop their own unique variations of common expressions as well as their own unique gestures. Nonverbal communication has played a key role in interactions between humans long before languages had been invented. For primitive humans, being able to quickly recognize facial expressions and understand them in their current context was key to survival. In the present day, being able to accurately read someone's facial expressions and body language allows people to develop greater empathy and is a key skill in making and maintaining healthy relationships. I plan to focus on how biological and cultural factors affect our nonverbal expressions and how gestures and expressions that are unique to individuals reflect their identity.*

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Imagine a pair of identical twins that you know in real life, and think about what you do in order to distinguish between the two. Are you able to look at either from a distance and tell which is which? Do you need to have a closer look at them to identify them? Or can you only tell once you've been talking with them for a while? When dealing with twins, the biggest factor we make use of to identify people, obvious differences in appearance, is removed. The second biggest factor, personality, requires you to get close and have a conversation, and it's often difficult to even start a conversation without knowing which twin you're speaking to. In order to recognize them from a distance, you need to look at the smaller details, whether it's more subtle differences in appearance or observable body language and facial expressions, in order to distinguish the two individuals.

This scenario involving the twins reflects my interest in this topic. During high school, I started to develop an interest in anthropology and the concepts of what humanity is and how humanity is manifested internally and externally, which led me to an interest in poetry and history. Specifically, I reached an affinity for individuality and identity. What makes us individuals? How is the concept of identity defined?

I am less interested in the big concepts and want to focus on the smaller, more benign minutiae of daily lives and interactions that, when put together, create a distinct image of someone's identity. I am drawn to all the small details--the subtleties, the habits, people's choice of colloquialisms (slang), body language, and gestures.

These subtleties in behavior can be considered manifestations of personality and identity, but they're often overlooked in favor of the more obvious or prominent aspects of identity. However, the amalgamation of these subtleties has the potential to be as large, if not larger than other aspects; by overlooking them, you miss out on a key dimension of someone's identity.

Out of these gestures, I have chosen to focus on forms of nonverbal expression because I'm fascinated by how significant of a role it plays in our interactions with other people. Hand gestures, eyebrow movement, pointing of eyes, and nose twitching are all gestures used in conversation. Before the development of verbal language, these gestures were all humans had to communicate with each other and being able to interpret them was key to survival.

Nonverbal communication is part of our daily language. When my best friend Sean and I sit together at lunch with others, if he wants to indicate to me that we ought to head to class but doesn't want to interrupt a conversation, he will rotate his hand ninety degrees while sticking out his thumb, and vice versa for me. Last week, I was at the office with Chris and I took three mini-bags of candy out of the Halloween leftovers bowl. She squinted at me, then at the candy, and then at the bowl, indicating to me that she thought I had taken too much candy, to which I responded by putting one bag back in the bowl. These are small examples of interactions where meaning is clearly conveyed and fully understood without a single word being uttered. Sometimes, these interactions are culturally pervasive and can happen between strangers, other

times there are more nuanced or specific gestures used between people that require a mutual understanding that's based on past experiences or a relationship with the person in question.

How do people develop their own unique body language and facial expressions? This question addresses both the origins of specific gestures between familiar people, and the variations between commonly recognized nonverbal expressions; everyone smiles, but no two smiles are the exact same. How do body language and facial expressions play a role in shaping one's unique identity?

### **ABSTRACT:**

The goal of my research was to answer the essential questions of, "How do people develop their own unique body language and facial expressions?" and "How do body language and facial expressions play a role in shaping one's unique identity?" Initially, research was conducted by finding secondary sources online on the origins of facial expressions and body language, in order to develop a general understanding of its history and uses. Primary research was conducted in the form of interviewing peers to examine nonverbal communication at an individual level and determine how it relates to identity. The interviews revealed that body language, facial expressions, and gestures are heavily influenced by an individual's surroundings and upbringings and are often subconsciously co-opted. Nonverbal communication can be better perceived as a reflection of the factors that shape someone's identity, rather than necessarily a deliberate, outward channeling of identity.

### **METHOD:**

Initially, I looked online to find primary and secondary sources that looked at the origins and development of nonverbal communication, as well as how they are impacted by differences in culture and demographics. However, the main focus of my research was a series of interviews I conducted with my peers. The purpose of these interviews was to gather primary data on the origins of individual body language and how it relates to identity, since I was unable to find research online regarding that specific topic. I recorded the interviews on digital video using my DSLR and a shotgun mic.

I opened the interview by telling one of my favorite jokes, while also happens to be long-winded and has a weak punchline. Its humor comes from taking so long to tell and how the payoff is nowhere near as good as its buildup suggests. I chose this joke because it keeps the interviewee in suspense, and also because since they're listening to me speak, their expressions and language are limited to nonverbal communication. Furthermore, it gives me a large chunk of footage I can use to analyze the interviewee's nonverbal communication.

This is the joke I told:

*'3 people are hiking through the woods when they find a lamp. One of them picks it up, rubs it, and out pops a genie. It booms, "You have finally freed me after all these years, so I'll grant each one of you 3 wishes."*

*The first hiker immediately blurts out "I want a billion dollars." POOF, in their arms appears a game-show style massive cheque written for \$1,000,000,000.*

*The second hiker thinks for a bit, then says "I want to be the richest person alive." POOF, he gets a notification on their phone stating that their net worth is now valued at \$24 trillion.*

*The third hiker thinks even longer about their wish, then says "I want my left arm to rotate clockwise for the rest of my life." POOF, their arm starts rotating.*

*The genie tells them it's time for their second wish. The first hiker says, "I want to be married to the most beautiful person on the planet." POOF, a stunning beauty wraps themselves around the first hiker.*

*The second hiker says, "I want to be the most charismatic person on the planet, I want to be able to wrap my finger around anyone and get anything from them." POOF, the first person's partner begins to flirt with the second hiker.*

*The third hiker says, "I want my right arm to rotate counter-clockwise until I die." POOF, now both their arms are rotating, in opposite directions.*

*The genie tells them to think very carefully about their third wish. The first hiker does so, and after a while says, "I never want to become sick or injured, I want to stay healthy until I die." POOF, their complexion improves, their acne is gone and their knees don't bother them anymore.*

*The second hiker says, "I never want to grow old. I want to stay 29 forever." POOF, he looks younger already.*

*The third hiker smiles triumphantly and says, "My last wish is for my head to nod back and forth." POOF, they're now nodding their head and still flailing their arms around.*

*The genie wishes them good luck, disappears, and the men soon go their separate ways. Many years later they meet again and chat about how things have been going. The first hiker is ecstatic, they say, "I've invested the money and multiplied it many times over, so me and my family will be among the richest of the rich pretty much forever. My partner is amazing, and I've never gotten so much as a cold in all these years."*

*The second hiker smiles and says, "Well, I built charities worldwide with a fraction of my wealth, I'm still the richest person alive and also revered for my good deeds. I haven't aged a day since we last met, the lifestyle is great."*

*The third hiker walks in, flailing their arms around and nodding their head, and says: "Guys, I think I messed up."'*

After telling the joke, I asked the interviewee a series of questions, listed below:

1. What were your body language and facial expressions just now (as I was telling the joke)? Are you normally aware of them? How deliberate are your body language and

facial expressions typically? How do your expressions differ when you're alone versus when you're around a lot of people?

2. What were your body language and facial expressions just now? Are you normally aware of them? How deliberate are your body language and facial expressions typically? How do your expressions differ when you're alone versus when you're around a lot of people?
3. What sort of gestures do you have that mean something between you and your friends, but people who might not know you wouldn't recognize (Mention friends recognizing I'm upset and "crush it" hand gesture)? How did you all develop an understanding about these gestures?
4. How significant of a part do your body language and facial expressions, the way you stand, sit, the way you smile, the way you frown, etc. play in shaping your identity?
5. Where do you derive a lot of your body language and facial expressions from? Observing others? Being taught? Coming up with them on your own?

I interviewed six people, although I would have interviewed more had there not been time constraints and scheduling conflicts. The people I interviewed were: Elliott Aiena, Elijah Chavez, Maya Callaway, Phoebe Dubisch, Eli Smith, and Quinn Jonas. I asked these people to participate in my interviews because they're people at Oxbow that I'm familiar with and know (relatively) well. Furthermore, they're all expressive people and have a wide range of diversity between them in regards to their nonverbal communication.

## **RESULTS:**

*(See end of document for interview notes)*

One of the secondary sources I found was an study done by psychologist Paul Ekman to determine whether or not basic facial expressions were universal across humans or separated by cultural differences. In his first experiment, Ekman showed photographs of faces to people in twenty different western cultures and eleven different isolated and pre-literate groups in Africa. He discovered that 96% of western respondents and 92% of African respondents identified happy faces, with similar findings being shown for faces of disgust and contempt.

In subsequent experiments, Ekman looked at the facial expressions of newborns and blind children, since neither would have had the opportunity to learn facial expressions from others. Newborns everywhere showed similar expressions of disgust, distress, and intrigue in response to the same respective stimuli. (Dobrin, 2013)

Another source I discovered was a TED Talk given by professional dancer and MD candidate Natalia Khosla. In her speech, she highlighted the expectations and stereotypes about the body language of different genders; she said, "As a dancer, I have to be hyper-aware of my

body language and what it means. For women, these social stereotypes are kindness, friendliness, cooperativity. For men, the cultural stereotypes are assertiveness, power, taking a stand... Body language is the symptom of a much deeper problem which is that in our society, the gender norms and stereotypes that we ascribe to men and women differentially place them to succeed in society and to be leaders. For example, the norms associated with women; communality, friendliness. These are not consistent with what we need in a leader. Those that we see in men; power, assertiveness. That is what we want in a leader.” (Khosla, 2015)

She later goes on to talk about a study done by Harvard Business review that tasked participants with reading a script to an audience. The scripts were all identical, but half of the participants were told to place themselves in “power positions” while the other half were not. Those placed in power positions at the end of reciting the script reported that they felt more confidence in what they were saying, while the audience judged them as being more competent and fit to lead.

## **DISCUSSION:**

The interviews I’ve conducted indicate that the development the body language, facial expressions, and gestures people make use of are the most influenced by their environments, both growing up and present. Five out of six participants of the interviews said that they were influenced by their immediate family, i.e. parents, siblings, or that they were influenced by their surroundings growing up. Quinn mentioned that her mom’s side of the family is incredibly loud and expressive, describing them as the “cartoon Italian family”, which is why her own gestures are so expressive themselves. Phoebe also mentioned that her biggest influences were her parents, siblings and friends, saying that you “become the five people you hang out with most.” Eli made specific use of “imitat[e]” when describing her influences and that she also exchanged gestures with friends, while Elliott mentioned that their arsenal of nonverbal communication continued as they met more people. Another source of influence people mentioned was the media they consumed. Quinn had said that in the past she would mirror social media, but now deliberately separates herself from media influence because matching expectations had proven detrimental to her mental health. Phoebe said she would often pick up gestures from the media she consumed - social, TV, films, etc. - because they seemed cool to her. Another facet that is somewhat related to environments being sources of influence is that almost all participants mentioned having gestures that only meant something between them and their friends, akin to an inside joke. These gestures, such as making odd faces, doing certain hand gestures, or even certain dances didn’t really have any meaning on their own, but were often drawn from shared experiences between the two in the past. Making use of these gestures wasn’t to convey any message, but rather to indicate a shared bond between the two people. The large amount of influence that people’s surroundings and environments hold over their facial expressions, body language, and gestures indicates that they’re highly flexible and malleable, especially during the formative years of childhood. Given enough time and changes in environment, the nonverbal communication employed by an individual can be completely altered.



Personality, anatomy, and social environments also play smaller roles in dictating the nonverbal communication of people. Elliott describes themselves as an introvert, which is reflected in their generally more reserved body language; they draw themselves in and shrink, trying to avoid drawing attention. Quinn and Phoebe are both highly self-aware and cognizant of what's going around them, and both of them make deliberate use of their body language during conversations to indicate that they are engaged and active and that the speaker feels listened to; Quinn specifically mentioned the actions of sitting forward and making eye contact to indicate interest. Quinn also brought up the topic of anatomy, mentioning that big cheekbones create obvious smiles that would require more effort from someone with a different cheekbone structure. Elliott and Maya both mentioned that they would sit in positions that they felt most comfortable in. Elliott, Maya, Phoebe, and Quinn reported that they were aware of their body language at most given points, to mean that they knew what they were currently doing with their body, while Elijah and Eli reported that they often unaware unless specific attention was drawn to it. However, only Phoebe and Quinn reported being deliberate, as in choosing what they did with their body and face before taking action, about their body language for non-negligible portions of their total nonverbal communication. All participants reported being more expressive and generally more conscious/aware of their nonverbal communication when they were around others. From the current data, the majority of participants being non-deliberate about their use of body language suggests that it is dictated by instinct (that was taught by social conditioning) or the subconscious, while making deliberate use requires a higher level of awareness.

When looking at the data to answer my essential question of how nonverbal communication plays a role in shaping identity, the answer is that it doesn't really play much of a role in shaping anything. A person's facial expressions, body language, and gestures are themselves shaped by their surrounding environment and are subject to change alongside the environment. It's more accurate to say that a person's nonverbal communication is a reflection of the factors that shape someone's identity, since the factors that shape the two are often the same, rather than nonverbal communication necessarily being a deliberate outward channeling of someone's self-understanding of their identity.

## **CONCLUSION:**

The interviews revealed that body language, facial expressions, and gestures are heavily influenced by an individual's surroundings and upbringings and are often subconsciously co-opted. Major sources of influence include close family and friends as well as consumed media. Smaller factors that also dictated the development of nonverbal communication aside from environment include personality, anatomy, and social awareness. Due to the heavy outside influences and its capacity to be subject to change, nonverbal communication can be better perceived as a reflection of the factors that shape someone's identity, rather than necessarily a deliberate, outward channeling of identity. Moving forward, I am curious about taking a closer look at the origins of regional, cultural, and generational gestures. All of the people I interviewed were born in and grew up near the west coast, and I'm curious to see if answers to my questions

would remain consistent if I conducted interviews back home. Likewise, I also want to see how they would differ if I conducted them with foreign students and with people outside my generation.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY (MLA or APA format):**

Dobrin, A. (2013, June 25). Facial Expressions: Universal vs. Cultural. Retrieved November 14, 2018, from Psychology Today website: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/am-i-right/201306/facial-expressions-universal-vs-cultural>

Khosla, N. (Presenter). (n.d.). *Body language and gender from a dancer's perspective*. Lecture presented at TEDxYale, Yale University, CT.