

This Week's Citation Classic

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Duncan S, Jr. Nonverbal communication. *Psychol. Bull.* 72:118-37, 1969.
[University of Chicago, IL]

Research is reviewed on the communicative functions of nonlanguage behaviors, such as voice quality (paralanguage), body motion (kinesics), touch, and use of personal space (proxemics). A major distinction is drawn between structural and external-variable research in this area. [The *Social Sciences Citation Index*® (SSCI)® indicates that this paper has been cited in over 125 publications since 1969.]

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"In 1967, I joined the faculty of the University of Chicago. Intending to do research on the 'nonverbal' (and verbal) aspects of face-to-face interactions, I sent off a set of grant applications. But what to do until the grant (if any) was awarded? Beyond keeping myself occupied and out of trouble, a comprehensive review of the literature seemed useful prior to undertaking a major research effort in the area.

"In addition to simply pulling together the rather skimpy literature available at that time, the review had three main purposes. (a) The main areas of nonverbal-communication research were enumerated with basic references for each, including available transcription systems. (b) The potential value of nonverbal actions for various areas of psychological research was suggested, along with the advantages of variables I based on these actions over other, more familiar variables in psychology. (c) I wanted to communicate to psychologists

the ideas underlying an approach to studying the interaction process developed by anthropologists and linguists. In this 'structural' approach, interaction is viewed as a rule-governed phenomenon; research is aimed at discovering and documenting these rules, much as linguists seek to formulate a grammar for a language. More familiar to psychologists was the 'external variable' approach in which nonverbal actions, such as gaze direction, were related to individual difference variables, such as affiliativeness. The definition of this approach has since been modified.¹

"The paper had, if nothing else, excellent timing. *Post hoc*, but surely not *propter hoc*, there was an enormous surge of research on nonverbal communication beginning in the 1970s—and with good reason. The more concrete nonverbal actions had a great advantage as raw data over the more traditional—and inferential—content categories for describing interaction, such as 'shows solidarity' or 'empathic response.' Researchers using variables based on nonverbal actions easily obtained excellent reliability and were typically rewarded with strong, replicable results. But I fear that many investigators were just as intrigued with the possibility that observing these actions would provide a relatively direct window on the subjects' inner feelings—a notion shamelessly exploited in the popular books on the subject. A rather more complex view is generally held today.

"My effort to generate interest in structural research among psychologists proved to be a *dud*. As the nonverbal-communication literature grew exponentially, few studies took a structural approach. However, in announcing their topic to be some aspect of nonverbal communication, many investigators cited the review as a way of identifying the field. And the review may have contributed to general acceptance of the term 'nonverbal communication,' as opposed to about a half-dozen others current at the time."

1. Duncan S D, Jr. & Fiske D W. *Face-to-face interaction: research, methods, and theory*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977. 361 p.