

# Research on Cross-Cultural Differences in Nonverbal Communication Between America and China

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to provide a contrastive study of cultural differences in nonverbal communication between America and China. It examines the Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck Framework for analyzing cultural patterns and lays emphasis on the comparisons of some aspects of nonverbal communication such as gestures, time orientation, and space and distance orientation. It is hoped that such a research will be of practical significance to the success of international communication between American and Chinese people and help cross-cultural communicators better understand both Eastern and Western cultures.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural differences, Nonverbal communication, America, China

## 1. THE NECESSITY FOR THE RESEARCH OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION

Human beings have two means of communication: verbal communication and nonverbal communication. While much of the research in intercultural communication and foreign language learning tends to be language oriented or language related [1], nonverbal communication is of equal or even greater importance in face-to-face communication. Language is an indispensable carrier of culture. Cultural differences exist in languages of all nations, and our cultural background defines us in different aspects such as customs, beliefs, traditions, attitudes, and behavior. The rapid development of economic globalization and new communication technology have granted people from all over the world more opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges, and nowadays cross-cultural communication activities have occurred more frequently.

Cultural differences lead to variations in both verbal and nonverbal communication. Nonverbal signals can be easily misinterpreted, and the misunderstandings may be difficult to clear up because people may not be aware of nonverbal cues that lead them to assume that they are disliked, disrespected, or disapproved. Thus, cross-cultural communication can be inaccurate and highly stressful. When people are immersed in an environment where the language, attitude, value, and behavior are

alien to their own experience, they may feel frustrated and suffer culture shock.

Learning about cultural differences in nonverbal communication helps people gather clues about underlying attitudes and values and reveal basic cultural traits. Also, a great deal of nonverbal behavior speaks a universal language, and the study of nonverbal behavior in different cultures assists people in overcoming their own ethnocentrism. Furthermore, knowing the attitudes and actions of people from different cultures helps them learn about each other's affective or emotional states.

## 2. THE KLUCKHOHN-STRODTBECK FRAMEWORK

One of the most widely established approaches to analyzing variations among cultures is the Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck framework. After examining hundreds of cultures, the Kluckhohns and Strodtbeck identified five basic cultural dimensions: human nature orientation, relationship of humankind to nature, time orientation, activity orientation, and social orientation.

The Kluckhohn-Strodtbeck's value orientations have certain limitations. Many cultures do not have a single value orientation. For example, both advocating Confucianism, Mencius put forward the theory of "good" human nature while Xunzi put forward the theory of "evil" human nature. Moreover, the value orientation is constantly developing and changing with

time. The westerners' understanding of the relationship between man and nature has gone through a process. The serious pollution caused by industrialization has made Westerners gradually change their value

orientation of conquering nature in the past, re-examine the relationship between man and nature, and emphasize the protection of the ecological environment.

**Table 1.** Five Value Orientations for Analyzing Cultural Patterns

Orientation	Values and Behavior		
Human Nature	Basically Evil	Mixture of Good and Evil	Basically Good
Relationship of Humankind to Nature	People Subject to Nature	People in Harmony with Nature	People the Master of Nature
Sense of Time	Past Oriented	Present Oriented	Future Oriented
Activity	Being	Being in Becoming	Doing
Social Relationships	Authoritarian	Group Oriented	Individualistic

Source: based on Kluckhohn, Kluckhohn, and Strodtbeck, from Larry A. Samovar, Richard E. Porter, Lisa A. Stefani, *Communication Between Cultures*, P74

### **3. CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION BETWEEN AMERICA AND CHINA**

#### **3.1. Nonverbal Communication**

Nonverbal communication is an interactive process of encoding and decoding messages intentionally and unintentionally between the sender and receiver of information. It occurs in specific situations and is closely related to the context.

Nonverbal communication involves all those nonverbal stimuli in a communication setting that are generated by both the source and his or her use of the environment and that have potential message value for the source or receiver [2].

Most classifications divide nonverbal messages into two comprehensive categories: those that are primarily produced by the body (physical appearance, body movements, facial expressions, eye contact, touch, and paralanguage); and those that the individual combines with the setting (space, time, and silence). Some scholars divide nonverbal communication into eight specific categories, including kinesics, oculusics, haptics,

proxemics, paralanguage, appearance, symbolism, and olfactory communication.

#### **3.2. Cultural Differences In Nonverbal Communication Between America And China**

##### **3.2.1. Gestures**

In daily life, people in all countries use gestures nearly every day to convey ideas they want to express. Gestures communicate as effectively as words, maybe even more effectively. Without gestures, our world would be static and colorless.

Gestures are specific body movements that carry meanings. Hand motions alone can convey many meanings. American people and Chinese people differ in the use of some gestures. For example, to call someone to come over, the Chinese extend their hand, palm down, moving all the fingers except the thumb up and down quickly; Americans, on the other hand, hold out their hand, palm up, moving the index finger back and forth—the way in which animals are beckoned in China. After a meal, Americans usually place an open hand on their throat, palm down, and then move the hand across their throat to show that they are full,

whereas Chinese people pat their own stomach with an open hand to show the same meaning. In Chinese people's eyes, the action of raising a hand to throat is nothing short of killing one's head. When preparing to take a taxi or taking a free ride on the street, Americans often clench their right fist and raise their thumb up, facing the oncoming taxi or car. However, the Chinese tend to extend one arm and move the hand up and down.

In America, people point to objects and at people with the index finger, while in China, pointing with the index finger is considered offensive. When Americans want to make a semi-joking gesture "shame on you," they extend the forefinger of each hand, put palms down in front of one's body; one forefinger makes several brushing movements over the back of the other forefinger. However, Chinese people extend the forefinger of one hand and make the tip touch one's own face several times quickly, similar to scratching the face, but with the forefinger straight, usually with the remark "shame on you!"

Americans cross their forefingers and middle fingers to convey "good luck." They "thumb one's nose" with one thumb on tip of one's own nose, curling fingers and moving together to show defiance or contempt. The "thumb down" gesture is performed with crooked arm and closed fist in front of one's body, one or several downward movements of the thumb expressing rejection of a person or a proposal—the nonverbal way of saying a strong "no." In China, there are no such gestures to convey similar meanings. Chinese people touch or point to tip of one's own nose with raised forefinger to say "it's me". They use both hands to offer something to another person or receive something from another person to show respect. They also use the upraised forefinger of each hand to come together in front of the body until the two touch to show that a man and a woman in love are a good match. In America, people never use these gestures.

### 3.2.2. Time Orientation

According to the Kluckhohns and Strodtbeck, cultures can be classified as past-orientated, present-orientated, and future-orientated cultures. Past-orientated cultures believe strongly in the significance of prior events. They place much emphasis on history and tradition and are often perceived as resisting change. The Chinese, with the tradition of ancestor worship and strong pride in their cultural heritage for thousands of years, use the past to guide people to live in the present. Therefore, it's normal for Chinese people to take a long-range view of events and less likely to be rushed when making decisions. Chinese people respect and venerate the elderly, value experience, and seek stability. On the contrary, present-orientated cultures emphasize living in the moment. These cultures tend to hold that the future is vague and unknown, and what is the most significant

is here and now, so they are more impulsive and spontaneous and have a causal and relaxed lifestyle. Future-orientated cultures, like the one found in America, focus on the future and expect it to be grander than the present. Most Americans are constantly planning for the future instead of experiencing the moment. Many of them can hardly wait to finish what they are doing so that they can move on to something else.

Lakoff and Johnson (2003) analyzed the metaphors of time in English (e.g.: "How do you spend your free time?") and argued that in Western cultures, time is regarded as money, a commodity with value and a limited resource, and time seems to be something concrete that can be quantified. Thus, the quantifiable verbs such as "give", "lose", "spend", "waste", "run out of", "save", "invest" and so on are used in the expressions of time. Lakoff and Johnson pointed out that the metaphors of time are the embodiment of culture. Western cultures compare time with money and goods, showing that this concept of time is a product of an industrialized society and is associated with the concepts of efficiency and competition [3].

There are plenty of idioms and proverbs in Chinese to express the value of cherishing time. For example, "Time is an inch of gold. An inch of gold will not buy you an inch of time." and "Time flies like an arrow." However, different from English, time in Chinese is compared with running water, gold, arrows, trees, etc., and time is regarded as a natural phenomenon. This reflects the understanding of time of a traditional agricultural society, and the saying "work at sunrise and rest at sunset" emphasizes that people in the agricultural society follow the natural time rather than the mechanical time in the industrial society. It can be seen that the concept of time is a reflection of culture.

### 3.2.3 Space And Distance Orientation

The way people orient themselves to others in space is also culturally determined. Like the many species of birds who maintain a prescribed distance between themselves and others when atop a wire, human beings show signs of territoriality.

Across cultures, people encounter very different ideas about polite space for conversations and negotiations. The amount of distance maintained in interpersonal interactions is learned behavior. The "comfortable" distance people maintain is quite constant among members of a given culture. Cultures that stress individualism like America generally demand more space than do collective cultures such as China. Americans have a strong sense of territoriality of personal space and privacy. Most Americans do not like people to be too close to them though being too far apart may be awkward. In America, the common practice of

saying “excuse me” for the slightest accidental touch of another person reveals how uncomfortable Americans are if people get too close. In cultures where close physical contact is acceptable and even desirable such as in China, Americans may be perceived as cold and distant.

Edward T. Hall (1969) divided distances over which people communicate into four categories: intimate space, informal (personal) space, formal (social) space, and public space. Intimate space ranges from direct physical contact to a distance of about 45 centimeters for people’s most private relations and activities, between husband and wife, for instance. Personal space is about 45-80 centimeters and is most common when friends, acquaintances, and relatives converse. Social space may be anywhere from about 1.30 meters to 3 meters. For example, co-workers, business partners, and people at social gatherings tend to keep a distance of about 1.30 to 2 meters [4].

Comparison of American and Chinese seating arrangements also shows cultural differences. Americans, for example, tend to talk with those opposite them rather than those seated or standing beside them when in groups. However, the Chinese often experience alienation and uneasiness when they face someone directly or sit on opposite sides of a table from someone because it makes them feel as if they were on trial. In China, students deliberately do not sit close to the teacher as a way of showing respect or awe; whereas American students feel comfortable to sit wherever they want in the classroom.

Line-waiting behavior and behavior in group settings are also culturally-influenced. Americans tend to be quite serious about standing in lines in accordance with their beliefs in democracy and the principle of “first come, first served.” On the other hand, it is not uncommon for Chinese people to have a practice of line jumping that irritates many Americans.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

With the development of economic globalization, the world is getting smaller, and the distance between people in different regions is shortened. The increasing growth in cross-cultural exchange activities has put forward new and higher requirements for cross-cultural communicators [5]. Due to the huge differences between Chinese and Western cultures, it is inevitable that some misunderstandings and obstacles will arise. Nonverbal differences exist in every corner of our lives, which are subtle but irreplaceable and crucial. Cultural differences may cause people from different cultures to misinterpret both what is said and what is left unsaid, meeting language barrier as well as nonverbal barriers in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, to achieve effective cross-cultural communication, it is vital for

people from different cultures to arouse cross-cultural awareness, have a good knowledge of cultural differences, and take into consideration both verbal and nonverbal variations during the process of communication. Obviously, there are many cultural differences in nonverbal communication between America and China. Only by recognizing and understanding these differences can we achieve smooth dialogue, mutual respect, and beneficial relationships in cross-cultural communication [6].

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