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Nonverbal Behavior in a Global Context Dialogue Questions and Responses

Miles L. Patterson · Joann M. Montepare

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Q1: Dr. Patterson, your research finds cultural differences in civil (in)attention in one particular context. What does this suggest about the need to consider the role of varied contexts in studying nonverbal behavior within a global context?

The long history of research in social psychology clearly emphasizes the importance of situations or contexts in determining social behavior and social judgments. In fact, people from Asian and more collectivistic cultures seem to have a clearer appreciation of the role of situations in shaping behavior, compared to people from Western and more individualistic cultures. This is specifically reflected in Asians showing less of the correspondence bias in making attributions about the behavior of others. That is, Asians are typically less likely to make the automatic dispositional inference (internal attribution) for another person's behavior and are more likely to make a situational inference (external attribution) than are Westerners.

We did not specifically examine different types of contexts, such as the home or work, in studying the subtle behaviors of Japanese and American pedestrians. Thus, we do not have data on cultural differences across contexts. Nevertheless, the minimal responsiveness of Japanese pedestrians as they walked past our confederates was consistent with other research pointing to norms of reserve, caution, and saving face in relating to outgroup individuals. In contrast, this kind of behavioral or expressive restraint may be unnecessary, and even inappropriate, in interactions with other members of one's own ingroup. Although we do not have direct evidence, it seems likely that comparable contrasting contexts would not have as large an effect on Americans. On a more general level, this suggests that the effects of culture on social behavior may well be qualified by context, that is, culture \times context (situation) interactions might be common. Thus, we might find cultural differences in one kind of context, but not in another. As a result we should be cautious in assuming broad cultural differences on the basis of results from a single specific context.

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Q2: What are the inter-cultural implications of your findings in light of emerging trends in global travel and tourism?

I think that there are important inter-cultural implications for our findings and, more generally, for the passing encounters paradigm for issues of global travel and tourism. When we think about “interacting” with others, whether this is within our native culture or when visiting elsewhere, we typically assume that people are having conversations with one another. Goffman (1963) called these events “focused interactions” because the exchange is focused around a shared conversation topic. Focused interactions are important forms of social contact and often provide the means of sharing information. Nevertheless, for most people who live in or near urban areas, and certainly for those who travel a great deal, most of our social contacts take the form of “unfocused interactions.” These events include a wide range of activities in which we share a close presence with others, but have no intention of striking up a conversation with them. This obviously includes situations like walking past others on the sidewalk, as in our experiment. Choosing a seat in a half-filled waiting room, standing in line at the grocery store, or sharing an elevator ride with two other people are other examples where people make behavioral adjustments to the presence of others and, in doing so, manage their comfort level. That is, without a spoken word, people are still interacting in these shared presence situations.

But why are unfocused interactions important and what do they have to do with global travel and tourism? As I mentioned earlier, unfocused interactions are ubiquitous, especially for people who travel a great deal. Frequent travelers are constantly sharing a common presence with strangers in a wide variety of settings. This is important because such occurrences can prime subsequent social behavior and judgments without individuals being aware of their effect. Thus, the residue from an uncomfortable (or comfortable) experience, probably operating at an unconscious level, can bias subsequent interactions. In addition, because unfocused interactions are typically low investment events relative to focused interactions, individuals are less likely to engage in impression management tactics. That is, behavior in unfocused interactions may be better reflection individuals’ implicit or automatic attitudes than is behavior in focused interactions. A careful observer can learn a great deal about culture and individual differences by carefully attending to others in these situations of shared presence.

Finally, on a personal level, my first trip to Japan in the summer of 2006 reinforced some of what we learned from our research, but also highlighted some interesting context differences. As a relatively tall westerner walking the streets of a small city in southwestern Japan (Izumo), I noticed that I certainly got a lot of visual attention as others approached – but only up to about 20 feet. As the approaching pedestrian came into the passing zone, there was rarely a glance in my direction. In contrast, in the social gatherings and dinners with faculty and students, my hosts were extremely kind, sensitive, and hospitable. This was an interesting reminder of the context differences addressed in the first question.

References

Goffman, E. (1963). *Behavior in public places*. New York: Free Press.