

Body language—are we insane? or just human?

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I was in the midst of my first relationship when I began questioning my tendency to over-analyze social situations. Rather frequently, even now, I find myself looking a bit too closely into a tilted smile or a raised hand while engaged in conversation with another. As I see it, my infatuation with body language has always been my way of reassuring myself that I will always know what somebody is really feeling. At the time I was with a girl named Hannah who, as it turns out, had shown no signs of noticing what exactly it was that I was trying to say when I crossed my right leg over my left and turned my head to the side.

Or what I might be trying to tell her if I crossed my thumb over hers when we were holding hands. But even still--on every date I found myself to be in this habit of interpreting (or more accurately, guessing) what I thought to be truth in her body language. Every moment I was in her presence I managed to over-think myself into this state of insanity. The fact is I spent more time trying to interpret how she must be feeling than I did listening to what she was actually feeling. Whenever we went on dates I was constantly plagued with the thought that because she wasn't squeezing my hand tightly enough or leaning into me while I spoke to her that she just wasn't interested anymore. My supposed explanations of what her body language meant caused me to see just quirks or even meaningless gestures as something greater--something significant--that either signaled her undying love for me or growing hatred towards me.

Our relationship was either destined to be forever or doomed to end tomorrow based solely on my observations. And in the meantime I made sure to fine-tune all of my actions so that if in any case she did decide to

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take notice of my body language, she would know exactly what I was trying to say. But she never did-despite my obsession with trying to understand her. And gradually as my paranoia increased, I stopped paying attention to what it was that she was saying because what she spoke seemed to hold no truth. After all, I could always look to her body to know if she was having a good time with me or if she liked me -if she loved me. Even then I questioned my logic.

But what kept me so adamant in the fact that her body language was accurate-that how I saw it was accurate-was the thought that actions so genetically engrained in us, as humans, couldn't possibly lie. Looking back now, it's embarrassing to think that I had relied so much on my paranoid observations to dictate my relationship because after it ended I came to realize that many of these assumptions-the ones I was absolutely sure were right-well, weren't . When I used to assume she was mad at me because she hadn't looked me in the eye that time I said goodbye to her or because she hadn't tucked her hair behind her right ear like she normally did when I told her how happy she made me-all of this had been wrong. After these instances I would avoid her the next day. I would shy away from giving her a hug or holding her hand. I really had begun to think that I was able to interpret every single one of her gestures: the shoulder-shrugs and the squinted eyes or the fixed gazes and the folded hands.

I had even started to believe that we shared a sort of unspoken language together and that when she strayed from our " language", there must be something wrong. Only after a day of avoiding her for these reasons would I find that she hadn't been angry with me at all. Why couldn't I have just
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asked her how she was feeling? I've often attributed the failure of our relationship to my unsuccessful attempts at understanding body language. I believed that my fixation on Hannah's every twitch and turn was what made our time together so unbearably awkward. Despite the fact that I probably did over-analyze a lot of what Hannah did, what I've come to realize quite recently is that it wasn't body language that misguided my interpretations-- it was my inability to interpret body language correctly.

It wasn't that I was noticing things that weren't actually there, but rather that I never considered the possibility that maybe body language is so complex that it can't be boiled down to just one meaning or interpretation. I've had to convince myself that body language was, in fact, important—that there was some sense in my paranoid tendencies—because in reality, body language can be (and most always is) truthful. It has the ability to form connections and to capture human emotion in the most complicated of forms. What you might perceive as the source of your discomfort and self-consciousness (whether on a first date or a first job interview) isn't just our over-dramatized anxieties, but rather a way of deciphering our surroundings to understand them in-depth. When we use body language to understand others, we are gaining a perspective past what we are able to put into spoken word.

Body language is just that: what we are able to say without words. It is how we communicate nonverbally through posture, facial expressions, gestures, and movements (Mehrabian, 1). According to author Susan Quilliam, an expert on kinesics (or the study of body language), 93% of what we communicate is through body language—the other 7% being through spoken

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word. We most often tend to associate body language with a wave hello or a nod in agreement. But this is merely the body language that supplements verbal communication. Oftentimes our nonverbal tendencies can communicate what we aren't saying-or rather, what we cannot say-with words.

In actuality, it is this subconscious category which makes up the majority of our body language. How we communicate with our body is so much deeper than spoken word and although we are perhaps more aware of it when we are in those self-conscious or high-stress situations, we are always interpreting body language. Albert Mehrabian, PhD and expert in non-verbal communication, describes, " Whereas verbal cues are definable by an explicit dictionary and by rules of syntax, there are only vague and informal explanations of the significance of various non-verbal behaviors". This is what makes nonverbal communication so complicated: because much of it is understood subconsciously, many times we are unable to define exactly what we are saying nonverbally-well, verbally (Mehrabian, 2). I can remember, even before we were dating, that fixed gaze Hannah and I would sometimes share when out to lunch on a Saturday or while sitting on a bench at the strip mall.

In that ten or fifteen seconds we spent making eye contact, I was never quite sure what she was telling me or what I was telling her because I wasn't exactly positive about what it was I was feeling. I couldn't put into words the range of emotions that were shared simply through both of us making eye contact with each other. Was I attracted to her? Was I scared of what she was thinking of me? Was I trying to decide if she was attracted to me? It was <https://assignbuster.com/body-language-are-we-insane-or-just-human/>

overtime that these moments started becoming more frequent and that we started to form a connection. It was almost as if we bonded over our shared confusion in trying to define the range of emotions we were conveying to each other. As Mehrabian suggests, it is these complicated and indefinable nuances of communication that form the bonds and connections that serve as the bases of our relationships.

In humans this behavior is instinctive: even before birth we start developing what is to become our “baseline behavior”—the way we act as an individual in terms how we communicate (Quilliam, 15). When in the process of forming any type of relationship, we start to establish a deeper connection with that person even just in the rhythm of our gestures or movements—as Quilliam describes, our rapport develops. The closest relationship between our instinctual rapport in mature social interaction (for example, while at a party and engaged in conversation) and our instinctual rapport preceding birth is that in each, we begin forming connections. At the party, you may subconsciously notice that the person you are conversing with has begun to sway back and forth. In response, it is likely that you will start doing the same—without noticing.

Much like the mirrored reaction at the party, in the womb a fetus’ heart will beat in sync with its mother’s (Quilliam, 22). Whereas at the party you are telling that other person you are engaged in what they are saying or that you are interested in this person as an individual, during fetal development the parallel heart rate also forms a bond—this time between a mother and her unborn child (“Flirting with the science [...]” and Quilliam, 23). In each situation connection is established through common body language This <https://assignbuster.com/body-language-are-we-insane-or-just-human/>

would make body language, in essence, the key to sharing bonds with other members of our species. Without these nonverbal cues it would be difficult to maintain relationships or even to form connections in the first place. As humans we need constant reassurance that we are liked and that we have the potential to engage another's interest. Body language provides us with the opportunity, therefore, to know that we are liked.

When we know that we are liked, or that another is interested in us, we respond positively—eventually forming these connections and relationships with them (Quilliam, 23). As we mature, however, body language becomes more than just a subconscious means of forming a connection because instinctively we begin to consciously recognize this form of communication as vital to our success as individuals (Driver, 2). Consider: when we are young, we are taught manners—how to act in such a way that is socially acceptable. These types of social “rules” are enforced in hopes that once they are acquired, we will succeed among members of our own species. In Western culture we are encouraged to “stand up straight” or to “make eye contact when speaking to others” until these actions become habitual (Quilliam, 6).

Because of this link between how we communicate and how likely we are to succeed, our body language becomes important to us as individuals and as a community (Driver, 4). This is what results in our shared compulsion to interpret (or even over-analyze) body language in others. What I have deemed my “paranoia” or my “obsession” is actually an urge present in most all humans: to be accepted by others, to be liked among peers, and to make beneficial impressions with strangers. Hence we know why nonverbal

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communication is so important and why it should be considered as more than a self-conscious tendency within relationships. But if this form of communication is so vital to our success, how is it that we even begin to interpret body language? How does it develop and how can it be useful past just human instinct? The neurological origin of body language starts, rather ironically, in the same part of the brain responsible for verbal communication—meaning that it's connected largely to how we are able to speak and how we interpret the speech of others. In studies observing Aphasia, a disorder in which patients are unable to speak or to understand spoken language, it was found that along with verbal cues, those suffering from Aphasia are also unable to interpret or display any sort of nonverbal communication—suggesting that the same areas of the brain affected by this disorder (the Broca's Area and Wernicke's Area) are also the places where our recognition of body language begins.

Further supporting this connection is an experiment conducted by neuroscientist Spencer D. Kelly in which by using an electroencephalograph (a device used to measure an individual's brain waves) he measured the peaks and valleys of the brain when the patient was interpreting a spoken or written phrase, hoping to prove the connection between spoken and nonverbal communication. To do this Kelly showed patients slides in which two words were inappropriately juxtaposed within a sentence (for example: “The fish walked through the ocean.” or “The boy galloped across the pasture.”) and observed a negative peak reading on the graph of N1400. Next, he offered the same patients slides with phrases that were

accompanied by pictures of the wrong gestures (for example: the phrase “good job” accompanied with a “thumbs down” gesture).

In the second trial, there was a similar negative peak reading on the graph as in the previous trial. This experiment served to prove that the same area of the brain confused by the written and verbal language in the first trial, was also confused by the gestures in the second trial—further suggesting that nonverbal communication is, in fact, associated with the areas of our brain dedicated to processing verbal communication (Roney). If body language has such a blatant connection to both how we speak and how we understand spoken word, then it is no surprise that it’s such an integral part of how we communicate and how we form connections. But even if these studies explain how we are able to communicate, we are still left with the question of exactly why we even have an area in our brain dedicated to body language. Why is it that our species developed the ability to use and understand body language? There are two major (and often overlapping) theories surrounding the development, or origin, of body language: one being that body language is almost purely evolutionary—that we, as a species, developed this form of communication genetically and hence share similar body language; the other being that body language is cultural—that much of the way we communicate is influenced by our environment and as a result, it develops as we become more experienced members of our culture (Roney, Ekman and Friesen, 59). The first theory suggests that our ability to communicate verbally, because of the fact that it is mutually exclusive to humans, came only after evolving from other species which communicate almost solely through body language (Roney).

This description of our communication origins refers back to Quilliam's definition of "baseline behavior" which assumes that we can attribute most of our nonverbal tendencies to our individual nature and to our species. That we all exhibit body language in the form of purely primal instincts that are completely unrelated to our present cultural environment. In the documentary *The Human Animal: The Language of the Body*, kinesics scientist Desmond Morris describes that we, "who have the most expressive faces in the animal kingdom", can trace facial expressions back to our evolutionary ancestors. To prove this Morris observes the similarities between the facial expressions of apes and those of modern-day humans, finding that the same facial muscles attributed to facial expressions were acquired initially for survival. For example: the ability to move our lips was originally developed to aid us in our drinking and feeding.

Morris describes, "As the apes suck, chew, and bite, their powerful sensitive lips explore each object as it comes into contact with the mouth", much like the way that we consume our food. Nonetheless, humans don't just possess the same facial muscles as apes, but also put these muscles to similar nonverbal use in the form of facial expressions. Morris focuses on apes both in defense and on the attack employing those same types of conflicted facial expressions as humans do when in similar high-stress situations. While in this type of "attack mode", apes show the same tightness around the lips that is a common sign of all primate aggression. Similarly, furrowed eyebrows like ours when in instances of pain or intense emotion are a biologically acquired defense mechanism to protect the eyes, yet is a common human signal of anger and aggression.

The intense stare accompanied with the furrowed eyebrows, which signals a challenge or threat between two members of the ape species, is also a characteristically human tendency from which Morris explains, we get the idea of the “evil eye” from earlier centuries where there was the present belief that any type of prolonged eye contact signaled danger. But even despite the relationship between humans and apes when supporting the theory that nonverbal behavior is a result of evolution, much of our body language ancestry extends beyond just that of the primate family—especially when we consider courtship behavior, which even for humans is largely nonverbal (Leech). Even who we’re initially attracted to is connected to this genetic urge to interpret body language. Statistics suggest that the eyes are the key facial feature contributing to attraction, with the larger and paler eyes proven to be more desirable. When we are interested in or attracted to something, our basic primal reflex is the dilation of the eyes.

With pale-colored eyes, it’s easier for us to recognize when they are dilated. This reflex subconsciously communicates to others that we find them attractive—triggering the start of courtship behavior. In humans, the courting sequence tends to begin by “showing ourselves off” to our potential mate. Susan Quilliam gives the example of a woman who may, after becoming aware of attention, start an unconscious nonverbal display of femininity: by straightening her posture, she emphasizes her breasts and by fixing her hair or pulling down her dress, she shows off her best features. A man may do the same: standing up straight to emphasize his broad shoulders or adjusting his tie to appear more attractive (Quilliam, 58-59). This same behavior occurs in other species who, by instinctually showing off

their assets, signal to the member of the opposite sex that they are fit to reproduce.

For example: when the male Blue Bird of Paradise attracts a mate, it hangs upside-down from a branch and emphasizes its array of feathers by enlarging and contracting its chest--much like the woman emphasizing her breasts or the man showing off his muscular build. While swaying back and forth, the bird also arches its tail feathers to display the violet plumes that lay underneath. Similarly, it's been seen in male Mandarin ducks that even their preparation for courting involves the same grooming and preening that humans tend to engage in before going out to dinner or to a movie with their date (Leech). But even if we are able to explore numerous paths of genetic similarities when it comes to the human race and its evolutionary ancestors, there's no denying that we associate many of our gestures not with just other species, but with other cultures. The cultural gestures that come to my mind initially would be those of the Italians. On multiple occasions I've been challenged by friends to see how long I could go in a conversation without lifting my hand to speak or how long it would take me before I put both of my hands up in exasperation.

Hannah even used to mention how often I would raise my right hand when I spoke. No matter how fun it is to poke fun at my inability to refrain from supplementing words with hand gestures, in many cultures body language is more than that. Desmond Morris, in that same documentary *The Human Animal: The Language of the Body*, also reveals that he took it upon himself to start charting these cultural differences in human actions, gestures, and facial expressions by travelling the world. As an observer, Morris explains <https://assignbuster.com/body-language-are-we-insane-or-just-human/>

that one of his biggest difficulties in charting body language was that, “ even the simplest of human actions [...] has countless variations” depending on individual cultural influences. For example, just the action of shaking hands with another is approached differently depending on where you are in the world.

In the United States the way we greet each other is quite literal-we shake hands. But if you observe another culture, like the Masai tribe in East Africa, you will find that shaking another’s hand is considered disrespectful and even condescending in a culture that greets its members with a simple touch of the palms(The Human Animal [...]). In other countries it’s quite the opposite-greetings actually become more elaborate than those of the United States. In Mali, for example, an individual must briefly touch the forearm of another while engaging in a prolonged handshake. After the handshake, males tend to place their right hand on their chests as a sign of respect, followed by a hug (“ Mali Customs & Etiquettes”). In certain cultures even, these gestures serve as more than just greetings.

In Turkey, the way that citizens greet one another is a means of making a living. The farmers there have a local rule that unless they are shaking hands, they cannot start bargaining. This hand-shaking in itself lasts the duration of the bargaining process and if this type of “ ritual” is done incorrectly, a farmer could lose out on a sale (The Human Animal [...]). Similarly, the things we may deem in Western culture as disrespectful or even strange can appear quite the opposite in other countries. In many Japanese and Chinese cultures, it is often seen as respectful and even necessary for two members of the same sex to hold hands as a symbol of

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their friendship, yet if you were to put up your feet on a piece of furniture you would risk appearing disrespectful or degrading to a family's home. Even more blatant gestures such as spitting, which are seen in the United States or other European cultures as rude—simply because of the connotation that when you spit, you must be “spitting upon something”—has absolutely no meaning in Asian culture where spitting is really seen as just clearing your throat (Rugsaken).

All of these cultural gestures can be grouped into two categories: “illustrators”—or rather, gestures meant to supplement verbal language— and “ emblems”—or gestures that have a literal meaning or definition (perhaps deviating from the tendency of body language to lack any sort of definition). But nonetheless they are simply gestures, whereas body language in itself—although including gestures—encompasses posture, facial expressions, and other movements as well. The second theory mentioned that describes body language as having to do largely with cultural influence, therefore, would seem to overlap with the first theory that body language is purely primitive and that we owe our nonverbal techniques to evolution more so than the environment we grew up in. It seems that our body language is made up of a mix of the two: both what we are inclined to communicate subconsciously through nature and how we consciously supplement what we say with culturally-influenced gestures (Roney, Eckman, and Friesen). There are, in fact, “ the classic six” emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, disgust, and fear) that are consistently similar facial expressions no matter where you are in the world (Quilliam, 68). To say that we are only influenced

by our cultural environment would ignore the fact that a lot of our body language—regardless of our location—is similar.

Knowing why we are able to express body language, though, seems useless to somebody who's unable to interpret it. In actuality we do have the ability to interpret other's body language at least subconsciously (this is what is known as "intuition"), but rarely can we try to consciously interpret what we see—or what we think that we see—and interpret correctly. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that a lot of the common nonverbal tendencies that we do know how to define are actually nothing more than myths. One of the most familiar I can think of is the idea that if somebody isn't looking you in the eye, they must be lying. In his book *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage*, Paul Ekman refutes this notion that people with shifty eyes are automatically liars.

According to Ekman, the inability of an individual to look you in the eye usually signals some type of emotion—but hardly ever will a liar not look you in the eye. If you are asked out on a date and that person is unable to make eye contact with you, for example, it most obviously doesn't suggest that he or she is lying to you. Rather this lack of eye contact would probably be a sign of nervousness or anxiety. Ekman also add that anybody used to lying would not so easily give themselves away as not to make eye contact (Morgan). Because we tend to assume that a lack of eye contact—especially in Western culture—signals dishonesty or insincerity, we develop the thought that more eye contact is always better.

The concept that we do not seem to grasp is that this can make us look almost as ridiculous as if we stepped into a job interview without making eye contact. Prolonged eye contact has actually been proven to make anybody nervous because as humans we are programmed to only accept eye contact in a few second intervals. Anything beyond these few seconds gives us the feeling that the person that we are speaking with, because of their prolonged eye contact, is flirting with us (Morgan). But why is it important not to get caught up in these misconceptions? Generally in romantic relationships we tend to over-analyze body language inevitably-hence leading us to misunderstandings of certain gestures or facial expressions. This, though, is hardly based on misconception, but rather on our response to situations in which we are either under high-stress or feeling self-conscious-it's hardly ever rational at first (Quilliam, 56).

But outside of romantic relationships, it is easier to make more rationalized decisions when it comes to our interpretation of body language (Quilliam, 6). Many times the only things here to misguide us are those various misconceptions about body language that will cause us to rethink our intuition. And it is necessary that we learn how to rethink any nonverbal communication as more than just an overly-analytical genetic trait from our ancestors or a cultural tendency that merely serves to supplement our verbal language. What we don't seem to realize is that there are more practical (and often less personal) uses of nonverbal communication that are beneficial outside of the relationship between two people. Janine Driver and Mariska Van Aalst in their book, *You Say More Than You Think: A 7-Day Plan for Using the New Body Language to Get What You Want* point out that many

times successful individuals “ possess a sense of serene self-awareness,” yet “ they seem comfortable in their own skin” (2).

They also make the claim that, “ All successful people know that the ability to detect and react to the split-second signals that skin across people’s bodies,” meaning that really, a large part of our success socially is body language (2). If we can make that first impression (studies show that this happens in the first 5 or 10 seconds of meeting somebody), we might be more likely to get that position in a new job or impress our boss enough to get that promotion (Quilliam, 16). For employers, this isn’t even just a matter of first impression. There are now actual studies for employers instructing them on how to hire the best workers based almost solely on body language during job interviews. These studies give them clues on what types of facial expressions, gestures, or even postures have been proven to be traits of better workers. In this way, body language is even more practical and beneficial (especially when you learn to rethink the way you portray yourself) than in relationships.

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