Nonverbal Communication in Groups

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Theoretical and Factual Basis

At present there are many methods of psychotherapy. Freudian, Rogerian, Gestalt, Rolphing, Sensitivity Training, and many more approaches are designed mainly to delve into a person's selfawareness and help him do the same. Each approach uses its own definitions, techniques, and philosophy; however each requires a deep personal investment by the client. Often therapy is painful, supposedly indicating deep emotional gain. All too often people assume that emotional gain is dependent on pain. Thus many people only feel real insight if they are tormented or cry. I call this the "Thanks, I needed that," syndrome. I realize that this is all totally subjective, but to show that there is at least some validity in the above, I quote Frederick Pearls.\(^1\) In *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, Pearls said, "To suffer one's death and to be reborn is not easy." This metaphorically implies that mental health is dependent on emotional death accompanied by deep emotional pain.

In light of the above statements, I would like to add another approach to the ones listed above, groups based on nonverbal communication. This is not sensitivity, or touch groups, but rather an educational approach designed as a complement to other approaches or as a basis for group interaction in and of itself.

Before explaining my own philosophy, I would like to present

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some background information that was influential in the development of my philosophy. My approach is based on a child's early learning experiences. In the pre-school years a child develops skills for interpersonal interactions. Children also learn to evaluate and interpret their own and other person's behaviors. An experiment by Bandura, as described by Hussen, indicated that children learn processes of self-evaluation and judgemental orientations from even brief exposure to models. Aside from learning these specific procedures, children also derive much motivation from their parents. Motivation directs them into socially accepted behaviors, and thus they learn to avoid the anxiety associated with parental disapproval. In addition, a child experiences anxiety when his own behavior is incongruent with social rules. By the second year, a child begins to inhibit his own behaviors and also chooses a subject with which to identify. Through identification the child learns gestures and behaviors needed for social interactions. Thus, a child acquires a set of behaviors that he will use and modify for the rest of his life; he becomes socialized. Socialization includes methods of coping, identification, interpretation, and impression formation as well as personal and interpersonal behaviors and skills. Most of these skills require intricate use of nonverbal and verbal techniques.

3. Ibid., p. 135.
4. Ibid., p. 359.
Now I will present a short treatment of nonverbal communication as a subject in and of itself. Many professions, such as acting, are directly based on nonverbal communication. Actors, salesmen, and everyone rely on nonverbal techniques seemingly instinctively to express attitudes and feelings. Are nonverbal cues instinctual or are they learned social behaviors? Eisenberg states that cues are culturally significant and therefore may vary from culture to culture.\(^5\) Fast\(^6\) states that cues also vary within cultures according to membership within various ethnic or interest groups. It appears that nonverbal cues are learned, probably very early in life. Consider infants who first communicate totally without words, sending as well as receiving messages, only later learning to talk.

The first and most basic nonverbal cues available are facial expressions and vocal inflections. Both of these channels are associated with day to day conversations as well as infant communications. Mehrabian (1968)\(^7\) has shown that only 7% of communication is verbal, the written word, while 38% is vocal and 55% is facial expressions. Paralanguage is concerned with the nonverbal components of communication; communication of attitudes and feelings. Paralanguage interprets gestures, signals, actions, nonverbal vocalizations such as sighs and pauses, and so on. These cues express

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different messages than what is communicated by the written word alone. I consider paralanguage a specialized part of nonverbal communication. I consider everything used as means of communicating attitudes, emotions, and impressions; either implicitly or explicitly except the written word.

Using the above definition, I would like to outline several attitudes, such as; status, power, dominance, communication consistency, and communication accuracy. Status is a composite of dominance, liking, importance, and several physical characteristics between two people. Intuitive reasoning indicates that a person of high status wears better clothes, lives in a better house, has a bigger desk, and many similar physical and material goods than does a person of lesser status. Mehrabian has isolated several status cues, such as posture, eye contact, body orientation, arm position, and trunk relaxation. Mehrabian's findings indicate that closeness is associated with positive attitude toward the addressee. Thus eye contact and direct facing position represent positive attitude toward the addressee. High positive attitude is reflected with a side by side sitting position. Reclining angle also indicates attitude. In other circumstances these same cues relate to status differences between communicator and addressee. Status is communi-

icated primarily through postural and spatial relationships. Eisenberg 10 states that posture is also a socially learned behavior. Posture reflects both the role of the communicator and his attitudes toward the addressee. Specific findings are unimportant. However it is important to note that posture and position are used to make interpretations about people.

On the verbal-vocal side, consider sarcasm. Sarcasm is a combination of positive verbal and negative vocal communications. There is also reverse sarcasm, negative verbal and positive vocal components. Both of these communications are called inconsistent messages or mixed messages. In another experiment, Mehrabian (1970)11 found that inconsistent communications are preferred more in informal situations. Also, the verbal content of the message contain attitudes towards the actions of the addressee while the nonverbal portion refers to the communicator's attitude toward the addressee as a person. Thus sarcasm and reverse sarcasm contain two channels of communication. Increasing the number of channels in communication also increases the number of possible responses. The addressee must first choose the proper channel or combination of channels to base his reaction and decide which set of responses best reflects his own feelings toward the communicator and his actions.12 As a

tangent, nonverbal methods are helpful in appearing tactful or maintaining integrity in various situations. Take the case of Bill and John. John was late for an appointment with Bill. Rather than apologizing for his action, being late, John could indicate how Bill voluntarily participated in the action, (Instead of saying, "I'm sorry I was late," John could say, "Thank you for waiting for me.") Thus John appeased Bill but did not have to subordinate his own position in doing so. By including Bill in John's tardiness, John shifted responsibility from himself to both himself and Bill. Mehrabian points out that this procedure is only helpful if the transgression is semi-unclear, nondefined, rather than very clear and defined.13

The topics above are by no means all of the topics covered by research in nonverbal communication, and Albert Mehrabian is not the only researcher in the field. These topics fit into an intellectual approach to nonverbal communication. There is also an emotional component. Several writers call this component masking. Masking is setting up semi-permanent behaviors designed to protect the individual from the outside world. That is, masking is used to preserve one's self-identity and standardize one's reactions toward others; it's a universal defense mechanism. Such indicators as facial expressions and vocalizations serve in both the intellectual

and emotional roles of nonverbal communication. Facial expressions serve to protect each of us from expressing our attitudes outwardly. Vocal expression, especially sarcasm, allows us to hide our feelings while making socially acceptable remarks. In addition these nonverbal masking techniques preserve social identity. This is something like a self fulfilling prophecy. Actions occur in various consistent or predictable ways that yield predictable responses. Social identity is based on relationships between actions and predictable responses. One step farther, self control is a combination of these reactions and inward reactions to socially accepted behaviors; that circles back to masking. Expecting specific reactions, certain actions are inadvertently chosen that yield these specific reactions, thus fulfilling the prophecy. Relaxation of self control would expose ourselves in our reactions to others and would thus leave us open for attack by others. Since masking is also a socially learned skill, children learn how to mask, hide themselves from others, at a very early age. Then as they get older the mask hardens and is extremely hard to bend or break.

With the sketchy outline of nonverbal communication presented above, let me now present the philosophy that led me to this project.

15. Ibid., p. 69.
17. Ibid., p. 69.
Philosophical Basis

Keeping in mind that children learn how to read and send non-verbal messages from their parents, what happens to the child who models parents with poor skills of their own? The child learns improper skills, he mis-interprets many cues or relates improperly to their associates. These problems could lead to discomfort or emotional crisis as the child continues to make the same mistakes. For example, some parents tend to teach their children to hide their emotions, not allow their emotions to be communicated to anyone. At least two problems develop: the person appears rigid or cold, "aloof", or the person is unable to show the type of commitment to a partner that the partner requires in a relationship. This is a common problem in marital disharmony and divorce.

Granted, much of the above is conjecture, but the following example is a low key example that is easily recognizable in everyday life. Suppose Phil is driving his car and the person in the next lane cuts in on him, what is Phil's first reaction? Depending on various personal or temporal factors, Phil would probably feel (and show) some degree of anger. He may even honk his horn at the other driver. Seldom do drivers think of the other driver first; maybe he is lost, scared, or something physiological is stopping him from driving properly. Also the other driver might get scared and do something really serious if Phil honks his horn.\textsuperscript{18} This example,

and many more, show a double dilemma. As in many cases, Phil was not sensitive to the other person's needs, and he with Phil's. Unfortunately this is quite often the case. People are only concerned with their own needs and how someone else affects them, rather than how they affect others.

The last example and explanation adds yet another value to a nonverbal communication framework, educating consideration and affection. That is, creating an awareness of the four cell approach to interaction: 1) personal needs, 2) how someone else affects personal needs, 3) the other person's needs, 4) how interpersonal interaction affects personal needs. I think it would be beneficial to define each of the four cells in terms of the interaction process. Cell one is how we react to ourselves, 2) how we react to someone else, 3) how the other person reacts to himself, 4) how we react to the way someone else is reacting to us. Of the four cells, only cell two is consciously used in interactions. Most people behave almost completely on the cues presented to them by someone else and visa versa, totally neglecting three other sources of cues. We neglect to account for the cues we are presenting of and for ourselves. Whenever we talk to someone, a part of the communication is a set of nonverbal cues as to how we feel about ourselves. If someone picks up these inward cues, he is called sensitive and he becomes a counselor. Carrying the examination of this cell one step farther, even though the addressee may be unaware of the communicator's personal cues in his communication, the addressee still tends to make use of these personal cues unconscious-
ly in choosing reactions to the communicator. Cell three is similar, only taken from the other point of view. Finally, cell four appears to be the cumulative result of cell three and the reverse of cell two, how someone else reacts to us. Cell four incorporates our inward feelings, outward feelings, how both affect the other person, the other person's inward and outward feelings, how they affect us, and continues circularly. This is all very complicated, maybe a drawing would clarify things somewhat. Below is a figure only for person A reacting to person B.

A reacts to B, influenced by:

(1) A reacting to himself
(2) B reacting to A
(3) B reacting to himself
(4) B reacting to A reacting to himself

As a further point of clarification, consider any social gathering where two people meet for the first time. They meet because of some mutual attraction, then a conversation begins. One person is hesitant, speaks low, and doesn't look into the other person's eyes. Because of this the other person feels that he isn't liked and acts accordingly. Each person decided that the other person didn't like him and the conversation ends even though they really did like each other. Bad vibrations were sent out and received, not because of bad feelings about the other but because the first person was self-conscious and scared. This is not an
atypical example of first encounters. Additional encounters and experience may allow people to really associate with one another.

Hopefully I have sufficiently shown that nonverbal education could be valuable in group experience either alone or in conjunction with other therapeutic approaches. All of the above statements and examples are based on personal experiences. They should sharpen awareness of some of the subtleties in human communication. Once one of these oddities appear, it points towards others and pushes for the others to be defined. Thus the basis for nonverbal education lies in interpretation and mixed message communication. Later investigation moves towards rationalization, substitutes for apology, manipulation, and so on. With these topics learned, we are more able to judge our own acts and those of others according to their context rather than our personal dispositions.

It remains to be seen just how valuable this approach will be, and in what contexts. I can only hope that further research will allow me to develop a more concise model for implementing my theories. At this time it is sufficient for me to have tried to convince someone else of the possible feasibility of nonverbal communication in group work. Remember, "It's not what you say, but how you say it, what you're doing, where you are, how you feel, and so on when you're saying it."
Project Discussion and Results

Now I would like to describe the project. I led two groups at the Los Angeles Job Corps for women. One group was composed of 10 staff counselors and the other of 10 resident girls. Each group met once a week for about five weeks. There was a different approach used for each group. The staff group was aimed toward education and familiarity with nonverbal techniques with a side goal of self awareness. The student group was aimed primarily toward self awareness, sociological expectations, and fun. Both groups were exposed to similar topics with emphasis based on the goals specified. The topics included: first impressions, interpretations, mixed messages, power, status, life space, discussion of roles, and escaping from prescribed roles (unmasking).

I will first describe the staff group; however various problems and techniques appeared in both groups. The initial session was occupied with first impressions and the explanation of my theory. This was probably because I felt somewhat uncomfortable and not very confident in this situation. Fortunately my feelings led the group to a practical example of how feelings about myself could be communicated to others as feelings about them. This led the group to explore first impressions in general. To enhance the discussion a role playing game was used. One person acted as an employer while another acted as a prospective employee, no words were said. Rather, each person assumed postures, positions, and expressions suitable to his role. For example, the employer
sat on a table, relaxed, with his hands and legs in a comfortable position rather than rigidly folded or crossed, while the employee sat rigid in a chair. The roles were exemplified in the body positions of the actors and the difference in their seating arrangement. Later, various permutations of the roles and positions were tried. The discussion following the role playing game shed light on the concepts of power and status. As a sideline, several group members were asked to describe another member according to what stereotypes the member fitted into. Thus, the group examined first impressions resulting from clothing cues, physical cues, hair style, body shape and size, and so on. These are the most common references in basing first impressions. This proved to be difficult because the members of the group knew each other too well. Also in the first session, status cues were explored, primarily because status is highly related to both the employer-employee relationships discussed above and also because first impressions contain some form of status considerations. The discussion and role playing created enough interest in nonverbal communication for the group to continue.

The following week was devoted to verbal communication, what was being said, why listen to someone when they talk, how feelings are communicated, and so on. First, two group members were chosen to speak to the entire group on the subject of their choice, simultaneously. After several pairs of speakers, the group discussed attention getting devices. Such cues as topic interest, voice fluctuation, vocalizations, volume control, and proximity appeared
as the deciding factors in attention getting behaviors. These factors were then linked with the counseling setting experienced daily. Next, individuals were asked to talk about a topic using positive verbal and negative vocal components of the communication. This was found to be easy since this combination is sarcasm and is a widely used form of communication. As described earlier, the discussion showed that sarcasm is used in settings where the communicator doesn't want to offend the addressee; the positive verbal refers to the addressee. When asked to talk using positive vocal with negative verbal components, the individuals said that they couldn't do it, not because they were unable but because it seemed too artificial and unreal for them.

The following session dealt with life space and territoriality. To illustrate the topic, one member was chosen to stand still in the center of the room. Then one or more other members approached the center figure until the center figure said he was uncomfortable. This procedure was designed to produce a comfortability zone. The front would be farther away from the center person and the back would be closer, relating to visual awareness of the other persons. To some extent the game worked but because the group was already so familiar, the front zone was about 6 inches while the rear zone was at the point of absolute contact. However there was one effect not planned on. The center figure remained calm, as per directions and established a comfortability zone, but the other members showed signs of unrest as they approached the center figure. These people
were anxious, especially when approaching the center figure from behind. Group discussion decided that the center figure was expected to behave uniformly and thus had little signs of anxiety, while the approachers were given no behavioral directions and feared prevailing on the center figure. This showed violation of their life space by the center figure even though the center figure remained motionless.

Throughout the first three sessions, discussion also revealed facial and vocal cues, sociological expectations, and masking behaviors. Since these three areas relate to almost every other area, specific results cannot be defined. However, general examples might be useful. Why do people in a crowded elevator stand rigidly? Why do friends say, "Hi, how are you?" and walk by before they hear the answer? Why do people act happy when they are sad? All of these questions deal with imposed social behaviors. Being free, unrigid, in an elevator somehow is a sign of unfamiliarity with strangers. Similarly, friends are supposed to seem concerned but don't really want to "hear" specific problems, either verbally or facially. Discussion of the above topics led to personal awareness for the group members and myself of socially imposed behaviors, even though specific remedies or alterations in the behaviors could not be discovered.

Another topic introduced was intimacy. Whether intimate topics could be discussed, eye contact, and seating arrangements were viewed in relation to the counseling situation. The group decided
that extremely intimate topics couldn't be discussed in a facing position with a high degree of eye contact. Thus, counselors shouldn't be upset if their clients fail to look them in the eye during an interview. I and the others mistakenly perceived lack of eye contact as disinterest on the client's part or failure on the counselor's part to relate to the client. It was nice to see enlightened expressions on all of our faces.

The final session dealt with personal emotions of each of the staff members. To do this another technique was introduced, emotional charades. At first, individuals were asked to act out an emotion. This procedure proved of little value since the emotions chosen were readily associated with the individual doing the acting. Next, I chose emotions I felt did not fit certain individuals and had them act the emotions. This worked really well, not because the emotions were easily identified, but because the actor had to assume behaviors previously not used or unfamiliar. This game truly led to insight and should be developed into a more suitable group procedure. The final task involved two people. One person (A) was given an attitude to feel and act toward another person (B). All of his (A) actions were to fit the given attitude. The other person (B) was to react with whatever behaviors he felt appropriate. Then someone else (A₁) acted in the same set of feelings toward (B) as did person (A). After (B) reacted with several (A, A₁, A₂, ... Aₙ) people, the uninformed person (B) was to describe what attitudes the other people were instructed to portray. This
procedure proved to be beneficial also for interpreting other people's actions and noting differences between different people.

The only problem I had with the staff group was my own. It was hard for me to feel enough self-confidence in the beginning, but self-confidence increased with successive sessions. The staff members were very cooperative and aided me both in group leadership and in developing techniques needed for the student group.

Discussion of the student group will have to be very incomplete. Due to Christmas vacation and a late starting date, we only had two sessions up to the time of this writing. Also, progress is much slower in the student group than in the staff group. This is because of the different approaches used. In the student group, I tried to have the group come up with the facts I wanted to uncover. Therefore the topics had to be developed indirectly. Another problem was that the students were very non-communicative; they didn't have good discussions as did the staff group. More examples had to be presented with less intellectual development. The only topics covered to date are life space and status. Even these topics are incomplete. The students are a challenge to my philosophies and techniques. It is harder to develop techniques and discussions in the student group than in any other group I have led. The students were interested in the initial session and I am hopeful that subsequent sessions will prove more fruitful. The students practiced some of the techniques and games explored in the first session on their friends and counselors. The group will continue
for several more weeks.

In conclusion, I would like to present an overview of the entire project and indicate some direction for the future. I believe the group experience was valuable for all concerned. The staff learned new ways of working with their students, how to make more rational interpretations, and how to better read and send attitudinal cues. I hope these gains are real; however they are only my opinion of the results I saw in the staff members. The student group received a new group experience, learned various means of controlling their interpretations, and learned more about interpersonal interaction. I became more confident with groups, developed my techniques a great deal, and hopefully created some interest in the field of nonverbal education. In general, the members of both groups and myself are more aware of the attitudes communicated according to the nonverbal cues described and how to better relate to one another. Further exposure to groups would aid me in developing more efficient means of implementing my philosophies and allow me to develop nonverbal education as a viable means of group interaction.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


