

Nonverbal Behaviors and Social Rewards

Most of us have expectancies about appropriate nonverbal behavior. When people deviate from expected norms, we generally devalue them, feel discomfort, and compensate in some way. If, on the other hand, people keep a polite distance and show normal interest levels, they will be seen as rewarding. Burgoon and Hale wondered if there are times when it is more rewarding to have our expectations violated than to have them confirmed. They argued that violations of expectations lead to arousal, which in turn leads us to attend to our partners more fully. If our partners are rewarding and their violation is in a positive direction, we may interpret and evaluate their violation positively, and our communication patterns and outcomes will improve. If, on the other hand, they are not very rewarding and their violation is a negative one, then we should experience negative outcomes.

Burgoon and Hale designed a study to investigate what would happen when communicators violated or conformed to their own preestablished levels of nonverbal immediacy with friends and strangers. They hypothesized that interactions with friends would be more rewarding than with strangers. They also predicted that, in interactions with friends, increases in nonverbal immediacy would lead to increased attraction and credibility and relational messages of intimacy, involvement, similarity, and equality; while, in interactions with strangers, increases in nonverbal immediacy would lead to decreases in attraction and credibility and a sense of detachment and distance. Finally, they believed that decreases in immediacy would decrease rewards regardless of whether the interactors were strangers or friends.

The *method* was experimental. Participants were pairs of friends, who interacted with one another and with strangers. One member of each pair acted as a confederate for the manipulation of immediacy. In the normal immediacy condition, the confederate acted normally. In the nonimmediacy condition, the confederate increased the physical distance between self and partner and communicated in a distant and unreceptive way. In the high immediacy condition, the confederate moved closer and seemed more involved than normal.

Following discussion, the participants rated the credibility, attraction, and relational messages of the confederates. A factorial design was used, with three levels of immediacy (high, medium, and low) and two levels of communicator reward (stranger or friend).

The *results* of an analysis of variance showed that friends were indeed seen as more rewarding (in terms of attraction, credibility, and expression of intimacy and similarity) than strangers. Results also indicated that non immediacy violations produced negative ratings with both friends and strangers. The immediacy violation was less clear. While it did not increase ratings as Burgoon and Hale had thought it might, it did not decrease them markedly, either with friends or with

strangers. There appeared to be no significant cost to violating immediacy in a positive direction, but there was no gain either. Overall, the results also showed that decreased nonverbal immediacy communicated detachment, dissimilarity, and dominance. Although not all of their hypotheses were confirmed, the direction of the results were promising and showed partial support for their model of nonverbal expectancy violations. The study helped the researchers learn more about how we evaluate others on the basis of their nonverbal behaviors.

Source: Judee K. Burgoon and Jerold L. Hale, "Non-verbal Expectancy Violations: Model Elaboration and Application to Immediacy Behaviors," *Communication Monographs*, 55 (March 1988), 58-79.