



Nonverbal Patterns in Youth Culture

Russell L. French

"Many adults in the over-thirty age group are basically unaware of what's been happening culturally in the United States in the past half-dozen years." Study of the changing patterns, however, will help us better understand today's young people.

• The automated glass doors of the suburban supermarket slide open. Helen Smith, Caucasian, perhaps 40 years old, and her son, Jerry, age 16, enter. Anyone more than casually interested might conclude that the two have been having "words" about something prior to entering the supermarket. Even though both mother

and son are now affecting an "everything is fine" appearance, their nonverbal behaviors give them away. Neither mother nor son looks at the other. A certain rigidity of body movement and facial muscles marks their movement to the shopping carts. Mrs. Smith tugs a cart from its nest in a long line of carts, then shoves it toward her son. Jerry grabs the handle of the awkward wire basket and moves off dutifully beside his mother down the long aisle among cabbages, cucumbers, and kumquats.

To the casual observer, it would appear that neither mother nor son is watching the other. In fact, each seems intent on avoiding the other, but about halfway down the aisle, Helen Smith suddenly stops, wheels



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on her son, and hisses in an angry stage whisper, "Wipe that off your face!" Jerry's response is, "Huh?" Immediately, Mrs. Smith's face flushes. She jerks as though slapped in the face and begins to pour out her feelings about her son's "rotten attitude." "disrespect," and "disobedience."

- The scene shifts to a busy, high school hallway during the break between classes. A white, male student, Billy Bigelow, comes running down the hall. There is a rule against running. So in your role as teacher, you call to him, motion him to you, and begin a brief lecture on why one can't run in the halls. A few years ago, Billy's response pattern during the lecture would have been predictable. Typically, he would have stood with hands thrust deep in his pockets, shoulders hunched, eyes on the floor. But, that was a long ago yesterday. Today, Billy "strolls" over to you when called and stands "insolently," head up but tilted slightly to one side, eyes forward but focused somewhere beyond you, body swaying slightly to

an unheard rhythm, fingers silently snapping or pushed halfway into his pockets, body almost limp.

Perhaps you end your lecture with a question, "What do you have to say for yourself, young man?" When we were teenagers confronted with that sort of unanswerable question, we responded with a shrug of our shoulders, eyes still fixed on the floor. If you have taught for some time, you remember students of seven or eight years ago who responded to the question as we did—humbly, contritely, with a shrug of the shoulders and lowered eyes. But Billy doesn't do that. He looks you in the eye for a moment, then rolls his eyes, turns on his heel and "strolls" off down the hall. It's maddening! It's frightening! "What's come over youth today? Must they always put me down? Conflict! Confrontation! Oh, I'd like to hit him!" Perhaps these thoughts flash through your mind as you stand there angry, confused, and helpless.

Are these two scenarios related? What do they say to us as educators

about youth culture today? These are the questions to be addressed here. The answers may enable us to understand better what we see and experience.

Across the country today, teachers and parents of adolescents are perplexed. Most interactions with these young people appear to us to be confrontational. In particular, their nonverbal behaviors toward us drive us to distraction. They are not at all the behavior patterns we used at that age, nor are they the patterns (much like our own) that we saw among students a decade ago. Many adults in the over-30 age group are basically unaware of what's been happening culturally in the United States in the last half-dozen years.

Changing Cultural Patterns

Black culture is in! As we look at our television screens, survey the advertisements for films and concerts, and review the magazines displayed on local newstands, we suddenly become aware that black performers, black musicians, black theatre, black homes (as portrayed in televised situation comedies) have become popular. In a society that has emphasized since the early 1960s discrimination against blacks, disenfranchisement of blacks, and the historical and cultural contributions of blacks, black has finally become beautiful. While those of us over 30 may not have been attending rock concerts or watching *Good Times*, adolescents have been.

The nonverbal communication patterns of the black culture are different from those of the white culture. Please notice that I did not say that black nonverbal patterns are better than or worse than white nonverbal patterns. They are merely different. There is a growing reservoir of research data regarding the everyday

Photo: Michael D. Sullivan.



communication patterns of various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, and what has been learned should be of use to educators.

Johnson¹ has told us that the "eye roll" (movement of the eye balls in a low arc away from the receiver of communication), the "blank stare" (eyes focused beyond the receiver of communication) and the "back turn" (a shift in body position to expose

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one's back slightly to the receiver) are patterned behaviors in the black culture. As such, they may carry meanings that are often misunderstood by members of other cultures. For example, the "back turn" is often a sign of trust used in black interactions to signify understanding of what has been said or agreement with it. The "blank stare" may merely communicate a reluctance to look an authority figure directly in the eye. The eye roll has been historically a way of expressing impudence and disapproval of a person in authority, but its extensive use may now have weakened its message.

The research of Birdwhistell,² Condon,^{3,4} Byers,⁵ and Chapple⁶ has demonstrated that body rhythms differ from person to person and from culture to culture. To put it differently, each person's body rhythm differs, but there are patterns of black rhythm and patterns of white rhythm. Typically, black male adolescents walk differently from white male adolescents. Our research, as well as Johnson's, indicates that the historical "white walk" is usually brisk with

the walker placing his weight on the balls of his feet. Both arms swing. The nonverbal message seems to be, "I am a strong man, and I'm in a hurry to get somewhere." In a goal-oriented society such as ours, that message strikes us as being right and appropriate. We can look at the walker with pride and a feeling of kinship.

The "black walk" is different. The rhythm is different. It is much slower than the white walk—actually, more of a stroll. The walker's head is often slightly elevated and tipped to one side, casually. The walker's weight is cast to the heel of the rear foot. Only one arm, with the hand slightly cupped, swings. The other arm and hand hang limply, or the hand is tucked in the pocket with the thumb outside. As Johnson states the gait is almost a walking dance. The nonverbal message of this walk appears to be, "I am strong; I am 'cool.' I can't be bothered by anything in this world." To those of us who are essentially goal-directed and whose perceptions are colored by the domi-

¹ Kenneth R. Johnson. "Black Kinesics—Some Non-Verbal Communication Patterns in the Black Culture." *Florida Reporter*, Spring/Fall, 1971; pp. 17-20, 57.

² Ray L. Birdwhistell. *Kinesics and Context*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1970.

³ William S. Condon. "Linguistic-Kinesic Research and Dance Therapy." *Proceedings of the Third Annual Conference of the American Dance Therapy Association*, 1968.

⁴ William S. Condon. "A Segmentation of Behavior." *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 5:221-35; 1967.

⁵ Paul Byers. "Biological Rhythms as Information Channels in Communication Behavior." In: P. P. G. Bateson and Peter H. Klopper, editors. *Perspectives in Ethology* (Volume 2). New York: Plenum Press, 1976.

⁶ Eliot D. Chapple. *Culture and Biological Man*. New York: Holt, 1970.

nant behavior patterns of a few years ago (white patterns), the black walk is somehow obscene. It bothers us deep inside. It seems to convey that "getting somewhere ain't half as important as the going." For those who are goal-oriented, who value productivity over process, who have grown up with the nonverbal patterns of the white culture, the black walk is an affront, a challenge to what we have known and valued for a long while.

Youth culture has adopted the nonverbal patterns of the black culture. As implied in previous statements, those in the youth culture of the last six or eight years have been exposed to the nonverbal patterns of the black culture through the mass media, the world of entertainment, and increased interpersonal contacts with black peers. Their exposure has been more complete, more intense than the exposure of those of us in the over-thirty age group, because we travel in different circles. For young people, no matter what their race, black nonverbal patterns have become "cool." They have been adopted as readily as we adopt a "pet" word when we hear it many times over and catch its lilt in our ears and on our tongues. In most cases, the adoption process has been unintentional, unconscious. Old messages and meanings have been lost in transition. New meanings, often more general, have become attached.

Now, the two scenarios at the beginning of this article come into focus. Their relationship to each other and to the culture in which they are embedded becomes clear. Billy Bigelow's behavior in the school hallway—the black walk, the blank stare, the back turn, the eye roll may not constitute purposeful confrontation. They may well be only a reflex response to the situation at hand, an effort to be "cool" in the context of contemporary

youth culture. Only Billy can tell us, and he himself may not be sure.

The episode between Jerry Smith and his mother can be easily explained in this context. A confrontation between mother and son had taken place. Both parties were still sensitive to that confrontation. Mrs. Smith, a true mother, was still watching for signs of hostility, rebellion, and aggression in Jerry. Her view was

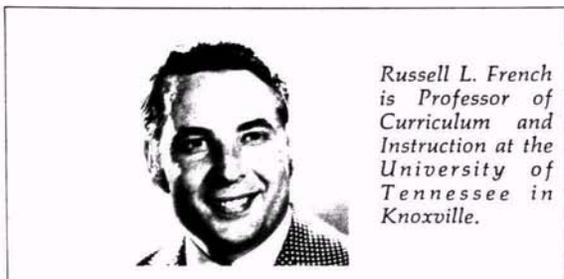
"We must learn to distinguish the nonverbal cues of active hostility and rebellion from those patterns of nonverbal behavior now common to the youth culture though uncommon to our own youth."

colored by her "nonverbal memory"—the remembrance of what she would have done under the same circumstances in another day and time. Jerry was trying to be "cool," to avoid further confrontation, but his nonverbal cues didn't fit the expectations of his mother. She chastized him. His response ("Huh?") was probably an honest response. He didn't know what he had done wrong this time. He didn't have the nonverbal image imprinted in his mother's mind. But Jerry's response was misinterpreted by Helen Smith as "another put-down," an unwillingness on Jerry's part to bring his behavior pattern into line with some commonly understood behavioral norm. It was too much for her to take. She exploded!

Hundreds of episodes like these two are taking place across the country every day, in classrooms, school halls, and homes. Often, neither party to the perceived confrontation is aware of the factors that have contributed to negative feelings and reactions, among them changing cultural patterns of nonverbal behavior.

A Plea for New Understanding

Parents and teachers often ask me what can be done about this "gap" in nonverbal communication between young people and adults. There is no simple solution. It cannot be said that youth are "right" and adults "wrong" in their interactive expectations and behaviors, or vice versa. One bit of advice to school administrators, teach-



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ers, and parents does seem to be in order, however. If something in the communication patterns of youth bothers you, try to identify that something, then talk the situation out with your student or son or daughter. We cannot expect those of another generation to share our "nonverbal memories"—those expectations about communicative behavior patterns born of our experiences. Neither can we be expected to know all that is going on in the minds and hearts of youth. Further, there is no age limitation on the inability of human beings to see themselves. We are often unaware of our nonverbal patterns until someone has the courage to discuss them with us. Talking may not solve our communication problem, but it should help us understand each other better.

There is also a final note to educators and those who are responsible for educating educators, whether in universities or staff development pro-

grams. We educators are first of all professional communicators. That is to say that the central act, the focal point of the educational process is communication. The professional educator/communicator must understand what is happening in the communication process, what factors influence the process with specific individuals at a given time. After all, the client (in this case the student) cannot be expected to fully understand the situation. His/her experience and training are limited. Understanding is more than information gained. Polanyi has stated that understanding

... is the faculty which I recognize as the central act of knowing. For comprehension can never be absent from any process of knowing and is indeed the ultimate sanction of any such act. What is not understood cannot be said to be known.⁷

We educators must understand nonverbal patterns in youth culture, not just react to them. We must learn to distinguish the nonverbal cues of active hostility and rebellion from those patterns of nonverbal behavior now common to the youth culture though uncommon to our own youth. Those of us given responsibility for educating educators must help bring about this understanding. I have commented elsewhere⁸ on teaching the nonverbal experience. It is sufficient to say here that we must give some attention to this important area of human interaction in our teacher education and in-service, staff development programs if we have any hope of improving communication with youth. [E]

⁷ Michael Polanyi. "Faith and Reason." *The Journal of Religion* (4): 237-47; October 1961.

⁸ Russell L. French. "Teaching the Nonverbal Experience." *Theory Into Practice* 16 (3):175-82; June 1977.

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