

# Embodiment

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In a globalized world saturated with voice and messaging technologies, it is easy for scholars to overlook the role of the body in intercultural communication. Social distances across the globe have shrunk thanks to these innovations, as well as others, yet the importance of the body for communication remains undiminished. We are constituted by bodies, and this simple fact has encouraged scholarship in the area of embodied communication. Although much of this work has occurred outside the bounds of traditional intercultural communication research, it is highly relevant. From a deep appreciation of the body cultivated within performance studies, to findings offered by research on embodied cognition, intercultural communication study stands ready to further benefit, and benefit from, understanding the intersections between culture, communication, and bodies.

Within the discipline, the study of communication has typically been split between verbal and nonverbal domains. The body has received considerable attention, but largely as a compendium of nonverbal channels through which individuals transmit information (e.g., facial expressions or gestures). Unfortunately, this approach has privileged conscious, symbolic thought while treating the body as a (mere) vehicle for communication. The body is, of course, more than this. Accordingly, the aim of embodied communication is to promote a richer understanding of the body while avoiding the dualism of Descartes' "error" (see Damasio, 1994) through a more integrative approach. Within communication studies, this is perhaps best illustrated by the use of phenomenological methodologies and a performance-oriented understanding of human interaction and culture.

While much of the communication discipline has implicitly approached the body as split off from the stuff of meaning and culture, the area of performance studies has situated the body squarely in the center. Here the body is viewed as both a marker of group identity and the site of cultural production. It is advocated that cultural group identities exist not only as abstract symbolic constructs, but also in the material bodies that evoke ascription, sometimes despite protests to the contrary. For example, a woman may fully embrace dominant white discourse and disavow her birthright culture, but may still be viewed as the Other based on how the color of her skin or the texture of her hair is read by dominant group members. Through the force of history and habit, the body thus comes to anchor our group identities. In addition, the body also helps settle the meaning of identities through ritualized enactment. Appearances to the contrary, cultural identities do not have stable or fixed meanings, but are rather produced and reproduced through acts of performative gesture (Butler, 1990). These ritualized

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performances take root as early as the day we are born. For example, we may be given a masculine or feminine name, be dressed in gendered clothes, and come home to a room decorated with princesses or sports figures. As youth, boys may be criticized for “throwing like a girl,” and girls may be told to “act like a lady.” Even relatively simple gestures like crying or sitting with legs crossed or open are embodied performances, and judged accordingly by dominant culture. Hence, gender and other social identities such as race, religion, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are both marked on the body and continuously (re)produced through the body.

Because culture is manifest in embodied performance, the body has also been treated as a point of entry into Other cultures. For example, Conquergood (1992) has advocated that rich understanding of culture can be developed through the performance of ethnographic fieldnotes, as well as other cultural texts, rituals, and scripts. Because ethnographies are documents produced by embodied sense-making, performing them has become a way to (re)enact cultural insights. By literally embodying cultural rituals or taking the stories of the Other into one’s body, the opportunity for vulnerable, authentic dialogue between cultures is created. Although it entails very real ethical pitfalls, performance ethnography engages both participants and audience members in ways that more traditional scholarly models do not, and therefore helps to uniquely reveal cross-cultural connections and differences.

One final contribution of performance studies to an embodied understanding of culture involves recognition that culture is co-constituted in relationship to other bodies. Cultural performances such as rituals, rites, and spiritual celebrations offer liminal spaces where spectators and actors can merge, power can be redistributed, and reality may be temporarily suspended or transformed. Victor Turner coined the term “communitas” to explain the heightened sense of group solidarity and oneness that occurs when bodies are engaged by a persuasive cultural performance. As illustration, Johnson (2003) conducted an ethnographic study of an all-white, atheist gospel choir based in Australia. As an African American raised in a Baptist church, Johnson was initially skeptical about the authenticity of the choir. It was only when the Australian choir came to the United States and sang before an African American church congregation that a transformation occurred. As the choir gained the expressed support of the audience and the participants moved toward communitas, Johnson insightfully concluded that the white singers and African American audience members were co-producing blackness. In this instance, blackness was more than some disembodied idea; rather it was literally manifest through and felt in a shared, embodied experience. By centering the body in analyses such as this, performance studies scholars have provided important insights about the many different roles that bodies play in marking, enacting, understanding, and co-constructing culture.

In addition to performance studies, an embodied appreciation of human communication and culture has also been cultivated in disciplines typically less allied with communication studies, such as anthropology, linguistics, and cognitive science. Because human evolution has been central to anthropological thinking, the body has rarely been absent in this field. Even so, it wasn’t until the 1970s that anthropologists began to widely integrate the body into their consideration of culture. For example, Ellen (1977) argued that culture exists in dialectical relationship to the body—all cultures

emerge constrained by the structure of the human body and also simultaneously mediate experiences of the body that are particular and local. This idea, that the body helps to structure culture, was further and famously discussed several years later by the linguist George Lakoff and his coauthor Mark Johnson (1980) in their seminal book *Metaphors We Live By*. The thesis of their book is that cultural, conceptual systems are metaphorically structured (i.e., concepts are understood in terms of other concepts; e.g., “seeing is believing”) and that the entire, rich, elaborated system is ultimately grounded in physical, embodied experience. Over the past decades, linguistic research has helped to unpack how the body influences language production and meaning-making across various cultural contexts. However, perhaps the biggest contributor to understanding culture and communication as embodied phenomena has been cognitive science.

Cognitive science is the interdisciplinary study of the mind, which first appeared in the 1930s. It gave birth to the field of artificial intelligence and rose to prominence alongside the digital computer. Historically, cognitive science has relied heavily on a computational paradigm—one in which intelligence is modeled as a program processing information through use of a complex series of rules or functions (i.e., software). However, contemporary cognitive science now largely favors a neural network approach over that of symbol manipulation. With this approach, a relatively simple structure is imagined to perform non-summative functions when operating in parallel together with other similar structures. For example, a single, “dumb” termite (*Odontotermes obesus*) can help build a nest that accommodates the harvest of fungi and capitalizes on diurnal temperature oscillations to ventilate carbon dioxide. This is accomplished without the benefit of central planning or direction—hallmarks of the computational paradigm. Instead, this elaborate architecture (a manifestation of intelligence) emerges out of interaction as a property of the collective network.

As the name indicates, a neural network approach is modeled after the (simple) structure and (complex) function of biological neurons. Neurons are the building block of the human brain. As such, they provide the platform for abstract, symbolic thought that, following a computational model, functions as a “program” to direct subsequent human behavior. However, just as conscious thought can direct the body, the converse is equally (if not more) true. Recent neuroscience indicates that body states are the focus of most (unconscious) brain activity and that these states can have an according and often undetected impact on conscious thought. For example, memory of a traumatic event may rush to mind when a somatic sensation associated with the event is triggered outside of awareness. Consequently, neuronal distribution throughout the entire body (and not just in the brain) has pushed the domain of “thought” and “intelligence” beyond the presumed neural seat of conscious processing (i.e., the brain’s prefrontal cortex) out to the entire neural network. In other words, thought within cognitive science is now widely treated as an emergent and embodied phenomenon (see Calvo & Gomila, 2008).

What does a model of embodied thought look like? Treating thought as embodied means that it is an interactive process that not only transcends the brain, but also perhaps the individual organism. According to a communicative theory of gesture (Cole, Gallagher, & McNeill, 2002), the body helps to accomplish thought because gesture and language are one system. For example, pointing improves performance on counting tasks because the physical movement serves as a mode of calculation, the results of

which are subsequently articulated in language. Gestures are an analogic form of representation and, as such, they often ground more complex, symbolic representations. Consequently, thought is more effective when these systems are aligned, such as when a pulling gesture accompanies the sentence, “I pulled the drawer open”; a pushing gesture will typically interfere with such an utterance. With respect to persuasive appeals, this means that message processing begins with kinesis—gestures of agreement have been shown to lead to more positive responses than gestures of disagreement. The body is thus more than a vehicle for communication; it is also a mode of understanding.

It is possible to consider the body as the domain not only of the mind, but also other bodies as well. Because humans are one of only 16 species considered to be eusocial—those demonstrating the greatest social organization and cooperation—we often distribute thinking across our social groups. When we are part of a crowd, thought is often distributed to those around us, and what they decide, we do. Likewise, socially shared information permits collaboration and the co-construction of remembering. Finally, we may offload recognition and sense-making to socially motivated heuristics when social identities are salient. For example, the fact that many white US Americans readily identify harmless objects as harmful weapons when in the hands of African Americans is less a function of information-processing that occurs within an individual brain and more a function of information processed across individual minds, embodied habits, and collective narratives. Thus, although conscious awareness is occupied almost entirely by symbolic thought, such thoughts are not the sole, or even primary basis, for our understanding and action in the world. Instead, understanding and action are generated by a mind that is distributed across brains and bodies, both our own and those with whom we share culture.

SEE ALSO: Cognitive Styles across Cultures; Identity and Intercultural Communication; Intergroup Anxiety; Neuroscience of Intergroup Communication; Othering and Otherness; Phenomenology of Cultural Communication; Social Identity Theory

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**Further reading**

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