

People in high contact cultures also prefer greater sensory involvement with the person with whom they are communicating than do people in low contact cultures. To illustrate, consider the role of smell in Arab cultures:

To the Arab, to be able to smell a friend is reassuring. Smelling is a way of being involved with another, and to deny a friend his [or her] breath would be to act ashamed. In some rural Middle Eastern areas, when Arab intermediaries call to inspect a prospective bride for a relative, they sometimes ask to smell her. Their purpose is not to make sure she is freshly scrubbed; apparently what they look for is any lingering odor of anger or discontent. The Burmese [high contact] show their affection during greeting by pressing mouths and noses upon the cheek and inhaling the breath strongly. The Samoans [high contact] show affection by juxtaposing noses and smelling heartily. In contrast, [U.S.] Americans [moderate contact] seem to maintain their distance and suppress their sense of smell. (Almaney & Alwan, 1982, p. 17)

Differences in use of smell can create misunderstandings when people from different cultures communicate. When Arabs interact with U.S. Americans, they often feel sensory deprivation and become alienated because of the lack of sensory contact (Hall, 1983). U.S. Americans, in contrast, are anxious because of too much sensory contact.

Touch also is an aspect of sensory involvement. People in Latin American and Middle Eastern cultures engage in more tactile behavior than people in the United States and Northern Europe (e.g., Engebretson & Fullmer, 1970; Watson, 1970). People in Asian cultures, in contrast, tend to engage in less touching behavior than U.S. Americans and Northern Europeans (Barnlund, 1975). Asian cultures are low touch, the U.S. American culture is moderate touch, and Mediterranean cultures are high touch (Watson, 1970).

Distance, smell, and touch are not the only aspects of nonverbal communication that differ across cultures. There also are differences in eye contact. The differences have to do with the extent to which people engage in eye contact and when they engage in eye contact. Members of low contact cultures (e.g., Asian cultures) tend to avoid eye contact when speaking and listening. Members of moderate contact cultures (e.g., Australia, Northern Europe, United States), in contrast, engage in more eye contact than members of low contact cultures (e.g., Hall, 1966; Noesjirwan, 1978). Members of high contact cultures (e.g., Mediterranean cultures) engage in more eye contact than members of moderate contact cultures (e.g., Watson & Graves, 1966).

People in individualistic cultures tend to engage in eye contact when listening to others more than when speaking. The listeners' eye contact is interpreted as an indication that they are listening to the speaker. Members of other cultures (e.g., African cultures) learn to avoid eye contact when listening to others, especially when the person speaking is of higher status than the person listening (Byers & Byers, 1972). This pattern carries over to African Americans in the United States; that is, African Americans tend to look down (rather than engage in eye contact) to show respect when interacting with someone of higher status. European Americans often interpret this lack of eye contact as indicating that African Americans are inattentive or uninterested, or that they are lying (European Americans learn to look people in the eye to indicate they are telling the truth). European Americans' eye contact behavior, on the other hand, may be interpreted as aggressive by African Americans.

There is one final aspect of sensory involvement, how people use their voice. Members of high contact cultures tend to speak loudly (Hall, 1959; Watson & Graves, 1966). In Arab cultures, for example, loudness is viewed as indicating strength and sincerity, and softness is viewed as reflecting deviousness and weakness. Members of moderate contact cultures tend to speak more softly than members of high contact cultures, and members of low contact cultures tend to speak the softest.

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