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Introduction to the Special Issue on Theory in Nonverbal Communication

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Abstract

To a striking degree, the study of nonverbal behavior and nonverbal communication has benefited from thoughtful attention to sophisticated theory. The Special Issue on Theoretical Approaches to Nonverbal Communication presents several core contemporary theoretical approaches. This introduction places these approaches to emotion, communication, and social influence into a general context in this field.

Keywords Theory in nonverbal communication · Skill in nonverbal communication · Emotion · Special issue

To a striking degree, the study of nonverbal behavior and nonverbal communication has benefited from thoughtful attention to sophisticated theory. From its beginnings as a scientific discipline more than a century ago, through its emergence as a modern interdisciplinary science a half-century ago, the field of nonverbal communication has incorporated sophisticated ideas about emotion, communication, social influence, and more, and then developed cutting-edge research designs, assessment tools, and statistical analyses to test theory-based hypotheses. This Special Issue on Theoretical Approaches to Nonverbal Communication presents several core contemporary conceptions of these matters.

Much of the deep-rooted sophistication of the field of nonverbal communication can be traced to Charles Darwin, particularly his 1872 book, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Darwin's writings simultaneously launched the scientific study of (a) the evolved biological foundations of motivation and emotion; (b) individual differences, including variation in abilities and in personality; and (c) the relevant social and cultural influences and deviations. Yet, with psychology's subsequent focus on individual thinking and learning, Darwin's emphasis on the function of ability and behavior was mostly absent from the postwar social psychology that flowered (indeed, boomed) in the 1950s and 1960s, with textbook chapters on social perception that generally paid little attention to faces, vocal cues, posture, gesture, touch, or even emotion.

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As modern theories of nonverbal communication took root in the 1970s, I argued (Friedman, 1979) that a functional approach of thinking about skills in nonverbal communication represented three key shifts in conceptualizing the study of human social interaction. The first was a shift in emphasis from cognitive processes to a much greater focus on emotion. The second was a shift from studying abstract traits to more concrete abilities. The third was a shift from studying inferred states to studying process, including social interactional processes. Indeed, the past several decades have echoed Darwin's transformations and revolutionized psychology, with research built on new theories and models of the unspoken (non-word, that is, nonverbal) communication in social life and social exchange.

In this Special Issue, conceived and edited by the *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior's* Associate Editor Miles L. Patterson, the current-day vigor of theory in this field sparkles and inspires—just as it did over a century ago.

In the opening paper, Patterson (2019) builds upon his earlier conceptual work (Patterson, 1976, 1995) to offer a comprehensive systems model of dyadic nonverbal interactions. This approach not only emphasizes and expands the role of *multiple* nonverbal behaviors but also the *contextual* factors involving the separate, yet coordinated, aspects of nonverbal communication in each member of the dyad. He proposes a fairly complex but elegant systems model to address these matters. Cognitive/perceptual, emotional/motivational and socio-behavioral issues play out in context-based interaction.

Next, in a wide-ranging review and explanation of recent developments in conceptualizing emotions and emotional expression—basic emotions theory—Keltner et al. (2019a) describe how new work on emotion intersects with and informs a wide range of key processes across psychology, including language, culture, psychophysiology, and social solidarity and coordination. They update and expand the numbers of facial expressions, and they too document the major importance of a range of cues beyond faces, including vocal cues, touch, posture and autonomic reactions like blushing.

Next, in a challenge to the assumptions and research interpretations of basic emotions theory, Crivelli and Fridlund (2019) present a behavioral ecology view. This functionalist approach does not rely at all on internal emotional states but focuses directly on the function of nonverbal cues (e.g., faces) in social interactions—they are communication cues to change social interaction trajectories. This approach claims to sidestep various internal inconsistencies in the approaches pursued by researchers of basic emotions. Ultimately, these issues center around the question of, “What is an emotion?” Although informed by data, this is inherently a major conceptual and theoretical question, very appropriate for this special journal issue on theory.

In response (to Crivelli and Fridlund), Dacher Keltner and colleagues (Keltner et al. 2019b) describe how new research designs move beyond the classic matching of emotional stimuli to emotional labels, and bring to bear new theory and new methods to deepen our understanding of emotion and emotional expression, and how these can be studied. They show just how advanced the research has become, and how rich is the potential for future breakthroughs in understanding of these key matters of what it means to be a complex sentient being.

In a new perspective on nonverbal behavior and persuasion, Guyer et al. (2019) combine and expand the traditional emphases on attractiveness, credibility, and power with nonverbal behaviors and reactions. Specifically, the authors identify and explain the links between attitude change processes predicted in the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty and Cacioppo, 1986) and the nonverbal processes of communicators and targets of persuasive messages. The social psychology of influence and persuasion is one of the most-studied areas in the field, and this paper points to the many possibilities of joining the

rich theorizing about persuasion and influence with the fertile theorizing about nonverbal communication. For example, mimicry is steadily emerging as a major focus of research in both fields, as well their combination.

In the final theoretical paper, Quadflieg and Westmoreland (2019) propose a model of relational impression formation. They cleverly shift our attention from the more usual matters of impression formation of an individual to impression formation about people in dyads, triads, or groups. Although such matters have been formally examined since at least the 1970's—such as in Erving Goffman's (1971) analyses of how we judge that member of a pair are “with” each other—this fascinating area remains understudied. This paper—like the others in this special issue—also provides a valuable review of where key research has been and where trailblazing research in nonverbal communication is likely heading.

All in all, these theoretical advances are must reading for anyone studying emotion, nonverbal communication, or face-to-face social interaction.

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