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Rosenthal: Skill in Nonverbal Communication: Individual Differences

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Figure 11 Female figure, Ha'apai Group, Tonga Islands, whale-tooth ivory, 12.7 cm. high, Raymond and Laura Wielgus collection.

Whale ivory figures of humans were made and used in both the Tonga and Fiji Islands, which, although having different cultures and languages, had economic and political relationships before European intrusion into the area. The precise use and significance of the figures is not known, although some seem to have been neck pendants. In both societies whale-tooth ivory was among the most valued materials, and objects made of it were associated with persons of high rank and transactions of great social value.

from natural history to art museums. Since then the very concept of art in our culture has undergone such drastic revision that the inclusion of certain artifacts from non-literate societies among collections of fine art from Europe and Asia is no longer controversial. These changes are linked, too, to our changing conceptions of the nature of man. Two centuries ago primitive peoples were thought to be lesser humans in comparisons with civilized peoples. Now we believe in the universality of human nature, and according to our cultural definition of the nature of man, he/she is, among many things, an aesthetic being, and that is what exhibitions of this kind are fundamentally about. They are the visual proof of our late-twentieth-century cultural assumptions that art is universal to man. One knows that such an assumption would have been rejected by artists, patrons, and connoisseurs of the eighteenth century. One wonders what eighteenth-century Hawaiians would think about their religious images and symbols of political rank being placed alongside effigies and idols from many cultures they never knew existed. My guess is that they too would reject the entire idea.

Robert Rosenthal, ed. *Skill in Nonverbal Communication: Individual Differences.* Cambridge, Mass.: Oelgeschlager, Gunn, & Hain, 1979. xviii + 270 pp. No price (cloth).

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We all know people who seem especially skilled at nonverbal communication, flashing their emotions at will or divining ours even better than we can. The essays in this collection promise to reveal some of their secrets, telling us how to measure who is nonverbally skillful, showing us who they are and how they achieve their skill, and demonstrating the consequences of their skill for social interaction. This book fails to live up to its promises, and I was left doubting the value of the individual difference approach to nonverbal communication that Rosenthal and his fellow authors advocate. My skepticism stems from both the structure of individual differences in nonverbal behavior, which the book reveals, and important limitations in the scope of the book itself.

Friedman's introductory essay argues that individual differences in nonverbal communication should be thought of as an ability akin to intelligence rather than as a personality trait like extroversion. Abilities can be directly sampled by tests that have intrinsic meaning, while measures of traits require complex and controversial inferences about how items are related to underlying dispositions. In addition, Friedman claims that individual attributes thought of as abilities predict behavior more strongly than do attributes commonly thought of as traits (Mischel 1968).

The rest of this volume belies the simplicity and power which the ability concept tries to bestow on nonverbal skill. If success at nonverbal communication were an ability like intelligence, then one might expect it to have a simple structure like the general factor in intelligence, perhaps with subskills overlaid on the general factor. Unfortunately, nonverbal skill does not appear to be structured so simply. At a minimum one must distinguish between skill at transmitting nonverbal messages (encoding) and at reading them (decoding). Research by DiMatteo and other research reviewed by DePaulo and Rosenthal in the present volume shows that these two dimensions of nonverbal skill are only slightly related (mean $r = .13$).

Even within these two subareas, skills do not appear to be general. It is true that people whose spontaneous expressions of emotions are easy to read also exhibit expressions which are easy to read (Cunningham 1977; Zuckerman et al. 1976). However, success at both encod-

ing and decoding nonverbal messages is extremely sensitive to the dimension or category being portrayed and to the modality about which the judgment is made. For example, in his paper Zuckerman notes that four measures of success at nonverbal encoding are unrelated (median $r = .05$), as are five measures of success at nonverbal decoding (mean $r = .02$). DiMatteo also presents data showing the weak associations of different measures of nonverbal encoding and nonverbal decoding. For example, a person's success at decoding tone of voice depends on how the voices were prepared (mean $r = .10$ for content filtered and random-spliced PONS scores). Success at judging the voice stimuli was not strongly correlated with success at judging the face or body (mean $r = .09$).

In summary, while the authors conceive of nonverbal behavior as a skill, with the implication that it is a unitary phenomenon strongly predicting behavior, the data show it to be much more fragmentary. Different ways of measuring nonverbal ability are weakly correlated, and none of the measures strongly predicts behavior. This pattern, similar to that which made Mischel (1968) challenge the validity of the trait concept, also makes me doubt the value of an individual difference approach to nonverbal behavior. To the extent that researchers do find stable individual differences in nonverbal skillfulness, these may be caused by individual differences on an array of dimensions only some of which are traditionally thought of as components of nonverbal communication. The dimensions range from voluntary control of facial musculature to visual acuity to a conscientiousness in completing rating forms.

As I have illustrated, some of the difficulties in the book inhere in the phenomenon of nonverbal abilities. But other problems result from the book's limited scope. The essays are a showpiece for Rosenthal, his students, and his colleagues. Of the seven chapters, Rosenthal or his former students and colleagues wrote six. Only Ross's chapter on nonverbal expressiveness and physiological activity shows clear independence from the Rosenthal *modus operandi*. Other highly relevant approaches to individual differences in nonverbal skill, including those of Trower, Bryant, and Argyle (1978) and Kagan (e.g., Danish and Kagan 1971), have been completely ignored in this volume.

One consequence of inbred authorship is an overreliance on a single set of materials for assessing nonverbal abilities. Much of the research reported here is based on Rosenthal, Hall, DiMatteo, Rogers, and Archer's Profile of Nonverbal Sensitivity (PONS; 1979). In this test of decoding skill, a woman acted out twenty brief scenes that differed in the positivity or negativity of the emotion and the dominance or submission of the relationship being portrayed. These scenes are repeated with different combinations of information available to the decoder: facial expression, bodily movement, and tone of voice. The decoder's task is to guess what scene was

being portrayed. Two derivative tests use the PONS material but either combine visual and auditory information inconsistently or shorten viewing times. Five of the six essays which report data rely on the PONS or its derivatives, with varying degrees of importance.

The major deficiency in the PONS is its use of only one actress to enact all the scenes, making highly inconclusive claims, for example, that decoders show a bias toward visual or facial information (p. 211). The authors attribute to perceivers' biases what may be an idiosyncratic feature of this actress's expressive face and dull voice. Ekman, Friesen, and Ellsworth (1972) strongly urged the sampling of stimulus people in their evaluative review of the literature on facial expressions of emotion. The emphasis that Rosenthal and his colleagues place on individual differences in nonverbal skill makes the use of a single stimulus person in their testing materials especially surprising.

As in any collection, the essays here vary in quality. Hall's analysis of sex differences in encoding and decoding nonverbal communication is a very strong piece. She compiled a lot of evidence to demonstrate that women are indeed better than men at both displaying and interpreting nonverbal signs. She then tested the quality of several developmental explanations for this difference. According to an empathy explanation, the sex difference would result from the ability of women to share emotions or moods with others. A femininity explanation credits the sex difference to traditional sex role norms which require nonverbal skill of women. According to a power explanation, women get special benefit from correctly interpreting others' moods and intentions because of their lower status, and, therefore, learn to do it well. Finally, an outsider explanation claims that women get more practice viewing and interpreting nonverbal communication because they are observers of, rather than participants in, most social encounters. None of these factors seems able to account for the sex difference. Indeed, contrary to prediction, greater masculinity and less traditional sex roles lead to more nonverbal skill.

DePaulo and Rosenthal's use of the concept of nonverbal accommodation to account for some of the subtleties of sex differences in nonverbal skill is interesting but less successful. They reason that women, in trying to make social interaction run smoothly, learn to read nonverbal signs meant for public consumption and to make their own behavior easy to read. Their interesting extension is that women's superiority over men in reading nonverbal communication decreases as the cues become more difficult for the sender to control (i.e., women refrain from decoding messages they were not meant to see). While DePaulo and Rosenthal's data are consistent with this hypothesis, they do not seriously consider a major alternative explanation, that nonverbal signs which are difficult to control, like micromomentary facial expressions, are also not informative. Thus women may lose their superiority over men when both become increasingly in-

accurate because the stimulus is uninformative. DePaulo and Rosenthal's failure to do the appropriate analyses to test this alternative (for example, by partialing out overall accuracy or by computing transformations of the original data) is symptomatic of Rosenthal's and his colleagues' general neglect of stimulus information.

Buck's literature review and analysis of individual difference in internal and external responses to emotional stimuli is well done. Other papers in this volume, however, are less successful. For example, the paper by DiMatteo concludes that a physician's success with patients depends in part on his or her nonverbal skill; yet the data for this conclusion are very weak. Zuckerman and Larrance describe new measures of subjects' perceived nonverbal abilities; while they provide an elaborate justification for why these self-perceptions might have importance in their own right, the failure of the self-perception tests to correlate with actual nonverbal success undercuts their value.

In summary, this is a book that promises more than it delivers. Its self-appointed task is to show the value of the *idiographic* approach to the study of nonverbal communication. Despite several excellent and provocative chapters, I was left unconvinced of the value of this enterprise.

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Paul Ekman. *The Face of Man: Expressions of Universal Emotions in a New Guinea Village.* New York: Garland STPM Press, 1980. 154 pp., illustrations. \$25.00.

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This book is an engaging little volume. On the surface, however, it seems never quite to have decided what to be about. On one hand, the reader finds sixty pages devoted mainly to answering affirmatively a very old question: Are facial expressions for human emotions the same in all cultures? On the other hand, one is presented with about eighty pages of heart-warming black-and-white facial expressions (of Woman and Child as well as "Man") in a single village of a single tribe (the Fore of New Guinea). At first glance, one cannot understand how the two sections might have landed between the covers of one book. The sense of incongruity is heightened when one places the sometimes technical and closely argued text in juxtaposition with the tone of the plates and their captions, which are sometimes playful and always informal. Thus, for example, Plate 336 of a photogenic young woman in a crouching position is labeled, "A better view of that tight-lipped embarrassed smile"; and Plates 46 to 52 "were not selected to illustrate facial expression but to show the beauty and appeal of these people." Furthermore, not a single one of the plates is specifically cited in the text, yet Ekman assures the reader that the pictures "tell the story of what I found" and are, after all, "the best argument" for the case of cultural universality of facial expressions (p. 12).

But when one finally sees the light, the apparent lack of integration in the book's structure dissipates somewhat, for it turns out that Ekman's research among the Fore—though not the pictures themselves—did play a pivotal role in his argument for universality; and if the claim of universality is valid, then the faces of the Fore—like the faces of any other human beings—are nothing less than perfectly representative of the whole species. Granting the plates this much relevance to the book's thesis, and admitting that they are quite entertaining, I turn to the book's weightier portion: the section entitled "Darwin and Cross-Cultural Studies of Facial Expression."

Ekman begins by summarizing the view of Charles Darwin (1965) on the subject. While Ekman ultimately finds himself squarely in Darwin's camp on the basic issue of universality, he attempts to put a little distance between Darwin and himself. He does so by attributing to Darwin the belief that establishing the cultural universality of facial expressions would prove that "they must be inherited" (p. 93). But, says Ekman,