

Cultural Variations in Social Communication Behaviors: A systematic review

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Text: **WORD COUNT: 469**

Social communication behaviors (SCB) are distinguished as verbal and/or nonverbal actions that convey meaning for social purposes. It is well-known that behaviors used for social communication can vary throughout and within cultures. Because culture broadly influences social behavior patterns, it is important to identify cultural variations that may impact social interactions. This session investigates the interface of social communication patterns in different cultures and compares them across selected social communication behaviors. Relevant comparisons of the following are included: Chinese, French, Indian, Japanese and mainstream American cultures.

Variation in expected social communication behavior patterns readily exist across all cultures. Both ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ levels of adherence are typically present. Thus, some individuals closely follow the traditional expected communication behaviors of a culture, while others may demonstrate individual or ‘micro-cultural’ communication behaviors. Each culture requires its own set of verbal and non-verbal components which frequently vary through a range of formal to informal usage. Attaining successful social communication behaviors is expected by all cultures, yet, individual adaptation certainly occur.

This session offers a systematic comparison of social communication behaviors across multiple cultures. Comparative information is presented that identifies specific social communication behaviors and how these typically relate to both the macro-cultural perspective and to an individual, micro level. Variations in areas gaze orientation, proxemics/social boundaries, and sustaining mutual attention are offered with supporting examples from multiple cultures. Relevant associations of the following are included: Chinese, French, Indian, Japanese, and mainstream American cultures. This presentation provides comparative information to assist the individual in avoiding potential misinterpretations of social communication in cultures outside the US mainstream.

A comprehensive review of numerous bodies of literature was conducted to coordinate cultural variations in social communication behaviors. The systematic approach included the following: 1) communication attempts to attain expected behaviors, 2) verbal and nonverbal actions to indicate an adherence to social boundaries, 3) behaviors to indicate the ability to sustain mutual attention, and 4) the verbal social skills to respond with relevancy, to initiate questions, to achieve message accuracy, and to reduce information redundancy.

An examination of verbal and nonverbal social communication behaviors are reported. Mainstream American, Chinese, French, Indian and Japanese cultures were investigated using the method described above. Sample social communication features include variations in facial expression, gaze-orientation, conversational participation, joint attention, and social proxemics. Although these samples are not complete, they do provide significant representative features of cultural variations in social communication behaviors. Representative samples of variations of each of the area are presented.

The information shared represents a variance in expected social communication behaviors based on culture. Recognizing that an individual is exhibiting a social communication behavior align with their culture, rather than being misidentified as demonstrating an inappropriateness or a communication disorder, is valuable information to practitioners in the fields of social work, law enforcement, healthcare, and other related humanitarian professions.

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