

## NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN COUNSELLING

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### **Abstract:**

*Counselling has become one of the most demanded social services (both in and out of school). Its success depends to a large extent on the quality of communication between those who offer this service and those who need it, the counsellor's ability to capture and decipher (suitably) the feelings expressed by clients through their nonverbal language. The study draws attention to the fact that nonverbal communication should neither be ignored, nor under-appreciated during counselling.*

**Keywords:** *inter-personal communication, nonverbal communication, counselling, counsellor, client*

### **1. Introduction**

As an act of support designed and carried out in a confidential, professional context, both secure and secured, that lasts until the existential moment that triggered it is overcome, counselling is - fundamentally - a special meeting between two individuals:

- a. One who is in an extremely fragile position in life, confused and vulnerable, unable to overcome it either by him/herself or helped by those close to him (either from a contextual, institutional point of view or from a more private, spiritual perspective);
- b. The other, able, ready, explicitly and professionally preoccupied, both cognitively and emotionally, to take account of the period the other goes through, motivated to understand the situation, the status (of concern, anxiety, helplessness, frustration or disappointment), the weakness.

This appointment, requested by the person on the inward decline triggers - and may institute - an inter-personal relationship. As any human relationship, it may continue until the inner restoration of the individual facing great pressures in life, or it may unravel in a relatively short time. Its continuation or unravelling alike, are related (to a large extent) to the efficiency, the depth, honesty, sharpness and extent of verbal and nonverbal communication between the individuals who, willingly or not, are caught in this support encounter.

## 2. Communication - an attempt at comprehension

Inter-personal communication is the core of the counselling process. It is a tiered interaction between interlocutors: conceptual interaction - thoughts and ideas -, emotional - emotions and feelings - and experiential. We are dealing with two individuals able to transact what they think is necessary in the conversation created (with more or less intention), in order to make it acquires more meaning and legitimacy (Cosnier, 2010; Dortier, 2010; Morin, 2010).

We communicate to transmit information, data, impressions, points of view, but not only that. Any message indeed transmits, before all, a content (concepts, information, opinions, judgments, feelings, emotional states, expectations and anticipations), but, at the same time - has a tendency to develop, simultaneously, a certain relationship between the interlocutors (Marc, 2010b).

As a result, communication is both an opportunity for the transmission and for the exchange of information and meaning between interlocutors, but it is also a means of instituting and maintaining relations of goodwill between individuals, ensuring - as well, a specific and dynamic (micro)social balance. People communicate moved by certain (more or less immediate) reasons, in order to reach certain concrete (more or less urgent) purposes and/or to achieve certain psychological (more or less acknowledged) objectives.

Among the latter, the specialists (Floyd's, 2013; Marc, 2010b) mention:

### a. *Identity reasons*

Identity is both a condition of the acts of communication and a psychological objective. The way we communicate with others and the way in which the others communicate with us 'plays a pivotal role in forging our vision about the self' (Floyd, 2013, p. 27). As a matter of fact, identity develops throughout our lives, while communication plays a significant, first order role in this process. Apart from the fact that it helps us express our personal identity, communication also makes it easier for us to express our cultural identity (*idem*, p. 28).

By communication we seek to be recognized, we confirm that we exist, that we are alive. "Search of recognition - specifies Ed. Marc (2010a) - which underlies most communication undergoes a fundamental motivation, *search of valorisation* (which means to exist in the eyes of another, to be considered as a human being, to be valued as a reliable individual, to be recognized as individuality, etc.)".

If identity is manifested like a goal of interpersonal communication, it is, at the same time, a result of it. "The image we have of ourselves - declares the French professor - is being built through everyday interactions and through the images they produce; self-representation and self-esteem arise out for a large part of us from "mirroring each other", being the feedback for the messages they convey" (pp. 44-45).

Of course, in this respect, communication with others involves a risk of distortion, misunderstanding of ideas and opinions, but also the risk of refutation or devaluation. For this reason, certain persons (and in certain circumstances) prefer to keep silent (for instance, in a more or less numerous group). They are afraid of being judged, being considered uninteresting, being deemed inconvenient, uninspired.

b. *Relational reasons*

As human beings, we need relationships, and communication with others is "an important component of the way in which we build or maintain that relations" (Floyd's, 2013, p. 26). According to Ed. Marc (2010a), "communication is a mandatory stage to enter a relationship with anyone, regardless of motives (social, professional, emotional, utilitarian and so forth)" (p. 45). Psychologically, it is about our need for attachment, the need for support, of understanding and gratification, the need for companionship, escaping loneliness, the need for affection and love.

K. Floyd (2013) maintains that "a simple narrative is not, however, sufficient: studies show that involvement in *significant* conversations induces happiness, while "trivial discussions" are associated with a decrease in wellbeing" (p. 27, a.o.). In short, it is clear to the vast majority of us that personal relations play an essential role throughout life, and communication (verbal, para-verbal and nonverbal) with fellow humans - closer or more distant from a sympathetic-emotional point of view - helps us shape them, acknowledge their role in self expression and sustain them.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Unfortunately, there are times in the evolution of (Western) society when honest and open communication between people is discouraged, avoided, underappreciated. It seems that such a trend is perceived in our existence as of late. In such a context, during a speech held in Berlin in 1960, the famous physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer confessed: "I have been intensely concerned with the fact that, in this world, we have lost to such an extent the skill of talking to each other. In the succession of deep discoveries, we have become estranged from one another in tradition and, to a certain extent, even in language. We have neither the time, the skill, nor the dedication necessary to tell one another what we learned, or to listen to or hear, or to receive with open arms this method of enrichment of the common culture and common understanding. We long for nobility: the rarer words and gestures which harmonize simplicity and truth" (*in* Gardner, 2014, p.217).

c. *Influencing reasons*

Many acts of communication aim to determine the interlocutor to act in a certain way, seducing, threatening and manipulating it. Coercive, manipulating strategies are involved, which introduce a force ratio between interlocutors, marked by tension, effort and seduction strategies aimed at instituting complicity, attraction or assimilation.

d. *Spiritual reasons*

These reasons include the principles that are appreciated in life as pillars of progress and development, the morality of interlocutors and their ideas about what is - fundamentally - correct and what is wrong. They involve our convictions relating to the meaning of life and death. From this point of view, communication allows people to express the fundamental axiological states of their personality, as faith, values and core options. It allows for the possibility of sharing with others their ideas and philosophical, religious and spiritual practices.

e. *Instrumental reasons*

Communication helps people achieve their practical, every day objectives and meet many of their everyday tasks. Practical-instrumental components of communication "may not always contribute significantly to improve our health, identity or spirituality, states K. Floyd (2013). However, each behaviour is valuable, because it serves a necessity (and an objective - our note - G.A.) that helps us communicate our daily life" (p. 29).

Summarizing, we can say that the existence of communication skills in a person is given by the ability to communicate in effective and appropriate ways based on the particular characteristics of a situation (opportunities and constraints) in which that person can be found at any given time. On the one hand, effective communication consists in achieving objectives, and on the other hand, proper communication "complies with the rules and expectations which apply in the social situation", rules governing conversation between interlocutors (*idem*, p. 46).

Counselling relationship takes place both in the minds and hearts of participants, as well as in their communication. Counselling skills include relationship skills as well as communication skills. In so far as they are concerned, people with communication skills "distinguish naturally and quickly when to warn and when to withdraw, when to speak and when to listen, when to ask and when to keep silent, etc., all these personal expressions assuming in fact - according to A. Margaritoiu (2013) - possession of an appropriate language for the situation" (pp. 31-32). Communication skills have at their core and are marked by active listening.

### 3. The significance of nonverbal language in counselling

Experts have come to the conclusion that nonverbal language has a great value in a counsellor's (active) listening. Mainly, it serves to double the words, but also to replace them (from time to time and, in certain circumstances) (Margaritoiu, 2013). In the course of his/her listening, the counsellor transmits nonverbal messages - more or less voluntarily.

Nonverbal communication includes "behaviours and characteristics that convey meanings without using words" (Floyd's, 2013, p. 203). Such behaviours are a way of communication with a strong impact on interlocutors and to many of us it comes instinctively. Nonverbal communication is distinguished by several traits, between which (*idem*, pp. 207-208):

- a. It is present in most interpersonal conversations;
- b. Transmits, often, more information than verbal communication. We use many nonverbal channels: sense of sight (facial expressions, gestures and personal appearance), sense of touch and hearing;
- c. Usually, nonverbal communication is trusted more than verbal communication;
- d. It is the main means of transmitting emotion; "We have a rich vocabulary for depicting emotions - specifies K. Floyd (2013) -, but our nonverbal behaviours communicate them more effectively" (p. 207). Specialized studies show that people are very sensitive to emotional nonverbal indices. For instance, we tend to pay very much attention to facial expressions of a person when we want to find out their emotional, inner state. In short, the main way in which we communicate how we feel is nonverbal language.
- e. Nonverbal communication achieves meta-communication;

In interpersonal relations, nonverbal communication has the following functions (*idem*, pp. 209-213):

#### a. *Emotion management*

Nonverbal indices help us initiate, maintain and close our conversations. Thus:

- to initiate conversations three nonverbal indices are relevant: personal space, physical appearance and eye contact;
- to maintain conversations the following are important: gestures, eye contact and tone of voice;
- to close conversations, the most commonly used index is switching off visual contact.

#### b. *Expressing emotion, feelings, and moods*

The most expressive channels for the transmission of information relating to interlocutors' emotional status are:

- facial expression of emotion;
- vocal expression of emotion: "sometimes, we can find out how a person feels not only because of what they say, but because of how their voice sounds"; many emotions influence the tone of voice (Floyd, 2013, p. 210).

c. *Maintaining relations*

"Communication plays a central role as a way to maintain close relationships, and nonverbal behaviours are particularly important for a few essential traits of those relationships. Among these behaviours are attraction and affiliation, power and domination, incitement and relaxation", states the North American Professor (*ibidem*).

Thus:

- *attraction and affiliation*, which many researchers call *behaviours of immediate involvement*. Those whom we sympathize, to which we are drawn, whom we like, we speak to in a softer, warmer tone; our glances are more vivid, more insistent, more direct; we touch them to show support and encouragement;

- *power and domination*: "*power* is the potential to influence the behaviour of another person, and *domination* is the specific pursuit of this potential" (*idem*, p. 211, a.o.);

- *incitement and relaxation*: "*incitement* refers to a boost in energy. We feel the elation in two fundamentally different ways depending on its association with positive or negative emotions. When it is accompanied by positive emotions, we perceive incitement as enthusiasm" (*ibidem*, a.o. ). Most of us express our enthusiasm by nonverbal indices, such as prolonged visual contact with each other, intense laughter, faster rate of speech, amplified tone and volume and by greater spatial proximity.

The opposite of incitement is *relaxation*, which we feel in situations where our energy is reduced. As is the case with incitement, we feel relaxation in two fundamentally different ways, depending on the emotion involved. "When relaxation is accompanied by a positive emotion, we perceive it as contentment. The feeling of contentment makes most of us smile more than usual, to have a more relaxed posture, extended visual contact and closer proximity to others around" (*ibidem*).

d. *Forming impressions*

e. *Influencing others*: nonverbal communication can be persuasive when it is used as part of several strategies, such as:

- *fostering credibility*: this we often do when we're adopting "an attitude that communicates personal skill and authority" (*ibidem*); "using eye

contact and gestures which clarify the verbal message amplify, in their turn, the credibility of the person" (*ibidem*);

- *promoting affiliation*: in this area, we agree more with the persons we sympathize than with those we do not sympathize. Nonverbal behaviours that promote a feeling of affiliation and antipathy can amplify our persuading skill. Affiliation is, in principle, amplified by *interactional synchrony*, which represents the convergence of the behaviours of two persons in a conversational situation.

f. *Hiding information.*

In the design of K. Floyd (2013), there are *10 channels of nonverbal communication*, respectively (pp. 215-227):

a. *Facial expressions*

In accordance with the principle of facial primacy, "*the face communicates more information than any other nonverbal communication channel*", underlines the North American Professor (p. 215, a.o.). Facial expressions have 3 important functions:

- *identity*: face is the most important visual indication used by people to identify one another;

- *attractiveness*: as is the case in symmetry, attractive faces are more proportionate than unattractive ones;

- *emotion*: nonverbal behaviours communicate emotions more efficiently than verbal communication; our primary means of communicating emotion is facial behaviour.

b. *Visual behaviours*

As face behaviour communicates more than any other nonverbal channel, so the eyes to communicate more than any part of the face. Eye contact plays an undeniable role, distinct in several important types of interactions.

We use eye contact to show attraction toward someone and to infer whether someone is attracted to us. We use it to persuade others and to show that we care about what others say and to show we understand them. We can use eye contact when we want to intimidate someone, or when we want to take a dominant or authoritarian stance in a conversation or group discussion. We feel very connected to people when we look them in the eyes.

c. *Movements and gestures*

According to experts, there are several types of gestures:

- *Badge-gestures*: gestures that can be translated directly into words;
- *Illustrative-gestures*: gestures which accompany a spoken message, clarifying or amplifying it;

- Affective manifestations: gestures that convey emotions or affects;
- Control gestures: they are gestures that control the flow of conversation;
- Adaptive gestures: they are gestures meant to meet a personal need.

d. *Touch behaviors*

The first sense that develops is touch (Floyd, 2013). There are five major areas in which touch plays an essential role in the transmission of meanings: affection, concern, power and control, aggression and ritual.

- *affectionate touches*: "a reason for which affectionate touch is so important - states K. Floyd (2013) - is the fact that it contributes to our physical and mental well-being" (p. 220). The author notes below: "In recent years, concerns about sexual abuse against children have led many public schools to adopt strict "touch banning" policies, which do not permit teachers, advisers and other members of school staff to touch pupils in any form, except for medical emergencies. As explains the educator Tony Del Prete, "in an effort to discourage those who commit sexual aggression, more and more schools communicate adults the message: Hands down! Touching children in schools has become practically taboo" (2013, p. 220).

To all these, the author added: "although such extremely strict strategies are created in order to protect children, many experts are wondering whether to prohibit touching children does not cause them, in fact, more harm than good" (*ibidem*).

- *touches used by carers*: unlike affectionate touches, this type of touch "does not necessarily reflect affection or positive emotion towards the person who receives it" (*idem*, p. 221).

- *touches associated with power and control*;
- *aggressive touches*, such as: hitting, pushing, slapping, kicking;
- *touches used for ceremonial purposes*: those are touches we make within the framework of a tradition or a custom.

e. *Vocal behaviours (para-language)*

Among them, we mention:

- *tone*: refers to moments when the voice can be more high-pitched or thicker;
- *inflection*: refers to variations in tone (voices with ample modulations are usually described as being very expressive);
- *volume*: describes how intense or weak is someone's voice; when people talk louder, they want to emphasize a particular idea, a specific word/concept, a certain decision/option, a certain emotional state;

- *speed*: a person's utterance can be faster or slower, depending on how important a certain content is, or a certain point of view, a specific proposal or solution;
- *elements of filling*: these are sounds that are not words, but are used to fill the silence breaks created in speech;
- *pronunciation*: reflects how well a person combines vowels and consonants to utter a word;
- *articulating/uttering*: refers to how clearly we speak (or try to speak);
- *emphasis*: it is using voice to underline certain words (in a sentence and/or a phrase) to convey the desired meaning;
- *silence*: represents absence of sounds;<sup>23</sup>

f. *Use of smell*

Smells can change our communicational behaviours, influencing our memories and moods.

g. *Use of space*

As we already know, the distance between interlocutors plays a decisive role in development of interpersonal communicative interaction; it is in close connection with the psychological distance between interlocutors at a given time.

h. *Physical appearance*

It covers a person's weight, personal hygiene, clothing and general physical neatness.

i. *Use of time*

The way we allocate (or refuse to allocate) our time to others may communicate them important messages about our feelings and attitudes toward them; when we dedicate our time to others, we let it be known that we cherish the people in question.

j. *Use of artefacts*

It is about objects and their visible features in an environment which reflects who we are and what we love.

As for the counsellors' body messages, in their capacity as (active) listeners, these are important both when they listen to, as well as when they answer their clients. To make clients feel like they can talk to them, counsellors need - in such circumstances - to make known their emotional and motivational availability. Thus, according to R. Nelson-Jones (2009)

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<sup>23</sup>See - with the permission and effort of the reader - the multiple and profound meanings of silence in our paper *Interpersonal Communication*, edited by the European Institute, Iasi, in 2008.

counsellors need to "deliver their clients and others clear messages about availability and access" (p. 85). To do this, the British specialist recommends:

a. To adopt a relaxed and open body posture "which must not be sloppy or ungraceful" (*ibidem*), but the one to denote that, for the present moment, the counsellor is receptive. "Counsellors and clients - noted the psychotherapist - must adopt an open posture to allow them to be able to see one another" (*idem*, p. 86); to create the premises of (mutual) knowledge and to foster trust.

b. A slight tilt forward. "In particular, claims R. Nelson-Jones (2009), at the beginning of the counselling session, a tilt forward may encourage clients, instead of threatening them" (p. 87).

c. An appropriate gaze and eye contact. "There is a balance in the eye contact level in counselling relations which depends on the client's and counsellor's level of anxiety, on how developed is the relationship and the degree of attraction involved". From this point of view, "clients - specifies the British counsellor - want an appropriate level of eye contact from the counsellor and they may perceive counsellors as tense or bored if they often look down or sideways" (*idem*, p. 87).

d. Express appropriate facial expressions. "People's faces - state R. Nelson-Jones (2009) - are the main mode of delivering body messages regarding their feelings. A large part of facial information is expressed by mouth and eyebrows. A friendly, relaxed expression, including a smile, typically proves interest" (p. 88). When the client is talking, it is important that the counsellor's facial expressions show they are connected to what they are told, to indicate that the counsellor understands their client's feelings.

e. Uses appropriate gestures, such as:

- nodding (the most common gesture in counselling);
- gestures of the arms or hands by which counsellors prove their attention and interest in the experiences, words and emotions of their client.

f. Uses touch sparingly. "Touching clients - specifies the British counsellor - may be appropriate in counselling, although it must be carried out with great care, so as not to be perceived as an undesirable invasion of the client's personal space" (2009, p. 89). The intensity and duration of touch "should be sufficient to establish contact and, at the same time, to avoid discomfort and any clue which would suggest sexual interest" (*ibidem*).

g. They are paying attention to personal space and height ratio. Counselling involves observance of the client's personal space (generally, a meter and a half). With regard to height, the most appropriate situation is when "both persons' heads are at the same level" (*idem*, p. 90).

h. Pay attention to clothing style and personal care.

#### 4. Possible conclusions

Communication is at the base of counselling activities. Between them there is a very tight relation. The quality of one mostly depends on the quality of the other. But the beginning lies in the meaning and depth of communication between partners. Counselling involves an effort of effective, open, active communication. To do this, it is necessary that we, as counsellors, decipher as correctly as possible the meanings of the client's verbal and nonverbal language. It is also necessary to coordinate our nonverbal communication, in such a way as to create in our meetings an atmosphere conducive to the client's openness and self-disclosure.

A good counsellor is a good communicator. The counsellor holds the science and art of understanding and using nonverbal language. He/she is receptive and sympathetic. He/she takes the clients seriously, recognizes their feelings and ideas, shows them that their experiences matters. Through this experience of recognition, the individual (temporarily) diminishes his sense of existential alienation towards the world, the feeling of isolation, of estrangement and can consequently recover their impulse to live.

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