ISRG Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISRGJAHSS)

ISRG PUBLISHERS
Abbreviated Key Title: ISRG J Arts Humanit Soc Sci
ISSN: 2583-7672 (Online)
Journal homepage: https://isrgpublishers.com/isrgjahss
Volume – IV Issue - IV (July – August) 2026
Frequency: Bimonthly



Exploring Nonverbal Communication Through the Lens of Relational Frame Theory

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| **Received:** 08.07.2026 | **Accepted:** 12.07.2026 | **Published:** 18.07.2026

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Abstract

This research explores the role of Relational Frame Theory in deciphering and perceiving nonverbal cues in interpersonal communication. In the study, six participants were interviewed based on their ability to explain Nonverbal Communication and function via Relational Frame Theory (RFT) in various relationships. Three broad themes were identified for analysis: categorical interpretation of nonverbal signs, interpersonal recontextualization of nonverbal signals, emotional representation, and interchange associated with nonverbal communication. The study shows that people reacted to nonverbal cues differently depending on their relationship with the reaction subject. It proved that relation types affect how people embrace such nonverbal cues. The study can help analyze interindividual interactions in therapy, education, and other potentially effective communal practices. Further research should be devoted to experimenting with RFT in various cultures and contexts of communication other than the workplace and adapting it to practice.

Keywords: Relational Frame Theory, Nonverbal communication, emotional expression, interpersonal relationships, contextual interpretation, qualitative research

Introduction

Communication involves transmitting and receiving information through agreed signals or codes. Psychologically, it underpins the formation of meaning, emotions, and relationships (Hargie, 2021), playing a critical role in identity formation, emotional regulation, and general psychological well-being (Romaniuk, 2021). While language is often emphasized, nonverbal communication (NVC) constitutes a vital and more revealing component of interpersonal interaction.

NVC refers to facial expressions, body posture, gestures, eye contact, and vocal tone, which convey emotional and relational states. For example, in therapy, a client's verbal reassurance may contradict their body tension or lack of eye contact, revealing internal distress (Burgoon et al., 2021). Teachers' body language influences learners' emotional engagement and comprehension in education. Similarly, in clinical settings, nonverbal cues are instrumental in establishing therapeutic rapport and predicting treatment success (Ramseyer & Tschacher, 2022).

Through cues like posture and eye contact, nonverbal cues can transmit relational messages like empathy, dominance, and trust (Cheang & Pell, 2022; Nakane, 2021). Sarcasm can be conveyed through tone, whereas disapproval is indicated by withdrawal or silence. According to Thompson et al. (2023), synchronized

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21424511

posture and gestures during couples' therapy were a stronger predictor of relationship satisfaction than spoken words. Nonverbal communication is explained by some theories, such as evolutionary (Tomasello, 2019), cognitive-social (Bandura, 2018), and embodied approaches (Niedenthal et al., 2021). On the other hand, RFT provides a contextual, learning-based explanation in which relational networks provide meaning (Hayes et al., 2022). According to RFT, which was developed by Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, and Roche (2001), meaning is relational and influenced by history, culture, and context. RFT is relevant to NVC, according to studies like Wilson and Hayes (2018), who discovered that participants' interpretations of gestures varied according to relational frames. Despite limitations like sample size and lack of observational data, McEnteggart et al. (2020) demonstrated therapists applying RFT principles.

Findings reinforce that nonverbal meaning is constructed through contextually grounded relational frames. Cultural, historical, and emotional factors shape how people interpret and respond to nonverbal signals (Barnes-Holmes et al., 2023). Despite this, several research gaps remain. O'Connor et al. (2022) applied RFT to cross-cultural business negotiations, identifying how relational framing facilitated or obstructed communication. Yet, they noted challenges in measuring micro-interactions and relational shifts. Schrage et al. (2020) analyzed nonverbal communication in digital therapy and education during COVID-19. They observed adaptations in gesture and animation but found it difficult to assess how participants constructed meaning from reduced nonverbal input.

These studies emphasize the importance of investigating how relational frames function in various communication contexts, particularly in tech-mediated interactions where cues are scarce. Using RFT, this study examines how people decipher nonverbal clues in romantic, familial, and professional settings. It poses the following questions: How do relational frames affect the efficacy of communication, and how are nonverbal clues interpreted in various relational contexts? Through the promotion of deeper, relationally grounded understanding and the reduction of miscommunication, the findings seek to close gaps in the literature and support improved communication strategies in therapy, education, and professional settings.

Literature Review

Nonverbal Communication in Interpersonal Relationships

Nonverbal communication (NVC) is a fundamental aspect of human interaction, often revealing emotional states that words cannot. Burgoon et al. (2021) reported that 37% of relational meaning is conveyed through facial expressions and body attitudes, while 41% communicates trust, dominance, and composure. NVC becomes especially important when verbal language is vague or absent, offering vital cues about intent, emotion, and relational quality (Carmichael & Mizrahi, 2023). Romaniuk (2021) also discussed how posture and physical distance convey trust, affection, and intimacy levels.

Context plays a big part when deciding the meaning of nonverbal communication. According to Schrage et al (2004), individuals with an avoidant attachment style of interpersonal functioning have presented themselves to be very insensitive to expressions of nonverbal affection as opposed to verbal communication. The same signals communicate different meanings in various relational contexts, showing why the models explaining how relationships structure communication are essential.

Relational Frame Theory and Communication

RFT describes that language and cognition are learned relationships among stimuli, including nonverbal cues (Gross & Fox, 2009). RFT states that people attach meaning to nonverbal cues depending on contextual frames that they get from history, culture, and relational history. A smile, for example, may act as a means of manifesting harmony (coordination frame) or rivalry (oppositional frame). At the same time, an averted gaze may mean submission in the work setting or familiarity in the family setting (Belisle & Dixon, 2021).

Cultural and Contextual Influences on Nonverbal Communication

Culture has a significant influence on the production and message of nonverbal cues. The same gesture, like direct eye contact, can mean aggression in one culture and respect in another, according to (Burgoon et al., 2021)—no possible disentangling of nonverbal behaviour from its relational context and its cultural context. Intimate partners often develop proprietary nonverbal signal repertoires that are incomprehensible to outsiders (Schrage et al., 2020).

The environment also alters nonverbal interpretation. A firm handshake, for instance, is appropriate in formal settings but may be stiff or formalistic in informal scenarios. It follows from Belisle & Dixon (2021) that social context changes calls for flexible interpretations of posture, eye contact, and facial expressions.

Technological advancement has made nonverbal interpretation even harder. Carmichael and Mizrahi (2023) argue that the need to develop new relational frames is inherent in digital communication as it reduces a significant number of spatial and physical cues. According to Romaniuk (2021), alternative ways through which relational and emotional intents must be expressed in computer-mediated communication (CMC) are needed because the communicating parties lack traditional cues.

RFT must be employed more flexibly, considering these changing situations. Communication training in therapy education and organizational development can become stronger by better understanding the way relational framing works in different cultural, environmental, and technological scenarios (Gross & Fox, 2009).

Gaps in Current Research

In digital contexts, few studies examine how relational frames influence cue interpretation across relationships (Burgoon et al., 2021; Schrage et al., 2020). Despite their significance, cultural influences are also not sufficiently studied (Romaniuk, 2021). RFT is used in this study to address these limitations.

Research Aims and Questions

Relational Frame Theory will be used to explain the relational functions of the responses to this study, which asks how people interpret and react to nonverbal communication in different relational types. Therefore, the following are some of the research questions that guide the study:

1. In the framework of their interpersonal relationships, how do people understand nonverbal communication?

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2. In what way do relational frames influence the interpretation of nonverbal cues and the effectiveness thereof during interaction?
3. What do people say about the way these nonverbal cues influence their relationships? The aim behind asking such questions is to understand the way in which relational framing affects communication according to the type of relationship, relationship context, and relationship impact on nonverbal behaviors.

Methodology

Research Design

The study examined participants' experiences with nonverbal communication in interpersonal relationships through the use of semi-structured interviews and a qualitative research design. The formulation of this technique for interpreting the subjective meanings attached to nonverbal cues mandated its choice (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Semi-structured interviews facilitated comparison with participants' responses since they allow for a standardized interview process yet respect individual experiences (Striepe, 2021). By applying this technique, researchers were able to trace the changes that occur because of relational framing in the interpretation of emotions and gestures.

Participants

Six (6) of the participants were aged between 19 to 35 years and recruited in a convenient design of sampling and through the University's participant recruitment systems. Participants were selected in an effort to see how a relational frame performed with numerous interpersonal relationships.

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation	Relationship
P1	24	F	Employed	In relationship
P2	19	M	Student	Single
P3	35	F	Sel-employed	Married
P4	29	M	Employed	In relationship
P5	22	F	Student	Single
P6	34	M	Employed	Divorced

Dawadi (2020) is of the opinion that the sample size was adequate to obtain the experiences of participants and, therefore, provide detailed descriptions. The collection of data continued until no new information could be added to what was already known in what was referred to as data saturation (Dawadi, 2020). Having been involved in 18 years or more previous relationships was a precondition for taking part. Such criteria were labelled as the exclusion factor, including such conditions that could impair one's ability to read various signs.

Materials

Interview Guide

There were ten questions in the semi-structured interview to understand the experience of participants regarding non-verbal communication in various relationships. Questions were created to collect real-life cases and point out the contextual characteristics of relationship building. For example, participants were asked to describe situations where nonverbal communication played a significant role. The questions followed Striepe's (2021) guidelines for relationship-based interviews.

Recording Equipment

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, using audio with video off. Zoom's transcription feature automatically recorded responses, eliminating manual transcription and maintaining participant confidentiality.

Procedure

Interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Participants were invited to describe experiences involving nonverbal communication in various relationships (positive, negative, casual, or intimate). Follow-up questions clarified or expanded upon responses. Participants were informed of the study's purpose and rights, including the option to withdraw at any time.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the British Psychological Society's (2021) Code of Ethics and received Brunel University's Ethics Committee approval. Informed consent was obtained, and participants' rights were explained. Data was anonymized using ID numbers, stored securely, and access was restricted to the research team. Participants were debriefed after interviews regarding the study's purpose and data usage.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed thematically, following Christou's (2022) and Dawadi's (2020) guidelines. This approach was adopted in terms of its capability of recognizing patterns of nonverbal communication. The six-step process involved familiarizing oneself with data, coding, theme development and defining themes based on Relational Frame Theory (RFT).

Reflexivity

This study reflected previously encountered nonverbal miscommunication caused mainly by cultural differences, resulting in my overestimating cultural factors herein. I did this by maintaining the reflective journal and reducing bias by conducting non-directive interviews. An interpretation by a coworker challenged me to think more. Given the impossibility of complete neutrality, I used member checking in order to enhance credibility and confirm new themes. The analysis offered a detailed picture of the impact on nonverbal communication and the meaning of how context and relationship dynamics operate by demonstrating the effects of relational frames on how participants interpret nonverbal clues.

Thematic Analysis

A. Overview of Emergent Themes

Three key themes emerged: Contextual Sensitivity in RFT Nonverbal Interpretation, Relational Framing of Nonverbal Signals, Emotional Self and Connection. These themes show how it is relational frames, and not intrinsic traits, that allow nonverbal gestures to be 'read'.

B. Theme 1: Contextual Sensitivity in Nonverbal Interpretation

Participants had different awareness of nonverbal cues depending on the type of relationship. Professional relationships were the most sensitive (80%), followed by family (60%) and romantic relationships (40%). In professional situations, participants concentrated on subtle signals such as approval or disapproval,

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whereas family relationships valued the distinction between formal and informal behaviour. Romantic relationships were more accepting of uncertainty and were more connected than divided in judgment.

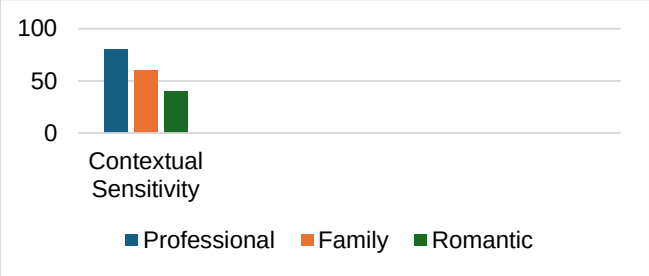
C. Theme 2: Relational Framing of Nonverbal Signals

The analysis identified several relational frames for interpreting gestures: coordination, opposition, comparison (hierarchy), and chronology (timeframe). Each relationship type had a dominant frame: professional relationships emphasized hierarchy, family relationships showed a mix and romantic relationships centred on coordination. Nonverbal cues like silence varied in meaning depending on the relational context.

D. Theme 3: Emotional Expression and Connection

There was a two-way relationship between nonverbal communication and emotions. At work, it was muted for emotions, but there was high sensitivity to cues. In contrast, romantic relationships heightened emotional expression despite lower attention to nonverbal cues. Trust was identified as a key factor in nonverbal communication, allowing participants to lower their guard and focus more on emotional content than specific cues. This shift indicated trust influenced both cognitive and emotional aspects of relational framing.

Chart: Relational Context Impact on Nonverbal Interpretation



Analysis of interview data revealed three key themes describing how nonverbal communication is interpreted across relationship contexts. The data shows that participants demonstrated the highest contextual sensitivity in professional relationships (80%), moderate in family relationships (60%), and the lowest in romantic relationships (40%). Professional contexts featured heightened vigilance toward subtle cues, with hierarchical frames predominating. They also showed slightly more tolerance for ambivalence, particularly in the results for romantic relationships and the instances where the coordinate frame was more salient than the vigilant one. People's discrimination uncovered how the same postural movements assumed a different significance in these two scenarios, and the given report conforms to the RFT view that meaning is in an invariable relation network.

The extension of the study into the thematic level further elaborates on the results, as participants proved to have levels of nonverbal cue sensitivity depending on the relationship type. The professional type was rated high, followed by family and romantic relationships. This analysis connects directly to the Relational Frame Theory framework by exploring how different types of relationships influence the interpretation of nonverbal communication

Results

Through Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, three primary themes emerged from the data: (1) Contextual Interpretation of Nonverbal Cues, (2) Relational Framing of Nonverbal Signals, and (3) Emotional Expression and Connection. These themes reflect recurring patterns across participant narratives and are grounded in illustrative excerpts prevalent among at least half of the participants. The following sections expand on each of these themes with quotes to demonstrate how RFT can be used to conceptualize and understand the interpretation and function of nonverbal communication across various relational contexts.

Nonverbal communication was not universally received, as assumed, but was understood in the context of relationships. Participants noticed that nonverbal indicators like stares crossed arms, and silence shift depending on the interaction: professional, family, or amorous. An uncomfortable or passive professional gesture may indicate implicit criticism or dissatisfaction. Similarly, a lack of expressiveness in a romantic relationship could be seen as a sign of brooding or deep emotional struggle. In familial contexts, silence might reflect familiarity, emotion, or avoidance based on prior relationships.

One key factor influencing the interpretation of nonverbal cues was relationship history. Participants recognized that past interactions framed the way they interpreted gestures. As one participant explained, *"A sigh from a long-time friend could suggest passive-aggressive behavior, while the same sigh from a colleague might indicate dismissiveness"* (Participant 2, line 23). This reflects the participants' understanding that nonverbal communication is not static but evolves with the history between individuals.

Participants also described how nonverbal interactions often formed an interpretive framework—for instance, long-term relationships allowed for more lenient or generous interpretations of nonverbal cues. A participant noted, *"The longer we know each other, the more we tend to give each other the benefit of the doubt"* (Participant 3, line 15). However, with acquaintances or people who were not close, such as supervisors, participants reported being more attuned to warning signs and interpreting ambiguous behaviors with greater caution (Participant 4, line 30).

The cultural context also played a significant role in interpreting nonverbal cues. One participant who had multicultural experiences shared how gestures, eye contact, and personal space are understood differently across cultures. For example, while direct eye contact may be perceived as a sign of attentiveness in some cultures, it can be viewed as confrontational or aggressive in others, especially within collectivist cultures (Participant 5, line 42).

Cultural influences, however, were not isolated from relational context; they added layers of complexity to the interpretation of nonverbal cues. One participant provided the example of an African cultural tradition where respectfully touching an elder's elbow could be seen as misconduct in a Western office setting (Participant 6, line 57). This highlights the need to understand each nonverbal cue through the lens of both cultural and relational factors to avoid misinterpretations.

The contextual interpretation of nonverbal cues is shaped by relational history and cultural background. Cultural context made it even more difficult to interpret nonverbal behaviors, as signs such as eye contact and body gestures had different meanings based on the cultural perspective from which they were being looked at.

This theme demonstrates how context—rather than being used alone—gives nonverbal clues meaning. Participants focused on

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how cultural background and relationship history influence interpretations. Understanding nonverbal behavior necessitates flexibility and sensitivity to relational and cultural dynamics, as demonstrated by the way a gesture like a longing look can convey attentiveness or distress.

Participants of this research stressed the extent to which certain nonverbal signals are determined by the nature of the relationships in which they take place. The context, whether formal or informal, also plays a major role in how nonverbal cues are interpreted. This theme discusses how relational dynamics, like power, cooperation, or conflict, determine the meaning of nonverbal cues in various contexts.

A major view from participants was how power dynamics in a hierarchical relation (such as the relation between supervisors and subordinates) influence the interpretation of nonverbal communication. In such a case, minuscule indications, such as body posture, tone, and hand gestures, always signify something. For example, a participant recounted her experience in the working environment, in which she said that nodding when a subordinate is presenting to please the boss is taken as approval but failing to respond either way can sometimes express disapproval. The participant noted: *"When my supervisor nods while I present, it feels like approval. If there is no response, I take it as disapproval"* (Participant 3, line 12). This quote indicates that even some of the smallest movements, like a simple head nod, are rich with meaning and indicate the dynamics within the relationship between a supervisor and a subordinate. The absence of response in the situation is feedback that affects how the subordinate perceives their performance and relationship with their supervisor.

In contrast, within cooperative relationships involving friendships or romantic relationships, mutual understanding and synchronization are reflected within nonverbal cues. Nonverbal mimicry, where participants mirror one another's body language or expressions to signal that they feel connected, was one of the behaviors that participants reported. A participant explained: *"I often mimic my partner's smile or posture when we're talking. It just feels natural, like we're in sync"* (Participant 2, line 5). This response demonstrates the use of nonverbal mimicry to strengthen tightness and convergence in supplementary informal relationships. It serves as a means of indicating concurrence and re-enforcing the idea of everyone being in the same boat.

Yet, nonverbal messages might betray a hindrance or fight in cases of dispute or non-accommodation. According to one of the participants, during disputes, one can choose not to make eye contact, use slow and unencouraging gestures, and become disengaged, which indicates their lack of willingness to cooperate. One stated: *"During arguments, my partner avoids eye contact, and their gestures become slow and dismissive—it's like they're resisting or not engaging"* (Participant 4, line 20). This quote highlights the importance of nonverbal indicators of disagreement being used to view someone as resistant or disheartened passively. In this situation, body language becomes a tool for signalling contradiction and a communication breakdown.

The meaning of non-verbal cues is dynamic with time, too. Some participants pointed out that behaviors that were first indicative of affection or playful behavior may be viewed as manipulative or controlling in nature upon realizing the nature of the relationship. One participant shared: *"At the start of our relationship, we would playfully tease and touch each other, which felt lighthearted and loving. But over time, the same gestures felt controlling or patronizing as the relationship soured"* (Participant 6, line 41). This quote illustrates how the same gestures—initially seen as signs of affection—can take on a different meaning as the relationship changes. It shows how nonverbal behaviors are interpreted in light of the emotional tone and relational dynamics at any given moment, confirming the temporal nature of relational frames.

Finally, nonverbal signals are understood in relation to different relational frames, such as hierarchical, cooperative, and oppositional frames. These frames are dynamic and may change over time given the relational history, power, and emotional factors of the relational episode. Through examining the way in which participants attach meaning to nonverbal cues that are within multiple relational contexts, a greater understanding is gained of the meaning encoded in signals across multiple social contexts as well as the influence of such signals on relationship participants' emotional experience and relationship itself.

Participants consistently identified nonverbal communication as crucial to their emotional experiences in partnerships. Nonverbal signals were seen as more emotionally resonant than verbal ones, with facial expressions, tone, touch, and gaze carrying significant weight—especially in intimate relationships where subtle cues were easily detected.

One participant explained the emotional power of facial expressions: *"It's not the words you use; it's how you look at someone's face that makes it all feel much worse"* (Participant 1, line 27). This illustrates how nonverbal signals can intensify or contradict verbal messages, particularly during emotionally charged moments.

Participants also described the emotional intimacy created through fleeting nonverbal expressions with close family or partners, interpreting them as reflections of internal states. One shared: *"When I see my sister's eyes shift, even a little, I know she's upset—even if she says she's fine"* (Participant 5, line 43). Such sensitivity to micro-expressions helped them stay emotionally attuned, fostering connection and empathy.

Trust emerged as both a result of and a condition for consistent nonverbal behavior. Alignment between verbal and nonverbal communication built emotional safety, while inconsistencies caused suspicion. One participant noted: *"If someone says they're okay but they smile strangely—like too wide or too fast—it makes me think they're hiding something"* (Participant 3, line 31). By contrast, another shared: *"The way he squeezes my hand when I'm anxious—it's like he's telling me I'm not alone, without saying anything"* (Participant 6, line 19). These gestures were grounding and emotionally reassuring, especially in vulnerable moments.

Participants also described using nonverbal strategies for emotional regulation. Some adjusted their tone or posture to de-escalate tension. One stated: *"When I feel things heating up, I talk more slowly and try not to move too much—so I don't come off as aggressive"* (Participant 2, line 38). Others mirrored a partner's body language to promote calm and connection. One explained: *"When my partner's stressed, I sit the same way or copy her movements... she seems to calm down too"* (Participant 4, line 45). These examples show how nonverbal behaviors are intentionally used to shape emotional dynamics.

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The link between nonverbal communication and overall communication quality was also noted. Congruent, open nonverbal cues helped build trust and ease future interactions. One participant observed: *"When we're open in how we sit or look at each other, everything else just flows better—it's like we trust each other more"* (Participant 2, line 49). Conversely, misaligned expressions could cause confusion or emotional withdrawal. One noted: *"She smiled, but it didn't match what we were talking about. It felt cold, and I just stopped trying to talk after that"* (Participant 5, line 52). These incidents underscore how nonverbal cues can either strengthen or undermine emotional connection.

This theme builds on earlier relational framing, emphasizing the affective power of nonverbal communication. Participants repeatedly affirmed that nonverbal behaviors often conveyed emotions more immediately than words. Contrary to some assumptions, intentional verbal and nonverbal expressions were crucial for emotional understanding, particularly in intimate settings. These signals supported emotional co-regulation, empathy, and relational stability. This theme reinforces the study's core aim—illuminating nonverbal communication as a relational process—and lays the foundation for the upcoming discussion, linking findings to broader literature and theory.

Discussion

A. Interpretation of Findings About RFT Principles

Relational Frame Theory (RFT) posits that humans learn to relate systematically through arbitrarily applied relational responding. This process affects how we comprehend our environment, particularly during interpersonal relationships. LITERATURE REVIEW: This study demonstrates that nonverbal communication is culturally and individually contextual, rooted in relational frames.

First, according to RFT, Theme 1 holds that a stimulus's loudest and most apparent meaning is crucial in determining its function. The same behavior, such as eye contact or a lack of verbal communication, can mean different things depending on the relationship context. This aligns with RFT's principle of contextual control, where behavioral functions are not fixed but change with contextual factors such as the type of relationship, culture, and norms.

Relational framing aligns with RFT's relational frames: coordination, comparison, opposition, and hierarchy. These frames were reconstructed in participants' interpretations of nonverbal cues. For instance, a nod indicating approval or a frown for disapproval in formal settings is an example of frame transformation. A particular behavior takes on new meaning when paired with a specific relational frame (Burgoon et al., 2021). In romantic and family contexts, coordination and mutuality were prominent, transforming nonverbal cues into emotionally charged referents within these frames

B. Theoretical Implications for Understanding Communication

The findings contribute to a more relationally grounded theory of nonverbal communication. Traditional models of communication often focus on encoding/decoding or signal-response paradigms. However, this study offers an alternative perspective: nonverbal communication is relationally co-constructed and contextually modulated.

In RFT, communication is not defined as a process of transmitting predefined signals; rather, it is a process of creating meaning based on relational networks. This paper elaborates on how relationship-specific frames operate on nonverbal behaviors as stimuli.

According to the study, relational framing is malleable and influenced by cultural norms and prior experiences. Participants modified their mental schemas according to context and history. Incorporating sociocultural elements into RFT within functional contextualism to comprehend communication dynamics is supported by the social conditioning of nonverbal cues such as eye contact and gestures.

C. Practical Applications in Therapeutic, Educational, and Professional Contexts

As a result, the implications of this study are reasonably practical for several domains of operation:

1. Therapeutic Settings

Understanding how clients interpret nonverbal cues within relational frame theory can improve therapeutic relationships. Client behaviors such as pacing, body posture, voice, and eye contact may be misinterpreted without considering the relational context. This could lead to therapeutic failures, especially if the therapist overlooks a client's cultural or relational background. RFT-based Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) can also use these insights, which help clients understand how their nonverbal interactions are influenced by their surroundings and promote healthier relationship dynamics.

2. Educational Settings

Misunderstanding nonverbal clues, like avoiding eye contact or sitting in a closed position, can result in bias or unfair punishment in classrooms with diverse students. Teachers who understand relational and cultural framing can better interpret students' actions, respecting the developmental process (British Psychological Society, 2021). In classrooms with children with learning disabilities, where nonverbal cues may precede verbal communication, teachers can model how to interpret relational contexts and nonverbal cues, teaching Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and community-building skills.

3. Professional and Organizational Contexts

The study's implications extend to professional contexts where nonverbal literacy is crucial. Leaders, managers, and team members may fail to understand the meaning behind nonverbal behaviors if they assume universal interpretations. For example, an individual's withdrawal may be misread as aloofness, reflecting respect or shyness. Incorporating relational framing into diversity and inclusion training can promote sensitivity to understanding nonverbal cues across different cultural and social identities, improving workplace communication.

D. Limitations and Future Research Directions

While the findings offer robust insights into the relational dynamics of nonverbal communication, several limitations must be acknowledged:

1. Sample Size and Diversity

While diverse in some respects, the study's participant pool may not fully capture the range of cultural, professional, or romantic relational experiences. Future research should recruit a larger and

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more demographically varied sample, including participants across age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability status, to explore how intersectional identities influence nonverbal interpretation.

2. Self-Reported Data

The data were based on self-reported experiences, subject to biases such as selective memory, social desirability, and personal interpretation. Future studies could supplement interviews with observational data or video-based analysis to more accurately capture the nuances of nonverbal communication in real-time.

3. Static vs. Dynamic Frames

While the study identifies fluidity in relational frames, it remains limited in modeling how quickly and under what conditions these frames shift. Future research should examine the temporal mechanics of frame transitions, possibly through longitudinal studies or experimental manipulations of relational context.

4. Cultural Framing Complexity

Although this study touched on cultural influences, it did not employ a rigorous cross-cultural comparative design. Future studies should systematically explore how specific cultural training or exposure alters relational framing capacities or the interpretation of emotionally ambiguous signals.

This study contributes to the body of research highlighting nonverbal communication's relational and contextual construction. Based on Relational Frame Theory, it demonstrates that meaning is not solely derived from cues but also from history, culture, and emotion. These findings inform therapy, education, and professional settings, which promote more dynamic and compassionate interpretations of human interaction in various contexts.

Conclusion

This study explored nonverbal communication in family, professional, and intimate relationships through Relational Frame Theory (RFT). The findings highlight that nonverbal behaviors, such as gestures and expressions, do not have inherent meanings; rather, their significance is shaped by relational and contextual frames. Depending on context, a cross-arm gesture can be one of defensiveness, confidence, or neutrality. Professional interactions were interpreted in hierarchical frames of reference, with authority emphasized, whereas family interactions were interpreted more subtly based on relational history. Nonverbal actions varied with relational development, with behaviors such as silence potentially varying from avoidance to reflective thought. Cultural context also plays a significant role in nonverbal communication. For instance, eye contact and proximity vary across cultures, influencing interpretations. This study suggests that understanding nonverbal communication requires sensitivity to relational and cultural histories, promoting open dialogue, empathy, and trust. It emphasizes the importance of context over fixed meanings, advocating for a flexible, dialogic approach to communication in various settings.

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21424511