

## **Unspoken Diversity: Cultural Differences in Gestures**

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*This paper describes the use of video to explore cultural differences in gestures. Video recordings were used to capture a large sample of international gestures, and these are edited into a documentary video, A World of Gestures: Culture and Nonverbal Communication. This paper describes the approach and methodology used. A number of specific questions are examined: Are there universally understood hand gestures?; Are there universal categories of gestures—i.e., universal messages with unique instances in each society?; Can the exact same gesture have opposite meanings in two cultures?; Can individuals articulate and explain the gestures common in their culture?; How can video methods provide “visual replication” of nuanced behaviors such as gestures?; Are there gender differences in knowing or performing gestures?; and finally, Is global diversity collapsing toward Western gestural forms under the onslaught of cultural imperialism? The research findings suggest that there are both cultural “differences” and also cultural “meta-differences”—more profound differences involving deeply embedded categories of meaning that make cultures unique.*

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**KEY WORDS:** gestures; culture; cultural differences; nonverbal communication.

### **A BABLE OF GESTURES**

Gestures are definitely NOT a universal language, as people who have worked, lived, or studied abroad may have noticed. Travelers sometimes learn this the hard way, committing inadvertent offense by using the culturally “wrong” gesture. No sojourner is immune to this hazard, even those traveling with scores of advisers in tow. For example, former President

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George Bush blundered into gestural profanity during a Pacific Rim tour late in his Presidency.

President Bush greeted a large, restive crowd of Australians with a gesture he *assumed* was Churchill's famous "V" (for victory) gesture. Unfortunately, the President had the gesture backwards (with the palm facing his own face)—this effectively flashed the large crowd with the British Commonwealth equivalent of the American "finger" (or "screw you") gesture. The Australians were more dumbfounded than angry; many could not quite believe that a head of state would stoop to such an unpresidential act.

Such gestural gaffes are not uncommon. Whether tourists, scholars, or business executives, we are likely to commit one of two types of blunders when traveling abroad: (1) using a gesture that means something very different abroad than it does at home, or (2) failing to "read" a foreign gesture correctly. The first error is particularly likely when we are not fluent in the language. In such cases we can be seduced by the tempting assumption that when words fail we can always communicate—if a little primitively—using simple hand gestures.

This assumption is false because gestural universals do not exist—however popular the idea may be, there is no "universal language" of gestures. This is the single most important conclusion to emerge from our research project on gestures that led to a documentary video, *A World of Gestures: Culture and Nonverbal Communication* (University of California: Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning).<sup>1</sup>

One practical implication of our cross-cultural research is that travelers are strongly urged to practice "gestural humility"—i.e., the assumption that the gestures we know from home will not mean the same things abroad, and also that we cannot infer or intuit the meaning of any gestures we observe in other cultures. A thirsty traveler using a hand gesture to simulate a bottle might just as well try yelling "beverage" at the locals. Just as there is no reason to expect an English *word* to be recognized internationally, there is no reason to expect an American *hand gesture* to be recognized. Using the hand to simulate a tipped bottle is unlikely to produce the desired beverage and, even worse, it comes perilously close to an obscene gesture for "homosexuality" found in slightly permuted form in many societies. While the native citizens (hereafter, referred to as "natives") in other cultures may forgive us our unwitting gestural trespasses—particularly if our garb and behavior proclaim us as clueless aliens—such forgiveness cannot always be counted upon.

The second type of cross-cultural gesture error is failing to read a local gesture correctly when a native citizen exhibits it to us. Travelers run the risk, however innocently, of responding inappropriately to a native's hostile or rude gesture. For example, if an Iranian flashes us the "thumbs up"

sign, we may assume we are being wished good luck and return the gesture. If we do, we have just flashed the Iranian with the single most obscene gesture (a very aggressive “screw you” message) in Persian culture. What ensues, one imagines, would be something other than the friendly encounter the traveler had hoped for.

The practical implication of this finding is that cross-cultural sojourners are strongly advised NOT to imitate or “mirror” any gesture flashed by members of the host culture. After the video *“A World of Gestures”* was released for distribution, I received in the mail several accounts of gestural debacles. For example, one person wrote of an experience while touring the Egyptian Nile:

“(A) small cruise ship brought a party of us to a village somewhere in the vicinity of Sohay. People on shore all raised their arms about their heads and brought them forward and downward in what some of my companions took to be a cordial greeting, in spite of the general hostility of the facial expressions. (My companions) enthusiastically responded with similar gestures. When we went ashore we found ourselves being yelled at and pummeled and generally mistreated to such an extent that our crew came to the rescue with long rods that they held around us, forming a square. The only damage was that one man had his glasses snatched from his face and shattered. We learned later that the gesture implied curses and hostility.” (Justine Randers-Pehrson, personal communication)

Even when we think we recognize a gesture while abroad, we may err. In some cases, the confusion can be innocuous. But the potential for serious error lurks in almost all cross-cultural encounters. In many cases, even when an identical hand movement occurs in two cultures, the emblematic meaning could not be more different. Here are just ten examples of potentially embarrassing gestural mix-readings:

1. “Good-Bye” (U.S.) = “Come Here” (Japan)
2. “Good Luck” (U.S.) = “Screw You” (Iran)
3. “Good Luck” (U.S.) = “Boyfriend” (Japan)
4. “Screw You” (U.S.) = “I Don’t Believe You” (Uruguay)
5. “I’m Angry” (Nepal) = “You Are Afraid” (Mexico)
6. “OK” (U.S.) = “Money” (Japan)
7. “OK” (U.S.) = “Sex” (Mexico)
8. “OK” (U.S.) = “Homosexual” (Ethiopia)
9. “Killed/Dead” (U.S. throat slash) = “Lost a Job” (Japan)
10. “Homosexual” (U.S.) = “Henpecked” (Mexico)

For the wary cross-cultural sojourner, a first step is to recognize that in trying to understand other cultures we have much to learn, and that some of this subtle knowledge exists on levels never taught in language classes or, indeed, in any classes. For the unwary, cross-cultural misunderstandings seem inevitable for several reasons. While Americans have for

decades given lip service to the importance of learning foreign languages, cultural differences in *nonverbal communication* are subtle and rarely (if ever) studied. A person learning French will only master part of the necessary communication skills if the focus is restricted to vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. Fluent communication in France (or any other society) also requires an understanding of the nonverbal communication used by native members of that culture. This may be what Gregory Bateson (1972) meant by the following father-daughter exchange:

Daughter: "Daddy, when they teach us French at school, why don't they teach us to wave our hands?"

Father: "I don't know. I'm sure I don't know. That is probably one of the reasons why people find learning languages so difficult."

### METHODS FOR A WORLD OF GESTURES: HOW TO CAPTURE VISUAL DATA?

Interest in the capture, rendering, and interpretation of visual data has a venerable history in the social sciences. Social scientists have employed drawings (e.g., Birdwhistell 1970; Morris 1994), photographs (Wagner 1979; Collier and Collier 1986), and film or video (Bateson and Mead 1942; Rosenthal, et al. 1979) to record events as diverse as body motion, social settings, cultural practices, and the nonverbal expression of emotions. There appears to be widespread agreement that these visual approaches are absolutely essential if we are to capture authentic data about the social world. At the same time, established methodological guidelines for these methods do not exist, and there are few or no benchmarks by which to judge the reliability and validity of conclusions arising from these approaches.

As a result, visual methods remain as much art form as science. For example, while survey researchers have an established vocabulary to gauge a methodological issue such as "representativeness" (e.g., sampling method, sampling bias, non-response bias, etc.), visual methodologies have few such conventions, and no established methodological benchmarks (such as response rates in survey research). One suspects that many of the traditional concerns of conventional research methods are inherent—if, perhaps, in slightly different form—in visual methods. For example, how representative is documentary footage of a Burmese dance performance recorded in a single village?; how general is the kinesic behavior recorded from one employer-employee interaction?; how do we know that video footage of one person's facial expression of "anger" is not idiosyncratic?

These are obviously issues of representativeness and, whether explicitly or not, they parallel the form that this concern takes within traditional research methodologies. When it comes to recording visual data, however, we lack established agreement about how to solve the representativeness issue, or criteria to indicate that representativeness has been maximized. It seems unlikely that this concern will go away on its own, particularly since representativeness issues are of obvious importance in virtually all uses of visual data. For example, a documentary film about the police may be edited on a 20:1 ratio—i.e., 20 minutes are shot for every single minute contained in the finished documentary. Unless one is willing to assume that this 5% sample is drawn randomly (and I know of no documentaries that make this claim), then the editing involved is a form of purposive sampling. One cannot easily avoid asking, therefore, what criteria were used to include 5% of the raw footage, while discarding the remaining 95%?

When it comes to the capture and interpretation of gestures, additional methodological issues arise from the special nature of the behavior “at hand.” By definition, gestures are fleeting and fluid. They appear before us in a rapid blur and are gone before close scrutiny can be attempted. This nuanced form of communication defies conventional social science methods. For example, imagine that a social scientist seeing for the first time the American hand gesture for “crazy” attempts to capture this behavior by means of verbal description. He or she might record something like the following:

The index finger is held aloft roughly six inches from one’s own ear, as if pointing to the ear. Then in fairly rapid manner, one circumscribes a circle about eight inches in diameter in the air, with the ear at roughly the center of the imaginary circle. Two or three revolutions around this circle appear to be common, and the gesture is sometimes accompanied with what is apparently intended to be a wild or “deranged” facial expression.

In some ways, this seems like an adequate description, and certainly American cultural natives might accurately guess that this was the American “crazy” gesture if given only this verbal paragraph. But how complete is this description, if one takes the vantage point of a cultural outsider? Could a person from Japan *perform* this gesture fluently, with only this paragraph to go on? I think not. For one thing, the paragraph gives no clue as to velocity. Is the circle drawn in a slow, deliberate manner, or in an *extremely rapid motion*? Is the *pointing configuration maintained* with the wrist below the finger held upward, or does the wrist flex, with the wrist itself remaining at the approximate center of the circle as it is drawn?

I think the reason that the original paragraph sounds accurate to American cultural natives is that we bring to it the fact that we already know this gesture, and can perform it without hesitation or premeditation.

To a cultural outsider, however, even the simplest hand gesture occurs along so many different dimensions and variables that verbal description is doomed as a reasonable methodology. One simply can not learn or perform a foreign hand gesture “fluently” from verbal description alone.

Visual methods have been attempted, with some success. Some researchers have used drawings, and these can include arrows or other motion clues for the reader. For example, Desmond Morris (1994) has produced an excellent book of static drawings to indicate the nature of gestures in different societies. Again, motionless depictions of this kind leave inscrutable important gestural features such as speed, number of repetitions, degree of motion “fluidity,” accompanying facial expressions, kinesic behaviors, contextual qualifiers, etc.

Another visual approach has enlisted still photographs in the recording of gestures, and one of the most creative efforts was Lawrence Wylie’s (1977) work on French gestures. Wylie’s book consists of photographs and includes the use of deliberately slowed shutter speeds that allow the viewer to see the trajectory of a gesture—one sees not only a still frame of the gesture highlight, but also as a ghostly path the larger movements of the hand. This approach has many advantages over verbal descriptions or drawings. Photographs allow the viewer some idea of the other nonverbal behaviors—e.g., facial expressions, shoulder position and other kinesic behaviors—that accompany the performance of a given hand gesture. Despite these advances over other methods, still photography also has methodological weaknesses. The speed of a gesture, the number of repetitions (if any), the sequence and fluidity of other accompanying behaviors, and important contextual data are simply invisible in still photographs.

#### **A VISUAL METHODOLOGY OF CAPTURING NONVERBAL BEHAVIORS**

The methods listed above all suffer in comparison to video. Video appears to be the perfect method for the study of gestures. It records movement, captures gestural speed in real time, faithfully shows how many repetitions are used, and even presents the gesture along with other fluid nonverbal behaviors (facial grimaces, postural changes, etc.) as they occur. Video can even record for the viewer the gesturer’s (or “encoder’s”) own contextual account about how the gesture is used, circumstances that illustrate a use of this gesture, the probable consequences of using the gesture, etc.

Because of its unparalleled power, video was the method we used in our research on cultural differences in gesture, and in the making of the

documentary *A World of Gestures*." At the same time, the methodology of video is not self-evident, and some informal methodological comments may be useful. We discovered that conventional videographic habits were NOT conducive to the best data. It often happens that the camera person sees something of interest, but then decides to change the field of vision or the camera angle—and the person in front of the camera is told, "Please do it again" and, more often than not, again and again.

We found this videographer's habit ill-suited the nuanced and largely unconscious domain of gestures. If people became self-conscious, or were asked to repeat gestures, some of the fluidity seemed to evaporate. To illustrate this, try returning to the American "crazy" gesture for a moment. Try performing this gesture five times in a row. One begins to *think* about how, exactly, the gesture is done, and the hand movements become more studied, deliberate, and wooden. During the early editing of our documentary, we discovered that the "best" and most natural rendering of a gesture tended to be the first performance. As a result, we changed our procedures to be ready to capture gestures when they made their first appearance.

Although we included children of different ages, gang gestures, and also archival images of gestures, most of the original footage for our documentary was obtained with "sojourners" visiting or studying in the U.S. Although the fact of international variation in gestures is widely known (Ekman 1976; Ekman and Friesen 1972; Morris, Collett, Marsh, and O'Shaughnessy 1979), before our documentary *A World of Gestures*, no one had assembled and tried to interpret a video anthology of cross-cultural gestures. In part, this is because such a project would seem to require months of foreign videotaping and record-setting frequent flyer mileage.

Clearly, such an undertaking does seem to require the gestural authenticity that only native "speakers" of a culture can provide. There are probably exceptions—e.g., trained ethnographers who approach gestural fluency in a second culture (e.g., Wylie 1977)—but in making the video, I decided that only "native gesturers" would do. Imitations performed by non-natives tend to be artificial at best and, at worst, as wrong-headed as Mr. Bush's "Victory" sign in Australia.

As it turned out, I was able to take advantage of the fact that so much of the world now comes to the U.S. in "English as a Second Language" (ESL) classes. In such classes, people new to the United States struggle with the perplexities of English vocabulary and grammar. Contemporary American ESL classes are a modern Ellis Island, although with perhaps even greater cultural diversity than was found in New York in the 1880s. Our ESL classes included nationals from all the continents except the Antarctic. The composition changed over time—e.g., a Russian man would leave the class, to be replaced by a Hindu woman, etc. Many of the students

in these ESL classes were immigrants, but others were in the U.S for finite stays for schooling or business—the common thread was only a desire to improve command of the English language.

Over a period of several years, I began visiting ESL classes. I discovered the students were eager to learn American norms of nonverbal behavior—our unwritten “rules” governing eye contact, touching, comfortable speaking distance, acceptable public seating patterns, etc. As a result, in making the documentary, I tried to develop an approach that involved a form of exchange. Because such matters are rarely presented in language classes, I would try to teach the ESL students about American NONVERBAL behaviors—American patterns of touch, speaking distances and other proxemics, eye contact, facial expressions and, of course, American gestures.

Someone who violates cultural norms for nonverbal behavior makes us profoundly uncomfortable. As just a single example, people from some Mediterranean cultures often hold the elbow of the person to whom they are talking; for many Americans, this uninvited touching is nearly unbearable. An understanding of these nonverbal norms is vital, since in everyday interaction people never explicitly correct a nonverbal violation—e.g., “Excuse me, you are standing too close to me,” or “Pardon me, you maintained mutual eye contact for far too long.” Instead, people tend to reject or simply avoid those whose “alien” nonverbal behavior makes us uncomfortable.

After giving a brief talk on such subjects in ESL classes, I found that the students were eager to share gestures from their home cultures. I began bringing a professional video crew along on my ESL visits, and the video *“A World of Gestures”* is the result. Thanks to the expertise of the ESL students, we were able to explore the variety and meaning of the hand gestures “spoken” in their home cultures. The ESL students showed us the gestures used in their cultures, and the students explained the context and consequences associated with each gesture. These gestural performances became the visual “data” edited and analyzed for the finished documentary.

This video captures and tries to make some sense out of a dazzling assemblage of international gestures. Perhaps not surprisingly, cross-cultural gestures are imbued with humor, spontaneity, affection, mischief, and sometimes malice. Gestures tend to involve powerful emotions, positive and negative, and many of the sequences in the documentary are provocative and highly entertaining. Although a pious lesson in the importance of “cultural diversity” was never my intent, no one can see *“A World of Gestures”* without gaining an enhanced appreciation for the remarkable richness and variety of the world’s cultures.

This was also true for those of us working on the documentary. For my video crew and I, the project was a voyage of visual discovery. We felt



that we were swimming in waters only faintly charted on most social science “maps,” and this gave the project a heady sense that we were exploring the unknown. The project was remarkable for other reasons as well. International gestures are frequently outrageous, largely unpredictable, often hilarious, and always interesting. Our video work in ESL classes often elicited gasps of surprise, as ESL students from one culture discovered that what at first appeared to be a familiar gesture actually means something radically different in another society. In making the documentary, we all acquired a deeply enhanced sense of the power, nuances, and unpredictability of cultural differences.

There were also lessons in visual methodology. One concerns embarrassment. Many gestures, here and abroad, are scandalous. Several of the gestural categories in the video deal with insults, angry obscenities, and—of course—sex, sexual insults, sexual orientation, and sexual infidelity. People in all societies have learned that to perform such gestures is vulgar, wicked, or even tabu. From the videographer’s point of view, the profane nature of many gestures presents a challenge. People may know fluently gestures that they may be too embarrassed to perform “in public”—meaning, in our case, before an audience and camera.

For example, a woman from Peru tried five times to perform an obscene Peruvian gesture for our cameras, but each time she collapsed in embarrassed laughter. This was interesting in part because there was not another Peruvian in the room (and perhaps not in the entire county), so no observer “knew” the wicked gesture she was trying to perform. Her embarrassment was therefore culturally *intrinsic*—i.e., performing this gesture in front of anyone, Peruvian or not, was scandalous. In such cases, we found that asking the person to stay after the ESL session was over enabled the person to perform this kind of “wicked” gesture in front of a largely empty room.

Another methodological point involved what might be called “*visual replication*.” In general, the cultural learning of gestures is thorough, consistent throughout a society, and therefore highly replicable. We found that putting two cultural natives on camera at the same time was an elegant way of demonstrating this point. For example, when two women from Japan are asked to perform the Japanese gesture for “angry,” the two performances are identical in form, position, speed, accompanying facial expressions—in short, in every facet of the performed gesture. These on-camera replications are so precise that a casual viewer might assume they could only be the product of deliberate choreography.

In fact, of course, this “choreography” reflects decades of gestural socialization—observation, experimentation, play, and repeated performances. This on-camera replication dramatically underlines the validity and

replicability of the gesture being captured on video. This encourages us to conclude that gestures are a form of shared understanding diffused throughout a culture. Next we see two examples. Two women from Japan demonstrate the gesture for “Homosexuality,” (see cover photo) and a man and woman from Mexico demonstrate the gesture for “Screw you 20 times” (see Figure 1).

Some caveats are in order. There may of course be generational effects in recognizing gestures—e.g., do octogenarians know some gestures unknown to fifteen-year-olds and vice-versa? In culturally diverse societies, there may also be what could be called “dialectal” gestures. In Los Angeles, for example, a gang member may recognize half a dozen different gestures symbolizing different gang names, while a suburban surgeon may know—at most—that such gang gestures exist. Other gestures, however, undoubtedly transcend dialects. Both the gang member and the surgeon will know gestures that mean “crazy,” “suicide,” etc.

A final methodological note concerns gender differences. In general, men and women inhabit the same gestural worlds. People from Iran all know what a given obscene gesture means, and gender does not in most cases circumscribe this knowledge. There are exceptions to this gender equality, some of them notorious. For example, British news people nearly trampled one another trying to photograph then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher repeatedly giving audiences of her enthusiastic supporters in England the “screw you” gesture—Mrs. Thatcher thought she was performing the Churchillian victory gesture and, surprisingly, she was apparently unaware of the British obscene gesture. It is a commentary on both Mrs. Thatcher and the English press that photographers gleefully asked the Prime Minister to repeat her gesture again and again while the click of camera shutters rose to a malicious roar.

We found other instances of gender differences. Even when both men and women both knew a wicked or scandalous gesture, it was frequently the case that *performing* the gesture obviously caused more embarrassment for women—suggesting that there may be a gendered pan-cultural (or, if one insists, “universal”) license such that women performing scandalous gestures are subject to greater shaming, sanctions, or social “taboo.” This parallels the tendency, widespread across cultures, to problematize women’s sexuality (virginity, purity, infidelity, etc.) but not men’s.

In general, therefore, the gender differences we observed were NOT differences in *gestural knowledge*, but gendered differences in *gestural permissibility*. Men exhibited an almost gleeful mastery of the wicked gestures in their home cultures, and a general willingness to perform them in front of the classroom and video audience. By contrast, women were often em-



Fig. 1. (Mexico) "Screw you 20 times."

barrassed to confess that they knew what such gestures meant, and even more embarrassed when asked to perform them.

Without further research, we can only speculate that this finding is replicated in the *verbal* channel—i.e., that women in most or all cultures might experience greater stigma for using verbal obscenities. In the gestural realm, it seems to be the case that even if men and women are equally knowledgeable regarding gestures about sex and love, men are more likely to perform these gestures. In Fig. 2, we see two of the hundreds of global gestures dealing with sex or love. A man from Uruguay demonstrates the gesture for “Unfaithful wife (i.e., the man is a cuckold),” and a man from Thailand demonstrates the gesture indicating “Two people are in love.”

### PATTERNS AND FINDINGS: HOW ARE GESTURES ACQUIRED?

Gestures are a silent language unique to every society. Although never taught in school or studied in books, the language of gestures for one’s own society is learned fluently during development. This is easily seen in studies of children. Pre-schoolers know that gestures exist and, if asked to show something like “OK”, they often use both hands to try to place the fingers in the appropriate position, with mixed results. At this age, hand gestures are literally “manufactured”—constructed laboriously with both hands—because young children are not yet fluent in the language of gesture.

Young children may even know that a certain gesture exists but be unable to perform it. For example, when asked if he knew the obscene “F-word” gesture, a seven-year-old American boy in *“A World of Gestures”* said he knew there was such a “bad” gesture, but that he had not yet been able to see it close enough at school to be able to copy it. Obviously, sustained attention overcomes such difficulties; by age ten or eleven, most children have mastered an impressive repertoire of gestures, and they have learned to perform them with unhesitating, fluent motions.

The absence of gestural fluency in early childhood, and the acquisition of gestural fluency by late adolescence demonstrate that the individual has been socialized to read and perform nonverbal communication—although we have very little exact understanding of how this learning occurs. For example, it seems unlikely that adults will correct gestural approximations, as happens with language errors. If a child says, “I saw two geese,” a parent or teacher will probably offer the correct plural noun “geese”—indicating that the verbal channel of communication receives explicit correction, improvement, and pedagogy. By contrast, it is highly unlikely that



Fig. 2a. (Uruguay) "Unfaithful wife (Husband is a cuckold)."



Fig. 2b. (Thailand) "Two people are in love."

teachers and parents will lovingly rush in to improve a child's first efforts at performing an obscene gesture! Instead, observation by the child seems to be the sole teacher, aided—perhaps—by some secretive practice.

### THE BIRTH OF GESTURES

Ancient gestures can be seen (although not always understood) in pre-Christian art (Morris, 1977). Some gestures persist recognizably for thousands of years. For example, the original cuckold gesture was performed by shaping both hands to simulate a bull's horns. Modern variations of the cuckold gesture can be performed with one hand alone (the pinky and index fingers raised), with two hands (index fingers raised) held at the temples, and even the contemporary "bunny ears" gesture children hold behind another person's head during a school photograph. Such gestures show remarkable inter-generational persistence, particularly for a "language" that is not part of any school curricula.

Gestures are also dynamic, however, and new ones are constantly being created. Examples of created gestures are the "thumbs up" gesture (popularized in the U.S. in the 1940s), the "square" gesture ('50s), the "peace" gesture ('60s), the "whoopie" gesture ('70s), the "gag me" gesture ('80s), and the "retarded" gesture ('90s). Some of these invented gestures persist, while others are destined for the nonverbal dustbin. What makes some gestures diffuse successfully, while others wither away, is simply not understood. It is tempting to assume that visual media are the necessary popularizers, but gestures predate television and cinema by at least two millennia.

### THEORIZING GESTURES: A CONFESSION OF ERRORS

I began research on cultural differences in gesture with a series of apparently reasonable working hypotheses. Some of these hypotheses seem supported by our video research, while others turned out to be spectacularly incorrect. I began with the assumption that cross-cultural research would quickly reveal massive gestural differences—and, indeed, that is what I found. The "vocabulary" of international gestures is diverse, extensive, and extraordinary in its creativity.

When one examines other societies, there is a dazzling array of gestures obvious to natives but opaque (or, even worse, misleading) to outsiders. So the first hypothesis, that gestures are characterized by vigorous cross-cultural heterogeneity, is easily demonstrated. In dealing with other

cultures, therefore, the best working assumption for travelers, scholars, and business people is that they will NOT understand the gestures used by natives in other societies. In addition, it is equally prudent to assume that the gestures one brings from one's own society will be at best inscrutable abroad and, at worst, dangerously evocative of meanings entirely unlike what we intend. In short, gestures are an area where culture governs—there is no such thing as a universal language of gestures.

Curiously, this is even true of the one form of hand gestures that is explicitly taught: sign languages for the deaf. Sign languages vary enormously from society to society. An American student told me that he caused riotous laughter while addressing an audience at a European conference on deaf research. When he “signed” his first name, it turned out that one of the American Sign Language (ASL) characters had an obscene translation in the deaf sign languages used in several European societies. While the potential exists for convergence toward a single manual sign language, this has not occurred, and even sign languages are therefore culturally esoteric.

In passing, it should be noted that manual sign languages such as ASL differ dramatically from the hand gestures used by hearing populations. The latter are generally *coverbal*—e.g., a “crazy” gesture used as part of an animated verbal conversation about someone's bizarre behavior. ASL and other manual sign languages are different. ASL is non-vocal and thus one is tempted to describe it as nonverbal because not a sound is heard. But ASL gestures are the direct equivalents of precise letters and words, and thus one can also describe ASL as verbal. There are other differences. While the hearing population learns gestures through informal observation and implicit socialization, the deaf acquire ASL through explicit pedagogy (Klima and Bellugi 1979; Sacks 1990).

### THE IMPORTANCE OF NUANCED DIFFERENCES

In many cases, gestures from different societies may look similar but have dramatically different meanings. The fact that these differences persist, despite the potentially homogenizing effects of global media, testifies to the strength and cultural vitality of gestures. For example, the familiar American “OK” gesture is similar in many ways to gestures that mean: “money” in Japan, “zero” in France, “homosexuality” in Ethiopia, and “obscenity” in Brazil. Similarly, the American raised thumb gesture for “good luck” is a vulgar gesture meaning “sit on this” in Sardinia, and “screw you” in Iran.



Clearly, the meaning of international gestures is rarely if ever self-evident. This means that any use of gestures in a cross-cultural interaction carries the potential for confusion, inferential error, embarrassment or, in extreme cases, even pugilism. The cross-cultural sojourner without verbal mastery of the local language cannot assume that an “international language” of gestures exists, and it is highly improbable that this sojourner will be able to decode or encode such gestures accurately. In some situations, this matters. For example, the two gestures in Figure 3 may appear highly aggressive. But can the exact meanings of these gestures be guessed reliably—i.e., are they threatening to the observer? Our intuition in such matters is likely to be a poor guide, and in cross-cultural contacts, it might be particularly important to be able to detect aggressive or threatening gestures. As it happens, neither of these gestures is threatening to the observer. The man from Portugal is demonstrating the gesture for “Suicide,” the man from Ethiopia is also demonstrating the “Suicide” gesture.

Another extraordinary thing about gestures is their subtlety. Differences that may seem slight can have enormous consequences. As we have seen, in England the difference between a “palm-in” and “palm-out” V-gesture is enormous. In Germany and many other European cultures, the hand gesture for “stupid” is a finger on the forehead; the American gesture for “smart” is nearly identical, but the finger is held an inch to the side, at the temple. Even though these positional or motion differences seem slight, the change in meaning can be enormous.

One of our goals in constructing *A World of Gestures* was to create a visual “archive” that could not only teach specific international gestures but also (and more generally) *sensitize* viewers to the variety and importance of cultural differences. We hoped that seeing the video might help groups as diverse as traveling scholars, students, business people, and diplomats. In addition, cross-cultural training such as that given to Peace Corps volunteers could emphasize that societies differ in important (but frequently unanticipated) nonverbal nuances as well as in the spoken word. These gestural nuances, and the unique qualities of nonverbal behavior generally, were best captured in a famous (and appropriately enigmatic) quote from anthropologist Edward Sapir (1949):

“We respond to gestures with an extreme alertness and, one might almost say, in accordance with an elaborate and secret code that is written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all.”

One of our pragmatic premises in making *A World of Gestures* was our conviction that Sapir is correct in his conclusion that gestural codes are culturally esoteric. However, our work suggests that Sapir was wrong in implying that this culturally “embedded” knowledge is inaccessible, in-



Fig. 3a. (Portugal) "Suicide."



Fig. 3b. (Ethiopia) "Suicide."

explicable, or hopelessly inscrutable—i.e., “known by none.” In fact, the unspoken diversity of human gestures is an area ripe for exploration and mapping. As our video seeks to demonstrate, one can in fact discover the international languages of gesture and, in the process, overcome a nuanced, often hidden, but quite formidable barrier to international understanding.

We believe that Sapir’s famous quote errs because it mistakes the “taken-for-granted” nature of gestures for nonverbal behaviors that are, in fact, performed unconsciously. Many other types of nonverbal behavior are genuinely unconscious, and people in all cultures would find it difficult or impossible to articulate the cultural “rules” for these acts. Examples are speaking distances (e.g., “Exactly how close should you stand while speaking to your boss?”), or eye-contact (e.g., “How does your eye-contact pattern change when you want to let another person know that it is his or her turn to speak?”). There are cultural rules for these behaviors and they are indeed, to use Sapir’s famous phrase, “written nowhere, known by none, and understood by all.”

But gestures are different. Gestures are deeply embedded in the socialization processes of each culture, but they are accessible to conscious awareness. Most important, from our point of view, they can be performed, illustrated, modeled, taught, and explicated to cultural outsiders. Although native members of a culture have almost certainly never been asked this before, they *can* answer questions like: “How do you make a hand gesture that indicates that another person is crazy?” We have found that people can answer such questions readily, and they can also provide contextual information—e.g., is this gesture mildly humorous or deeply insulting?; what might happen after a person uses such a gesture?; are men and women equally likely to use this gesture?; can you give an example of a situation that might lead to you using this gesture?

In passing, it is worth noting that in certain extreme situations, the esoteric nature of gestures can work to one’s advantage—i.e., sometimes natives *know* that culture outsiders do not understand “insider” gestures. When North Korea captured the crew of an American ship suspected of spying in North Korean waters, a photograph of the ship’s crew was released to prove to the world that the crew members were content and happy. Unknown to the North Koreans, the American captives used the photograph to transmit a secret, gestural message of defiance. Several of the captured Americans in the photograph displayed the American middle “finger” gesture in a manner that was prominent but not recognized by the North Koreans. In this way, the imprisoned Americans managed to visually telegraph a secret signal of defiance that spoke eloquently, if not elegantly, to Americans back home.

### CULTURAL DIFFERENCES AND CULTURAL META-DIFFERENCES

In general, the principal finding we encountered is a pattern of limitless variety in global gestures. The principal hypothesis of this work, that gestures are governed by remarkable cultural diversity, is therefore supported by the video record in *A World of Gestures*. However, candor requires a confession that we were quickly proven wrong in some of our other theoretical assumptions. For example, I was quite certain that research would show that the *categories* of gestures would turn out to be invariant across cultures—that all societies would have an obscene gesture, a “shame on you” gesture, a gesture for “very good,” a gesture for “crazy,” etc. While I expected the gesture for each category to be unique within each culture, I assumed that all cultures would need to have each gestural category. A metaphor might be language—the word for “hand” differs across cultures, but all cultures need to have a word for “hand.”

Apparently, some cultures can do perfectly well without a word for “hand”—at least when it comes to gestural categories. We were surprised to learn that even the most “obvious” categories of gestures are not universal. There appear to be few if any messages that universally require a hand gesture. An example, and one that we found particularly surprising, concerns obscene gestures. We had assumed (as it now appears, ethnocentrically) that all cultures would require one or more obscene hand gestures. We assumed that all cultures would require dramatic visual means of sending grievous insults.

To our great surprise, this is simply not true. Many societies indeed have one or more native obscene gestures. Perhaps not surprisingly, this is an area of striking cross-cultural creativity. Some cultures have an astonishing number of native obscene gestures—e.g., this is particularly true for Central American and Mexican cultures. For example, Mexican culture has an eloquent gestural repertoire of nuanced hand gestures for different obscene messages. Mexican culture also has a defensive hand gesture (for “canceling” another person’s obscene gesture), and even obscene whistles and hand claps that can substitute for obscene hand gestures. Clearly, obscene gestures and insults are highly expressive gestural category for many societies.

But not all societies. We were astonished (and, at first, incredulous) at finding that a number of societies have no native obscene gesture. Examples include certain (but definitely not all!) Northern European societies such as the Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland. We need to emphasize that citizens in these societies indeed recognize a number of obscene gestures from other societies. For example, via exposure to American cinema,

nationals of these societies told us they knew what the American “finger” gesture meant. But “foreign” obscene gestures are rarely used in their countries and—most important—there is no *indigenous* obscene gesture in these cultures.

Similar categoric variation was found for other subjects. We found only one society (Uruguay) with a hand gesture for “Lesbian” (it is a special hand-clap, with both hands held parallel rather than crossed conventionally), while many societies had a gesture for (male) “homosexuality.” Many societies had a suicide gesture, but some did not. A few societies had a gesture for “shame on you,” while most did not. France is one of the only societies with gestures for “I’m bored.” We found that some societies had a gesture for “beautiful woman,” but others did not, and only two cultures had a gesture for “beautiful man.” A few societies had a positive gesture meaning “these two people are in love,” but most cultures had no such gesture.

We also found that some societies have highly distinctive gestural categories, ones that have no close parallel in other cultures. Although the study of gestural categories is obviously in its infancy, I believe that in each society *gestural categories* will arise to “articulate” the most important themes and concerns in a given culture. For example, one often hears that filial piety (respect and concern for parents) is a major theme in Japanese society and, indeed, Japan was the only culture we found with a hand gesture for “protecting one’s parents”—the thumb of each hand is tucked safely within the fingers of that hand. Similarly, one infers that careers have an importance in Japan unequalled in most other industrial nations and, once again, Japan was the only culture we found with a gesture for “losing one’s job” (ominously, it is a throat slashing gesture). In Figure 4, we see two relatively unique hand gestures. An Ethiopian man shows the gesture for “Revenge,” and a Mexican man and woman show the gesture for “You are afraid.”

We do not yet have a list of which gestural categories are found in each culture on the planet. But I think *A World of Gestures* demonstrates that not only are specific gestures NOT universal, *entire gestural categories are also NOT universal*. It is simply not true that all societies will have an obscene gesture, a “crazy” gesture, a “beautiful woman” gesture, etc.—our work demonstrates that this is not the case. Instead, culture not only dictates what a specific gesture means, it also determines whether a given gestural category is “necessary” in a society. Again, this finding dramatically contradicts one of our principal theoretical assumptions: we had hypothesized that cultural variation in gestures would occur within the framework (and confines) of universal gestural categories.



Fig. 4a. (Ethiopia) "Revenge."



Fig. 4b. (Mexico) "You are afraid (a taunt)."



We had anticipated that we would find *cultural differences* in gestures, but not what might be called "*cultural meta-differences*"—more profound differences in the categories of meaning that gestures seek to express. We anticipated that gestural categories of meaning would be relatively universal, while the specific gestures in these categories would vary wildly. Instead, we uncovered both cultural differences and meta-differences. Our work suggests that there are not, after all, "universal" communicational needs that gestures evolve to serve.

Apparently, we underestimated the importance, power, and scope of cultural differences. Instead of universal communicational categories, we found that cultural differences are more profound and unfettered than we expected. When it comes to gestures, culture determines not only how one says something but even what someone might want to say in the first place. I believe this finding should erode further the widespread tendency to believe in communication universals, at least in this domain of nonverbal behavior.

#### IT'S NOT SUCH A SMALL WORLD AFTER ALL

Finally, we had assumed we would find Western cultural imperialism inexorably erasing all cultural differences, including differences of the hand. We imagined that cinema, television, MTV, the Internet, global CNN news coverage and—most sinister of all—worldwide broadcasts of "Bay Watch" would spawn international clones of American gestures. We anticipated that well-wishers on all continents would soon be gleefully flashing one another the American "thumbs up" gesture.

Again, we were wrong. Cultural differences in gestures are both alive and extremely well. While it is obviously untrue to say that Western cultural imperialism does not exist, it is not all powerful. Verbal and substantive *content*— e.g., what Clint Eastwood says in an American movie, the fact that there were four members of the Beatles, etc.—diffuses across cultural boundaries with relative ease. It is in such matters that Western cultural imperialism is likely to have its greatest impacts. Clearly, the content of the world's literature, drama, music, television, and cinema may show diminished cultural differences under the onslaught of imported Western media.

But if we have learned anything since the publication of Edward Hall's pioneering works on cultural differences (1959, 1969, 1981), it is that nonverbal behaviors are different. Nonverbal acts such as spatial behavior, eye contact, touching, vocal paralanguage, and gestures are unique in at least 4 ways: (1) These nonverbal behaviors are rarely taught explicitly, (2) They

are acquired instead through direct observation, (3) There are few vocabularies for discussing nonverbal acts, and people interpret and perform nonverbal acts without reflection or sometimes even conscious awareness, and (4) each culture has unique habitual patterns and preferences of nonverbal behaviors such as touch and space, and people experience profound (if inarticulate) discomfort if culturally "alien" nonverbal behaviors are experienced (Archer and Akert 1977, 1980, in preparation; Smith, Archer, and Costanzo 1991; Archer, Akert, and Costanzo 1993).

A nonverbal repertoire such as gestures is therefore unlike the more content-driven domains of literature and popular culture. By comparison, gestures are culturally deeper, more embedded, and less accessible to imports from other cultures. While people in cultures the world over may indeed be drinking Coca-Cola and playing basketball, nonverbal behaviors seem less likely to homogenize. Even if conversations around the world are increasingly sprinkled with global terms such as "OK" and "dollar," the extraordinary cultural diversity revealed and celebrated in the video *"A World of Gestures"* seems certain to endure. Whatever other homogenization occurs, people all around the world definitely will NOT all be smiling warmly while giving one another the "thumbs up" gesture. Once again, nonverbal behaviors are different.

#### ENDNOTE

1. *"A World of Gestures"* is one of five documentaries in a University of California video series on NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION. The other videos are *"The Human Face: Emotions, Identities and Masks," "The Human Voice: Exploring Vocal Paralanguage," "The Interpersonal Perception Task (IPT),"* and *"The Interpersonal Perception Task-15 (IPT-15)."* The two IPT videos are "self-tests" that allow the viewer to see whether he or she "reads" nonverbal behavior accurately (Costanzo and Archer, 1989; Archer, Akert, and Costanzo, 1993). Source for these videos: The University of California Extension Center for Media and Independent Learning, 2000 Center Street—Fourth Floor, Berkeley, California 94704, Phone (510) 642-0460; Fax (510) 643-9271.

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