

## Body Language 88

### **Does Our Body Language Reveal Conscious and Unconscious Prejudices?**

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD**



The social upheaval in 2020 triggered by the murder of George Floyd, and amplified by many other tragic situations, has changed the way we approach racial injustice as a society.

While some progress has been made over the decades, it is clear that more progress is urgently needed. As an older white male, I realize that I am caught in my own world view. I am becoming more aware that many marginalized groups have a vastly different set of experiences about the impact of prejudice. I am seeking to learn more.

As a longtime student of body language, I have concluded that our gestures and other body language do reveal hidden feelings of prejudice.

When teaching body language, I stress that cultural differences are really important when interpreting signals from another person. You cannot assume you are interpreting as a signal from someone of another culture is what you are used to in yours.

There is a wonderful resource book on this topic entitled [“Kiss, Bow, or Shake Hands”](#) by Terri Morrison, Wayne Conaway, and George Borden. My copy is a few decades old, but they have been issuing new editions; the most recent version was written in 2015. It is important to keep things up to date, because customs tend to change with time. The book is a great way to read up on the culture of another part of the world when you travel internationally.

Even within a particular nation there can be large differences in body language signals depending on the differences that occur between groups of people.

I am sure there are a ton of issues where body language signals are different from one race to another. I have not found a lot of studies on this aspect, although there was a [documented study](#) at the University of Pittsburgh in 2016 relative to doctors being less empathetic with their body language when treating terminally ill black patients versus white patients.

The majority of the physicians were white men, so the team could not make any statistically significant conclusions about whether the physician's race impacted his or her actions.

In a [Tufts University study](#) reported in Science Daily, "Subtle patterns of nonverbal behavior that appear on popular television programs influence racial bias among viewers. Black characters elicit especially negative nonverbal responses, such as facial expressions and body language, from other characters, and viewers exhibit more racial bias after exposure to such negative responses."

The study found that characters on the shows exhibited more negative nonverbal behavior toward black characters than to white characters of the same status.

I also found an interesting [study](#) indicating "Some evidence for the nonverbal contagion of racial bias." The study was done in 2015 by Willard (Harvard), Isaac (Princeton), and Carney (UC Berkeley). "Four experiments provide evidence for the hypothesis that we can "catch" racial bias from others by merely observing subtle nonverbal cues."

The implications of this study are that it is likely we unconsciously pass on judgmental feelings about another group of people by our nonverbal behaviors.

I found several examples of specific scripted studies such as the ones above, but I have not found a meta-analysis or extensive controlled experiment reported in the literature.

I have a growing interest in the subject of the links between bias and body language. If anyone knows of a book, additional academic study, or video on this specific topic, let me know.

I find myself reading more on this topic and trying to learn how to become an "antiracist."

I am currently reading the book ["How to Be An Antiracist"](#) by Ibram Kendi on this topic. He is a New York Times bestselling author and is director of the Antiracist Research and Policy Center at American University. He makes the point that "racism is steeped in denial." He also points out that when a person says "I am not a racist," it is an indication that the person likely is a racist.

Before this summer, I was not thinking about these issues as much as I should have. I thought of myself as unbiased and have volunteered in dozens of ways to help try to level the playing field, particularly for blacks in our community. I now see my actions in a different light and feel that by not being more proactive in pursuing inclusive excellence, I was likely part of the problem rather than part of the solution.

I am attempting to remedy this situation by redoubling my efforts to become more educated about the issues and more active in fighting all forms of bias by reading and attending numerous programs on the topic. It is an interesting area, because if you have

unconscious biases, you are not aware of them, by definition. I think it is wise to explore in what ways you can become more aware of any unconscious biases you have.

We need to recognize that everyone is biased in some way.

Discussions of this topic are challenging, because it is easy to offend a person who is different from you. Well-intended conversations can quickly become a minefield of potential problems. Someone said that in order to make progress, we need to become more comfortable with being uncomfortable. There are many things we need to “unlearn” and learn in a different way.

*This is a part in a series of articles on “Body Language” by Bob Whipple “The Trust Ambassador.”*