

Why interpreting gestures often goes wrong

Many people try to read their counterpart's gestures – for example, in a job interview or recruitment conversation. Arms folded across the chest are quickly taken as a sign of defensiveness or closed-mindedness. I strongly advise against such blanket interpretations. Gestures are not as clear-cut as they may seem at first sight.

Peter Näf

What would be the prerequisite for being able to reliably interpret someone's gestures? They would have to be universal – appearing consistently among people of different cultures and backgrounds in response to identical triggers. This, however, is not the case. Things are quite different when it comes to facial expressions of emotion.

The psychologist Paul Ekman – well known to a wider audience through the television series «Lie to Me» – has studied facial expressions of emotion worldwide and, quite literally, travelled to the ends of the earth in doing so. He examined and compared how people express certain emotions in cultures familiar to us.

When facial expressions are universal...

He also conducted this research in tribal societies with no contact with other cultures. This allowed him to rule out the possibility that facial expressions are learned or culturally shaped. His conclusion: basic emotional responses in the face are universal. For instance, a tightened, narrowing upper lip is a reliable sign of anger – regardless of origin or culture.

Paul Ekman presents his findings vividly in his highly readable book «Emotions Revealed». Yet beyond such clear emotions, caution is needed when interpreting facial expressions and gestures.

...and when they remain individual

The German author and stage performer Thorsten Havener astonishes audiences with his thought-reading experiments. In his books, he describes his approach: as a keen observer, he notices even the smallest facial and gestural reactions. To interpret them correctly, however, he first needs to «calibrate» his subjects. He will ask a question they can answer with certainty – such as their name – followed by a question they cannot possibly answer. From the difference in their facial expression and body language he can discern how this individual displays knowledge and ignorance – and only then is he able to «read» them accurately.

So, if someone sits opposite you with folded arms and you have not first calibrated them, be careful about jumping to conclusions. The posture may mean many things: perhaps you have invaded their personal space, and they are trying to protect themselves. But they might equally be relaxing in this position; perhaps concealing sweat stains or dirty hands – or simply hugging themselves.

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