



## Articles

# When a Small Thing Means so Much: Nonverbal Cues as Turning Points in Relationships

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## Abstract

This paper investigates reports of transformative nonverbal behaviors: cues that act as important interactional triggers for a change in or between people in a relationship. To explore such behaviors, we asked participants to report on any situation in which they recalled one or more nonverbal cues that they or others used and that changed something for them. The most commonly reported nonverbal cues that instigated transformation were facial expressions, eye behavior, touch, and the use of personal space. Vocal cues (particularly silence), gestures and other kinesic cues (e.g., walking away), use of time, and attire were also mentioned. Using the constant comparative approach, we found four large categories of changes the participants reported as resulting from these nonverbal cues and provide examples of these change types from our data corpus. We labeled these “relational,” “perceptual,” “affective,” and “behavior”. Our analyses revealed that judgments of the behavior/event’s valence correlated positively with judgments of their relationship, the other person, and themselves, suggesting that the affective judgment of a nonverbal turning point event may have strong implications for other important judgments. Vocal cues seemed to be involved in events that were labeled more negatively, and touch was a cue in events labeled more positively. Finally, eye behaviors were consistently a part of events that were reported to result in changes in perception.

**Keywords:** nonverbal cues, relational turning points, nonverbal triggers, relationships

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Nonverbal cues are important in relationships, and they function in those relationships in a range of ways. As Guerrero and Floyd (2006) note, for example,

relationships sometimes suffer when people send conflicting nonverbal messages, express negativity through nonverbal cues, or misinterpret one another’s behaviors. Nonverbal communication is also a potent means for showing affection, expressing positive emotions, and otherwise maintaining satisfying relationships (pp. 1-2).

Perhaps most notably, however, nonverbal cues are a primary mode through which people reflect the current nature of a relationship to one another and to others around them. That is, they send *relational messages* (Burgoon, 1994; Burgoon & Hale, 1984) by showing without words, and often in subtle ways, how the parties to the relationship define what the relationship is to them. Sitting close and touching one another are, for instance, often signs of an intimate relationship, especially in its earliest stages (Andersen, Guerrero, & Jones, 2006). One person facing toward and another facing away may indicate two people with different types of regard for one another. In these cases, the nonverbal cues are acting as reflections of the current relational status.

Nonverbal communication not only reflects existing relationships, however; the enactment of certain behaviors (i.e., intimate cues) works to *create* a certain type of relationship (Andersen et al., 2006; Noller, 2006). That is, in addition to sending relational messages that communicate about the existing relationship between people, nonverbal cues may also function to bring about a new or different kind of connection or regard. In support of this, Chartrand and Bargh (1999), for example, found that synchrony of two people's nonverbal cues can create more liking for one another. Likewise, brief and appropriate touches tend to increase positive affect between interactants (Hornik, 1992).

Often, as in the studies just cited, the nonverbal cues implicated in creating relationships as a certain quality, form, or type have their effect outside of the interactants' awareness (Knapp & Hall, 2010; i.e., people are unlikely to know that another's touch made them like the toucher more). There are, however, times in the course of a relationship when nonverbal cues are more notable, and they may be actively interpreted and responded to by interactants. Previous research (e.g., Manusov, 1990, 2002) has found that negative and/or unusual behaviors tend to instigate more conscious attributions, for instance.

Of particular interest to the current study are those nonverbal cues that may work as recognizable *triggers for change* within relationships. That is, one or more nonverbal cues may function to alter something in a relationship—or at least within the minds of the partners to that relationship—quickly and saliently. Manusov and Milstein (2005) refer to the ability to evoke change as the “transformational quality” of nonverbal cues, and such a conceptualization is consistent with Andersen's (2008) claim that nonverbal cues in relationships can be “capricious and nonlinear” (p. 207) as they play out in the complexities of real life. It is also consistent with a dialectical approach to relationships, which views change as expected in rather than problematic to relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996).

### Nonverbal Cues as Turning Points

Sudden or notable changes in relationships have been studied primarily by researchers interested in *relational turning points*, although nonverbal cues have not yet been the focus of this scholarship. According to Bolton (1961), turning points constitute “breakthrough points at which some ambiguous matter ‘jells,’ jump points where there is a sudden surge in affective involvement, points of decommitment from past relations or identities, etc.” (p. 237). Graham (1997) expanded on this conceptualization, stating that,

by definition, turning points capture a critical moment, an event or incident that has impact or import. Turning points trigger a reinterpretation of what the relationship means to participants. These new meanings can influence the perceived importance of and justification for continued investment in the relationship (p. 351).

Since Bolton's introduction and analysis of turning points, scholars have investigated similar concepts, including transition points (Levinger, 1983), critical events (Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985), transition phases (Masheter & Harris, 1986), relational turning points (Baxter & Bullis, 1986), and relational transitions (Conville, 1988). The concurrence of so many related constructs suggests the importance of change in the relational context and provides epistemological backing for further investigation.

Researchers who study turning points in relationships have been concerned primarily with identifying the types of events (e.g., an argument, a change in marital status) that create marked changes within particular relationship types, such as romantic (Dailey, Rossetto, McCracken, Jin, & Green, 2012), family (Poulos, 2012), friendships

(Becker et al., 2009), and teacher-student relationships (Docan-Morgan, 2011; Docan-Morgan & Manusov, 2009). They have also had interest in particular changes that the turning points bring about, such as levels of commitment, relational satisfaction (e.g., Baxter & Bullis, 1986; Surra, 1987), self-efficacy (i.e., Docan-Morgan, 2011), and closeness (e.g., Golish, 2000; Johnson, Wittenberg, Villagran, Mazur, & Villagran, 2003; Johnson et al., 2004; Poulos, 2012). As noted, nonverbal behavior has not been the primary focus of this scholarship.

Nonverbal cues have arisen inductively as “turning point material” in several studies, however. In their investigation of romantic partners, for example, Baxter and Bullis (1986) noted that two behaviors associated with *touch*—first kiss and first sex—were important events in escalating relationship commitment. They also found other turning points associated to some degree with *physical space*, often discussed as a form of nonverbal communication. In particular, their participants identified physical separation (e.g., vacations, overseas trips) and living together as relational turning points. Golish (2000), Graham (1997), and Johnson et al. (2004) likewise found that increases or decreases in geographical distance constitute turning points in a range of relational types. In their study of turning points in college teacher-student relationships, Docan-Morgan and Manusov (2009) found that seeing a professor in a non-academic *environment* can be a turning point. Moreover, Johnson et al. (2004) identified spending less *time* with a relational partner as a turning point in friendships that have terminated.

Thus, there is evidence that at least four nonverbal cues—touch, space, environment, and time—have the potential to create turning points for interactants. Within Surra and Huston’s (1987) 4-type categorization of turning points (intrapersonal or normative, dyadic, social network, and circumstantial), the two that appear most likely to involve nonverbal cues are *dyadic*, defined as turning points that occur during interaction with another person (e.g., a kiss), and the *circumstantial*, which involves an event perceived as beyond relational partners’ control and that affects the relationship (e.g., geographical distance, location).

But all of this discussion is largely speculative. That is, it stems from some indirect evidence and a general conceptualization of nonverbal cues as able to bring about significant change. Given the salience of nonverbal cues to relationships (Andersen et al., 2006; Guerrero & Floyd, 2006; Kotlyar & Ariely, 2013; Noller, 2006) and the evidence that nonverbal cues may be a part of or akin to turning points (Manusov & Milstein, 2005), more exploration of what kinds of behaviors are likely to make up these nonverbal triggers—and what is changed by the behaviors—is warranted. Given the limited research in this area, research needs to start at the ground up, assessing the types of cues that may trigger change in everyday interactions, discovering the valence of those triggers/changes, and discerning what types of changes may be brought about from these triggers. We also want to know whether the types of behaviors are linked to the type of relationship in which they occur. Finally, turning points can be positive or negative in nature. Therefore, we explore some ways in which the perceived valence of the event may be associated with other important outcomes for the participants.

As such, in this paper we report on a study designed to explore nonverbal triggers or turning points as they occur in a wide range of close relationships. In particular, we ask the following questions. First, previous research only suggests a few behaviors—touch, space, environment, and time—that may trigger relational change. To better assess the types of cues recognized as important to turning points, and consistent with similar arguments made in other contexts (e.g., Docan-Morgan & Manusov, 2009) about the importance of assessing the variety and range of behaviors implicated in turning points, we pose our first research question:

*RQ<sub>1</sub>: What nonverbal behaviors instigate turning points in relationships?*

Second, [Baxter and Bullis \(1986\)](#) argue that, “participants retrospectively cast their relationship development as a series of positive and negative turning points” (p. 490). The valence (i.e., positivity or negativity) colored the emotional memory of these events and shaped how participants responded to the events. An assessment of valence thus provides an initial understanding of how relational turning points may affect other outcomes. Toward that end, we ask the following two questions:

*RQ<sub>2</sub>: How do respondents evaluate/valence those behaviors?*

*RQ<sub>3</sub>: What are the associations between the perceived valence of a nonverbal turning point and other important evaluations?*

Third, given that nonverbal behaviors are both indicators of relationships ([Guerrero & Floyd, 2006](#)) and also are made sense of within the larger narrative of a relationship ([Manusov & Koenig, 2001](#)), we ask the following:

*RQ<sub>4</sub>: Are the behaviors that trigger change in relationships likely to vary based on the type of relationship that existed when the behavior occurred?*

Last, the current study also investigates the reported outcomes of relational turning points. As noted, most research (e.g., [Golish, 2000](#)) on relational turning points examines only one outcome variable (i.e., closeness). Given that nonverbal turning points may produce varying outcomes, and the goal of this study to broaden the scope of our understanding of turning points, the current study attempts to investigate multiple perceived outcomes related to turning point events and the ways in which those outcomes may be tied to particular behaviors. We do this with our final two questions:

*RQ<sub>5</sub>: What changes do people report occurred because of these cues and interpretations?*

*RQ<sub>6</sub>: Are certain cues more likely to occur with certain types of change?*

## Study

### Participants

Students in a range of undergraduate Communication classes at a large U.S. American Northwestern university were offered the opportunity to take part in a survey. Three hundred and one people responded (211 females; 90 males). Of these, 270 (89%, 193 females; 77 males) indicated that they were able “to recall a time in which they or another person used a nonverbal cue that changed something with someone else.” Forty respondents (14.8 percent) reported that the behavior occurred less than a week prior, 52 (19.3%) noted that it happened more than a week/but less than a month ago, 52 (19.3%) checked that the event took place more than a month/less than six months before, 30 (11.1%) marked that the behavior happened more than six months/less than a year prior, 38 (14.1%) said that it happened between one and two years ago, 44 (16.3%) remarked that it was more than two but less than five years previously, and 14 (5.2%) indicated that the behavior took place more than five years before for study. The participants reported on incidents with 123 females and 147 males. The average age of the participants was 20.9 years ( $SD = 2.52$ , range 17 to 53), and they represented 54 majors.

Six participants (2.2%) reported being African American or Black, 1 (.4%) noted being American Indian or Alaska Native, 52 (19.3%) identified as Asian, 8 (2.9%) as Hispanic or Latino, 3 (1.1%) as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and 175 (64.8%) categorized themselves as White, not of Hispanic origin. One person did not identify a

racial/ethnic background, and 23 (8.5%) people responded that they were in a group other than the ones presented. This group indicated that they were Asian American, Asian/White, Canadian, East African Indian, East Indian, Eurasian, Filipino American, French and German, Habasha (Eritrean/East African), Japanese/White (2), White/Chinese, Hispanic/Caucasian or White (3), Multi-racial, White/Asian, Multiethnic, Pacific Islander/White, and Hispanic/Irish.

When asked how they categorized their relationship prior to the event, 92 listed romantic, 103 identified friend, 21 discussed a family member, 25 included a work relationship, and 14 said that they were acquaintances or had no relationship with this person prior to the nonverbal cues' occurrence. In support of the idea of change, only 80 noted that their relationship was romantic after the event, likewise 92 said friend, 21 (as before) noted family, 8 stated work, and 54 identified their relationship as acquaintance or none.

## Procedures

Following Institutional Review Board approval and instructor consent, two of the authors recruited students from 8 classes, which ranged in size from 24 to 220 students. They told students about the nature of the study—"a research project that examines the types of nonverbal behaviors that occur in close relationships with others (e.g., parents, friends, romantic partners, work associates)"—and that they would receive extra credit in the course for their participation. Students were also told about alternative extra credit opportunities if they did not want to participate in the study.

Students who chose to take part in this study were asked to go to a website address with our survey. After the system assessed their enrollment status, and the fact that they had not yet taken the survey, the respondents were given this information:

[This] survey was created to examine the types of nonverbal behaviors that occur in close relationships with others (e.g., parents, friends, romantic partners, work associates). Nonverbal behaviors are actions like touch, facial expressions, the use of time, and vocal tones that may communicate things to others. We would like you to think about a time in a relationship you had/have with another person where you feel a type of nonverbal behavior occurred that really stood out to you in some way. More specifically, we would like you to recall a type of nonverbal behavior enacted by you or another person that you felt changed something between you and that other person. This turning point could be positive or negative. But, it should be an event that was meaningful to you in the relationship.

If they were able to recall such a time, they were then asked to complete the following two questions:

What was the behavior (or behaviors) and what was the meaning you interpreted for the behavior? Describe the story of this behavior and what changes the behavior brought about.

Why was this nonverbal behavior and/or the change particularly meaningful to you?

They also rated on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 5 (very positive) how positive or negative the event was to them; how negatively or positively they viewed their relationship prior to and after the event; how negatively or positively they felt about the other person prior to and after the event; and how negatively or positively they felt about themselves prior to and after the event. They indicated how long it had been since the event occurred, what nonverbal behaviors were involved in the event (in addition to their open-ended description, they could choose one or more of the following: eye behavior, facial expressions, touch, hand gestures, voice, physical space, use of time, and "other," with a place to enter what other type of cue was involved). They also reported how long before

the present the event occurred, their relationship with the other person at the time of the occurrence and at the present, and other demographic information.

### Coding

After data collection was complete, the researchers each read all of the open-ended data separately to look for the general types of changes that appeared to have come about through nonverbal cues. To begin this process, each researcher was provided with one third of the responses, sorted them into piles based on the similarity of their content, and created tentative categories. Using the constant comparative approach, we individually compared examples for similarities and differences (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After establishing these initial categories, we then met to discuss the data and identified through further use of constant comparative analysis four categories of change (see results). Throughout this process, the categories were redefined and revised until they did not need further modification.

Two of the researchers then used this coding scheme for each of the participants, also noting any participants' entries that did not appear to be either about one or more nonverbal cues or that did not discuss a turning point. Each researcher provided one of the "change codes" to each of the 255 useable responses. The primary investigator (PI) assessed the reliability of their coding and found that 226 of the 255 responses were categorized the same by both coders. The PI then acted as arbiter, placing the contested entries into one of the codes she believed best fit the data and that was suggested by one of the other researchers. All of the responses fit well into one of the four change types.

## Results

### Research Question One

The first research question concerned the types of behaviors that are reported to be a part of nonverbal turning points. As noted, the cue categories that the participants were given as potentially involved in the event were eye behavior, facial expressions, touch, hand gestures, voice, physical space, use of time, and "other." Given that nonverbal cues often act in tandem (Andersen, 2008), we allowed participants to check off any nonverbal cue that was, in their memory, part of the turning point. Thus, the occurrence of each cue across the data set could range from 0 (were not indicated by any of the respondents) to 255 (all of the respondents indicated that the cue was part of the change).

Out of the 255 participants, 127 reported that *eye behavior* was the/part of the trigger for change in their relationship. This was the nonverbal cue chosen most commonly. Nearly as common were *facial expressions*, which were reported 123 times, often in combination with eye behavior. *Touch* was the next most frequently noted behavior, with 116 of the participants citing it as part of the nonverbal "event," and 101 participants chose personal space. *Vocal cues* ( $n = 70$ ), *time* ( $n = 56$ ), and *hand gestures* ( $n = 34$ ) were noted less often.

As noted, we also allowed respondents to choose "other," and 28 participants did so. Of these, two referenced what was said, a category not applicable to this study. Many of the others were included in or restatements of existing categories (e.g., "sitting by me" is part of physical space, and "mix of eye and facial expression" was captured in the types of behaviors from which they already chose). Remaining, however, were attire ( $n = 2$ ), silence/lack of communication (6; although these could be categorized as part of vocalics), walking away ( $n = 2$ ), kiss ( $n = 1$ ; although this could also be part of touch and was indicated as such by most of the respondents whose

stories centered around a kiss), general or specific movements ( $n = 4$ ), posture/lean ( $n = 2$ ), tears ( $n = 1$ ; again, some people included this in facial behavior and/or eye behavior), not showing up ( $n = 1$ ), “sexual interest” behavior ( $n = 1$ ), pictures ( $n = 1$ ), and answering the phone while interacting with the other ( $n = 1$ ). Overall, then, a range of cues were reported as triggers for change in close relationships, the most frequent of which were eye behavior, facial expressions, touch, and use of personal space. Although constrained to some extent by the cue types that we provided, but supported by the open-ended descriptions, these behaviors fit best in Surra and Huston’s (1987) category of dyadic (or interaction-based) turning points.

### Research Questions Two and Three

To answer the second research question, we assessed whether the behaviors were part of events that were valenced differently by participants. To make this assessment, we ran t-tests for the presence or absence of each behavior (determined by whether or not the respondent checked off if the cue was part of the event; these participants were given a “1,” and those who did not indicate that the cue was involved were coded with “0”). Scores on the question “how negative or positive was this event to you” were used as the dependent variable. Our assumption was that higher or lower valence scores given by people who included the behavior as compared to those who did not would indicate indirectly how they judged the behavior.

The t-tests for eye behavior,  $t = .514$ , hand gestures,  $t = 1.22$ , personal space,  $t = .871$ , and time,  $t = .033$ , were all insignificant,  $p > .05$ ,  $df = 252$ . The tests were significant for the other cues, however,  $p < .05$ ,  $df = 252$ . Based on a 5 point scale, those participants who indicated that *facial expressions* were involved in the event were less positive ( $M = 3.06$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ) than were those whose events did not include facial expressions ( $M = 3.49$ ,  $SD = 1.52$ ),  $t = 2.19$ , suggesting that facial cues tended to be a part of events thought to be somewhat more negative than in other turning points, although they were largely neutral. The presence of *touch*, on the other hand, received higher valence scores ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ) than were given by those people who did not indicate that touch occurred ( $M = 2.57$ ,  $SD = 1.47$ ),  $t = 8.99$ . Those respondents who indicated that *vocal cues* were part of the turning point were more negative ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.54$ ) in their judgments of the event than were those who did not indicate voice ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.57$ ),  $t = 2.84$ .

Overall, then, three cues seem to be associated consistently with judgments of the event. Touch was associated with more positive judgments, voice with more negative evaluations, and facial expressions with neutral scores (but scores that were lower than the scores given to interactions that did not include facial expressions). The other behaviors may have been associated with events that were sometimes judged positively and other times negatively, or they did not have a strong evaluation.

Research question three explored some of the ways in which the valence of nonverbal turning points may be associated with other judgments that respondents made. In particular, we used the evaluations that participants provided for how positive/negative they perceived their relationship, the other person, and themselves after this event. As a comparison, we also looked at their reports of those same judgments prior to the event. To do these analyses, we ran one-tailed Pearson correlations between judgment of the event (negative to positive on a five point scale) with the same scale applied to ratings of their relationship, the other person, and themselves after the event. We also looked at the correlations of the same variables prior to the event.

In all cases, there was a strong positive relationship between how people judged the event and their other perception (relationships,  $r = .82$ , other person,  $r = .76$ , self,  $r = .54$ ;  $p < .01$ ). For relationship ( $r = .10$ ) and other person ( $r =$

.11) there were small but significant ( $p < .05$ ) correlations between perceived valence of the event and evaluation of the relationship and the other person, suggesting that how positive or negative a person feels about the other person or their relationship may influence their evaluation of the event. But the size of those correlations is extremely small compared with the judgments for after the event, and given the sample size may be negligible. Overall, however, and whereas no causal claims can be made, there is a suggestion that the valence of the events—or at least how they are perceived or interpreted—affect how people judge their relationship, the other person, and themselves, in both negative and positive ways.

#### Research Question Four

The fourth research question was concerned with whether certain behaviors were more or less likely to trigger turning points in different types of relationships. As noted, participants stated the type of relationship that they had with the other person both before and after the event occurred. For this question, we used the relationship type as it existed (at least in the participants' reports) prior to the event, although for exploratory purposes, we ran the same tests with relationship type following the event.

To do these analyses, we ran crosstabs tests, with relationship type (family, friend, romantic, work, or acquaintance/no relationship) and cue absent/present as the two variables. One analysis was run for each of the seven behaviors on which we had participants report. None of the crosstabs were significant, although there was a trend,  $\chi^2 = 8.27$ ,  $p = .082$ , for facial expressions. The frequency of reported occurrence suggested that this cue may have been particularly common in events that occurred with a family member (that is, a notable, but not statistically significant, difference existed in frequency for those family members who indicated that facial expressions were [ $n = 15$ ] or were not [ $n = 6$ ] part of the turning point). The other relationship types had roughly equal occurrence/non-occurrence of facial expressions in their turning points. Exploratory analyses of relationship type *after* the event (not applicable for families) found a significant difference between relationship types on the frequency of touch,  $\chi^2 = 19.74$ ,  $p = .001$ , with "romantic" pairs particularly likely to have indicated that this cue was part of the event that, in many cases, triggered the change toward romance.

#### Research Questions Five and Six

The fifth research question asked for the type of changes the nonverbal cues brought about. Based on close reading and discussion among all three researchers, four primary categories of change were indicated in these data. We labeled the first, *changes in perception*, and these ( $n = 110$ ) came from entries in which the respondents talked about the nonverbal cue altering how they thought about another person, themselves, or the behavior. Changes in perception of behavior typically involved rethinking how they interpreted their own or another person's behavior. Examples from the data may help to illustrate the nature of these reported changes. We include some points in italics, and this is done for emphasis. They were not in the original survey responses.

The following entry reflects how a nonverbal cue can change how people come to view their relationship with another person. It suggests that, for one of the participants, the relationship may have already changed. The behavior, however, reportedly worked to shift the respondent's understanding of what the behavior represented:

I had this friend called Katie. We've known each other for over 10 years but were never really...friends until last year. We became good friends but there was one incident that I felt changed our friendship. I've been feeling a "cold vibe" from her but nothing was confirmed until the following nonverbal behavior: I was sitting next to her at lunch with a group of friends. My friends made some reference to something funny and I turned over and made a comment about it. *She didn't even look back at me. She kept her*



*head down and gave me this cold shrug. After this behavior, I realized that something was definitely wrong with our relationship. I eventually felt like she either didn't like who I was or something about me was bugging her.*

Likewise, the following two examples help show a shift in perception of another person:

1) I was having a hard time and a bad day. I was feeling particularly alone, even among all the people I knew/was with. I was just feeling down in general. And I was sitting there on the couch, hiding my feelings and putting on a smile. A friend that I'm not very close to, who never hugs anyone, and whom I previously thought to be kind of insensitive, *gave me a huge, bear hug from behind*. I asked him what that was for, and he just said it looked like I needed it. After that, *I began to view him differently*.

2) I used to regularly date a guy who seemed to be the typical "prince charming" that all guys seem to be when you first start dating. Everything was going well until one day in particular *he wouldn't look me in the eyes* when engaging in basic conversation. He'd constantly look down and away or even past me. Turns out that was right around the time when he was getting into various drugs and stealing money from his mother for them. Not being able for him to keep eye contact *was the first thing that made me distrust him*.

As can be seen in the above example, some of our participants seemed very aware of the specific perceptual change and noted it directly. The following is an explicit example of change in perception, this time about behavior and its importance to another, as stated by the respondent:

My sister and I were arguing about something stupid one day. Usually, she would bring something up and nag me about it. I would pretend like I was listening and just agree. But this one day when she brought up one of her concerns I just ignored her. To my surprise she stopped nagging me and then began to cry. After I saw her cry, I instantly went to her and listened to her. *Because she cried, I realized how important the issue was. It changed my perspective and now I always try to listen.*

Overall, this set of changes reflected typically immediate shifts in how one person understands and sometimes evaluates another or a relationship. They reflect a reportedly new awareness on the part of the meaning-maker, and show the potential for nonverbal cues to help change our stance.

Our second category reflected *changes in affect* ( $n = 72$ ) because of the nonverbal cue(s). These could be changes in the way that they felt about the other (e.g., warmer, poorer), themselves, the relationship, or just in general. Indeed, it was sometimes difficult to decide whether the primary change was in affect or in a relationship. When the gist of the discussion seemed to be about one's regard and affect for another, however, we coded it in this category. Typically, the writer did not talk about a change in the type of relationship that he or she had with the other. Indeed, often it was a *validation* of the type of relationship they had, as the affect shown was more consistent with the current relational status than the person may have been experiencing. Some examples are as follows:

I was recently at a party and my ex boyfriend and I were on really bad terms. We weren't really talking and I basically thought he didn't even want to be my friend. We were at this party and several times across the room we met *eye contact and he smiled at me*. This *changed the feeling* that he didn't want to be my friend and we have been great friends ever since. His eye contact and smile sort of said an apology in itself and showed that he still wanted to be friends.

The following also shows the close tie between affect and relationship, where, again, the type of relationship did not change but the feelings within them did. Further, and unusually, it involves both partners' behaviors as being important to the change in closeness/affect:

Having just admitted to lying to, and cheating on, my partner for several years, I *cried* while my partner *embraced me* for about twenty minutes. My actions indicated my deep remorse, while my partner's actions indicated her willingness to forgive and be understanding of my mistakes, all without words. The *experience ultimately brought us much closer together*, solidified the bond between us and symbolized a strengthened commitment to one another.

A final example to reflect the tenor of this category is based in a "work" relationship (players and coaches), where the behaviors that the coach used reportedly changed the mood of the players:

During an important part of the game, my team made a mistake and the coach *shook his head* and called a timeout. During the timeout, he *had a frustrated look on his face* which *brought the whole team down*.

This participant later discussed how the coach's actions affected the spirit of the whole team for the remainder of the season.

Overall, these events included discussion of how nonverbal cues changed, more than anything, how the individuals felt generally or about one another. The focus is not on changing the character or type of relationship, although certainly relationships were reported to be affected by these emotional shifts.

The third category concerned *changes in behavior* ( $n = 19$ ) that were reported to have occurred because of the nonverbal behavior. In some cases, these were behaviors that happened subsequent to the interaction. In others, they were very specific *interaction shifts* that were said to have happened following the behavior. This latter category differs in some ways from the other changes, as it was specific to the interaction. But the changes were deemed important by the respondents who included them, some of whom implied that the cues' occurrence also (but not as centrally to the discussion) kept their relationship or feelings on track.

The following shows an event that changed the way the two acted toward one another later and was more about a turning point in a specific event:

When we were talking *i couldn't make eye contact with him* and therefore focused my eyes on my text book page, which was sitting in front of me. *This immediately let him know, there was something wrong*, and although at the time he didn't say anything. Later he called and asked me if I was mad. Not giving him eye contact let him know i was angry. This also gave us a pathway to talk about it later, besides me just telling him i was hurt.

Similarly, this excerpt shows a change in behavior, and was one that happened immediately, in that it turned a difficult conversation into a gentler one:

My boyfriend and I got in an argument. He *looked me straight in the eyes*, told me he loved me, and *gave me a great hug*. That was all I needed. (The respondent indicated later and more explicitly about the behaviors changing how they acted toward one another in their interaction afterward).

These examples help reflect the somewhat unique nature of many of these entries. They represented a significant shift, but the shift was often a change in the way an interaction or set of interactions was unfolding.

We labeled our final category *changes in relationship* ( $n = 54$ ), and these entries typically involved statements that a relationship moved from one type to another (not possible in events that occurred with family members). Most of these discussed a change to or from a romantic relationship or into becoming friends rather than acquaintances. Some examples from our data are as follows, including this one that describes a change in the type of friendship:

When I was meeting a casual friend for coffee, *he hugged me* when we were getting ready to leave. I know he does not often hug, so it made me feel like *we were becoming better friends, not just casual friends* who knew each other through mutual friends.

The following is also about a shift into a friendship relationship:

I went to the bank to get some cash. While I was waiting, out of nowhere, I heard laughter coming from a distance behind me. I turned around with my eyes shooting straight to the source of those laughter. And, there H was, *looking right back at me*. For a moment about 2 seconds, we connected, and those 2 seconds lasted as if it were 20 years or 2 centuries when we both intimately knew each other. So, *we became friends*.

An example of a behavior, in this case touch via holding hands, being the start of a romantic relationship (although not stated in so many words) is the following:

Right as she caught up to me, *I held out my hand*. In the chilly December night, her hand stretched out towards mine, and the two joined for the first of time of thousands. Oh yes, *she did like me*. And it had only taken me a semester of school and the first act of "A Christmas Carol" to realize. Five years later, I feel so lucky we made this little non-verbal action because *it led to a lifetime together*.

The entries that were coded as changing a relationship, then, made it clear that the behavior altered how they defined their relationship to one another (i.e., changing from one relational type to another).

This sixth question concerned whether certain behaviors appeared to be present when particular changes were reported. To assess this, we conducted a series of chi square tests, one for each type of change, with the presence or absence of each behavior as the two cells. The following describes these results.

*Changes in Perception.* The chi squared analyses were significant for all of the behaviors, except facial expressions. Only eye behavior,  $\chi^2 = 7.18$ ,  $p < .05$ , however, was significant for its reported presence ( $n = 69$ ), rather than its absence ( $n = 41$ ), in interactions that involved reports of changes in perception. There was also a trend,  $p = .058$  for facial expressions to occur more often ( $n = 65$ ) than not ( $n = 45$ ) in events that were reported to change perceptions.

*Changes in Affect.* The chi squared analyses for time, vocal cues, hand gestures, and eye behavior were all significant, but in all cases, it was for the greater likelihood that the behavior was absent rather than present.

*Changes in Behavior.* As above, the analyses for touch, hand gestures, and use of time were all significant, but only to reflect that these behaviors were unlikely to occur.

*Changes in Relationship.* The results were the same for changes in relationship, with hand gestures, use of time, and vocal cues being unlikely to occur. The use of touch was more ( $n = 33$ ) common than were no reports of touch ( $n = 21$ ), but this was not a significant difference,  $\chi^2 = 2.67$ ,  $p = .11$ .

Overall, then, although touch appears to have been a feature of many of the interactions that led to changes in relationships, the only significant predictor of a specific change was eye behavior, which was a common part of turning points that led to changes in perception.

## Discussion

In this paper, we argued that nonverbal cues are important in relationships in part because of the changes that they can bring about in those relationships. Whereas others have asserted that nonverbal cues may bring about relational change, it is usually conceptualized as occurring over time (i.e., in phase models such as that described in Knapp & Vangelisti, 2009). We argue that nonverbal cues may also work as more instant turning points or triggers that change something for the people in those relationships.

In support of this argument, we found that most of our participants could recall an event in which a nonverbal cue changed something for them, and, in most cases, it was reported to have done so quickly and in the moment, although a few were over time. For these respondents, the most common cues that were likely to be a trigger were eye behavior, facial expressions, touch, and vocal cues. Of these, the reports suggested that touch was a part of more positive turning points, and vocal cues were associated with events judged to be more negative. Such judgments appeared to be important, as the valence of the event as perceived by the respondent were associated with their judgments of the relationship, the other person, and themselves following the event. We also found four primary types of changes that the nonverbal cues were said to bring about. We labeled these changes in perception, affect, behavior, and relationships. Reports of changes in perception, or how people interpret or come to view something or someone, were most common in these data. The behavior more likely than not to be a part of interactions that resulted in these changes was eye behavior.

As with other turning points, those in our study were often valenced by the participants (for a related discussion of nonverbal cues and valence, see Expectancy Violations Theory, Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Negatively valenced turning points were correlated with seeing another person as having more negative attributes, as changing a relationship from one that was close to one that was not, and altering the mood that people were in, among other things. Positively valenced turning points were tied in by our respondents to greater relational closeness, better regard for others, ease in conversations, and creating friendships out of acquaintances and romantic relationships out of friendships. Clearly, these “small behaviors” had a large impact, at least as reported by these participants.

This study used a methodology that relied on self-reported, recalled behaviors. This choice was purposeful to allow us to access the kinds of behaviors and relational changes people remembered as most notable. Our choice, however, functions in restricting in our knowledge of what other behaviors occurred but were not recalled and what cues arose but did not lead to relational change. As well, our methodology means that we have reports of and attributions given to behaviors rather than accessing the actual behaviors nor does it allow us to access the interpretations given to the actions by the other relational partner.

Our methodology provides some important limits to what we can conclude about nonverbal cues and turning points. At the same time, although it is argued by some scholars that nonverbal cues often have their effect outside of interactants' awareness (e.g., Knapp & Hall, 2010), our methodology provides some basis for the argument that nonverbal cues may be actively interpreted and responded to by interactants. The current study, for example, supports previous research using attribution theories that has found that negative and/or unusual behaviors tend

to instigate more conscious attributions (e.g., Manusov, 1990, 2002; Manusov & Koenig, 2001). It also suggests some of the implications that our sense-making may have on our relationships.

Overall, our study provides additional evidence for the importance of nonverbal behavior in relationships by offering some description of what behaviors stand out to people, what changes they bring about, and how the valence of those behaviors—based in part on the ways that they are interpreted—are tied to how people feel about themselves, their interaction partner, and the relationship between them. In doing so, our hope was to show more fully the transformative potential of nonverbal cues; that is, the ways in which nonverbal cues work to create change in our close relationships.

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