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The Body Responds: Toward a Qualitative Communibiology of Interpersonal Communication

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Abstract

Communication is necessarily embodied, yet biological approaches to communication have largely privileged physiological measurement over qualitative interpretation of bodily experience. In this opinion, I argue for expanding Communibiology inquiry through qualitative approaches that examine how physiological responses are experienced, interpreted, and situated within communicative encounters. An eye roll, for example, is simultaneously an anatomical movement, a physiological response, a nonverbal behavior, and an interactionally meaningful act. Bringing biological, interpretive, and constitutive approaches into conversation can provide richer accounts of how bodies participate in communication while creating productive connections among communication, anatomy, physiology, and other disciplines. I conclude by suggesting that communication scholars should expand their attention beyond physiology to anatomy itself, asking not only how bodies respond during communication but how bodily structures enable, constrain, and constitute communicative possibilities.

Keywords: Communibiology; interpersonal communication; physiology; anatomy; qualitative research; embodiment; nonverbal communication

Introduction

Human communication happens in bodies. This observation is so obvious that communication scholars can easily forget its implications. We speak through bodies, perceive others through bodies, experience relationships through bodies, and physically respond to what other people say and do. As Boren and Veksler [1] observed in their review of biological communication research, the brain and nervous system, as well as the endocrine, cardiovascular, and immune systems, participate in communicative processes. Biological processes do not sit outside communication; they are continuously implicated in it. Communication scholars have long recognized this through the Communibiology perspective. McCroskey and Beatty [2], for example, argued that neurobiological structures are consequential for communication behavior and urged communication scholars to take biological explanations seriously. Subsequent research considerably expanded inquiry into relationships between communication and biological processes [1]. Physiological measures have consequently allowed researchers to examine processes that self-report measures alone cannot capture.

Yet there is another question worth asking: Must physiological communication research always be quantitative? The answer should be no. Physiological measurement can tell us what a body is doing. Qualitative inquiry can help us understand what bodily responses mean to people, how they are situated within interaction, and how communicators interpret those responses. These are not competing projects. They answer different questions about the same embodied communicative event. Consider the humble eye roll. Bonaccio and colleagues [3] identify eye movements as part of the kinesic and oculesic repertoire through which nonverbal communication operates. They also emphasize that nonverbal behaviors acquire communicative meaning through interpretation and context. An eye roll can substitute for verbal discourse, communicating something without its producer needing to say it aloud. Clift [4] demonstrates the interactional complexity of this seemingly simple physiological act even more clearly. Through multimodal conversation analysis, she shows that eye rolls function as embodied displays of dissent and can constitute protest in response to another person having gone too far.

The eyeball moves. Muscles move it. A nervous system makes that movement possible. Yet explaining the movement anatomically or physiologically does not fully explain the communication. Imagine, for instance, receiving an unsolicited professional email

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asking you to contribute an article to a journal. The request initially produces no remarkable physiological reaction. Then comes the reassurance that, if writing a full article is inconvenient, perhaps you could simply produce two pages instead because surely that would not be a burden for such a distinguished researcher. The eyes move upward. That movement can be described anatomically. It could potentially be accompanied by physiological responses that researchers could measure. But neither description alone explains why those words, at that moment, produced that response. Understanding the eye roll requires understanding the message, the situation, previous experiences with similar messages, the interpretation of the request, and what the embodied response accomplishes communicatively. Clift's [4] analysis makes precisely this kind of point possible: an eye roll is not merely movement. It is an interactional practice.

Bringing Bodies and Meanings Together

A qualitative Communibiology would therefore not replace biological measurement. It would expand the questions scholars can ask about biology and communication. Such an expansion is consistent with a constitutive approach to interpersonal communication. I have previously argued that communication scholars benefit when theoretical and methodological traditions that are often treated as separate are brought into productive conversation [5]. No single research tradition needs to explain communication completely. Different traditions can illuminate different dimensions of the same communicative phenomenon. Physiological approaches provide an especially promising location for such collaboration. A physiological researcher might measure cardiovascular arousal during a difficult conversation. An interpretive researcher might investigate how participants experience that arousal.

A discourse or interaction researcher might examine what occurs immediately before and after a visible bodily response. A critical researcher might ask which social or institutional conditions make particular bodies especially subject to stress. A nonverbal communication scholar might examine how bodily reactions become cues interpreted by others. Together, these approaches can tell us more than any one approach can tell us alone. They can also bring interpersonal communication researchers into deeper conversation with scholars in physiology, psychology, neuroscience, medicine, nursing, and other health sciences. Communication scholars have something important to contribute to those conversations: bodies do not merely respond to stimuli. People interpret what happens around them, interact with others, assign meaning to their bodily experiences, and use bodies themselves as communicative resources.

From Physiology to Anatomy

There is an additional possibility worth considering, particularly for scholars of anatomy and physiology. Communication researchers interested in biology have understandably concentrated on physiology: how biological systems operate and respond during communication. We might now devote greater attention to anatomy. The distinction produces a deceptively simple pair of questions:

a) How does the body respond to communication?

b) How does the body make communication possible?

Eyes permit gaze—and eye rolls. Faces make expressions possible. Hands touch and gesture. Skin makes tactile communication possible while simultaneously registering physiological responses. The tongue, mouth, larynx, lungs, and respiratory system make particular forms of speech possible. Bodies differ across disability, age, illness, injury, and other forms of human variation, creating different communicative possibilities and constraints. Anatomy is therefore not merely the container within which communication happens. Bodily structures help establish what forms of communicative action are materially possible. This possibility suggests an interdisciplinary agenda extending beyond the traditional boundaries of either communication or biological science. Physiological research can help explain what bodies do during communication.

Qualitative inquiry can help explain how people experience and interpret what those bodies do. Interaction research can demonstrate what embodied actions accomplish between people. Anatomical inquiry can help us understand the bodily structures through which those actions become possible in the first place. Sometimes an eye roll is an anatomical movement. Sometimes it is a physiological response. Sometimes—some would argue always—it is communication. And sometimes—as when someone unexpectedly suggests that producing two additional pages of scholarly writing should not be overly burdensome—it is all three.

In Summation

The body responds. Perhaps our research methods should be capacious enough to listen.

Acknowledgment

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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