

Bodily Expression: Selfperception, internal and external effects and their meaning for communication and interaction

Dear audience, dear students and colleagues,

In my lecture I shall introduce the complex interdependencies between bodily behaviour or bodily expression and the different levels of effects and perception. Bodily expression is related to communication situations and influences the individual possibilities of coping with stress. So it has a great relevance for people who are working with groups or in situations of (self-) presentation, but it is often underestimated and unknown. On one hand I will report about the influence bodily expression has on interaction and communication with the audience and on the other hand I'd like to draw results about the influence the bodily expression has on the emotional states. In my own researches I was investigating the possibilities of the body-feedback in stressful situations. The consciousness of both interdependencies can help to create a better atmosphere in the interaction and to establish a stable and high self-esteem in difficult situations.

To make the complex interdependencies more clear, I chose a circular model. In the box on the left side you can see the encoder (e.g. the teacher) who acts through his or her individual bodily expression. This causes an effect on the audience (e.g. pupils). Normally in this interaction the bodily expression is called body-language. (I will explain the different aspects and signals of the body later) Every one of the audience produces a reaction on the body-language of the teacher that is visible in their bodily expression or verbal behaviour. At the same time the bodily expression of the encoder causes an effect on him or herself. This happens by means of a conscious or unconscious awareness of oneself and produces a feedback about the actual emotional state. The phenomenologist call this a dialog with the „forms of sensation, attracting us“. If the encoder is now perceiving and reflecting both, feedback of the audience and of his body, he or she is able to control the effects by changing the bodily expression consciously. Therefore it is necessary to know the relations between the different signals and effects and to develop an awareness of my bodily expression and that of the pupils.

Waldenfels resumes: „the effects that are caused by the organism or the surroundings change our behaviour and our behaviour changes the surroundings.“ (vgl. Waldenfels 2000, S. 77).

This point of view contradicts the common position, that stands for a simple link of cause and effect concerning the body-language.

It is often underestimated how far bodily behaviour influences and shapes the interpersonal communication. Figures differ between 60 and 90% concerning the importance body-language has in contrast to verbal communication. The percentage depends on the situation and the proportion between content and the emotional level of a situation. The common signals of the body-language are facial expression, gesture, posture and eye contact. Some of them are used in a symbolic way and work like verbal language. E.g. we put the finger on the lips for „be quiet“ or we lift our hand with the palm up to ask for standing up. Other signals, especially the facial expression and the gesture help to point out the verbal content. But the meaning of body language goes deeper than the content level. It is the „window of the soul“ and enables the observer to see the inner and emotional state of a person.

Other characteristics like proximity, dress and styling and prosodic signals or intonation enable the audience to get further information. E.g. the vibration or the melody of the voice is a sign of inner excitement or relaxation. The use of space is significant for one's manner of presenting oneself and the ability to create one's stage. In the selection of dresses we can detect the self-image and self-presentation s. o. is intending. E.g. we often wear different clothes depending on the role we take in different situations.

What is neglected in most of the publications are aspects like tension and energy of the body, breathing, bodily movement and rhythm. Especially these signals have an immediate effect on our perceiving the surroundings. E.g. the energy or the rhythm of movements is taken in as an indifferent and pre-reflexive impression. This can be felt as something pleasant, awkward, relaxing or cramping. The impression we get and how we interpret signals like facial expression, gesture, eye contact etc. is dependent on the tension or energy of the body. E.g. the same gesture can be a threatening gesture or a gesture of triumph depending on the direction the energy goes and on the tension of the arm and the fist. Furthermore every person has his or her individual rhythm or tension. As long as we don't know his or her bodily expression very well, it is difficult to understand the signals completely. In addition to the common signals of body-language, I call the conglomerate of the aspects the bodily expression or bodily behaviour.

So, I would now like to explain the two different levels of effects we cause by our bodily expression. First I shall talk about the external effect.

Bodily expression is always self-presentation. Consciously or unconsciously, we try to present a positive image of ourselves to the audience. This image is reflected in the behaviour of the audience. We always leave an image of ourselves even if we don't want to impress somebody or leave certain effects.

As I said before, the bodily expression of the encoder offers informations about the self, this process is called self-presentation. In the context of the self impression-theory of Mummendey (1995, 2002) it is questioned whether it is an interial motivation to give a positive self presentation or if it is expected by the others. As for the teacher's job – in Germany - we can admit that the teacher is under pressure to present a positive, authoritative, stimulating potential. On the other hand the use of bodily expression is more and more appreciated as an enforcement that helps to feel self-contained and stabile. A conscious handling with body-language helps to motivate and prevents misunderstandings and incongruence in the teacher-pupils-relationship.

Even if teachers pretend not to use self presentation skills, self impression-management and self-presentation always take place. To quote Bourdieu: everyone has his or her own habitus and the every day habitual practice that is visible in every bodily action and interaction. Goffman compares social behaviour with the behaviour of actors in different roles (Mummendey 2002, S. 215). These examples make us believe that our individual bodily signals are determined. On the other hand the authors of publications that are concerned with body-language make us believe that we just have to know the meaning of the facial expressions, gestures etc. to make us immediately change our bodily behaviour (see Molcho 2002, Heidemann 1996, Mühlisch 1997). Concerning the subject of „body-language in classroom“ the authors create stereotypes acting in a „wrong“ versus a „right“ way. Imitating the behaviour shown in the pictures of the mentioned books is leading the person to an unauthentic and artificial behaviour.

My advice would be first to learn to become aware of our individual bodily expression and our tendencies in stressful situations. Our bodily behaviour is very complex. When I'm working with teacher students on they self-presentation I try to make them become aware of their individual potential and tendencies. We try to find out, what is irritating in a communication process and what kind of signals are helpful. It is now their job to make these positive signs step by step become a part of their natural habitus. So from my point of view we can change our bodily behaviour but it is a long way and it needs regular perception and reflection.

For me habitus, bodily behaviour and self-presentation are an interrelational process. Our surroundings or audience reacts in an individual way that is socially, biographically and also culturally influenced. The encoder gets a feedback from the signals of the body-language and the behaviour of the others. The encoder's perception of the audience is called the external perception. This means that the encoder is able to conclude from the signals of the audience,

how he or she was noticed and perceived. The behaviour of the audience functions as a reflection. It is very important to remember, that every person has an individual perception. In an audience of 30 pupils a teacher has 30 critical observers. We have to decide if we want to be ruled by these reactions. In the concept of the self impression-management the encoder is building up his self-image just from the interaction-processes with others. In my opinion it depends on the personality and the self-esteem. In my workshops some students were very dependent on their external perception and the expectation of the audience. Others were mainly focuses to their self-perception and tried not to fix on their external effects. I think it is necessary to build up a deep awareness of our own signals and their possible effects, but also to keep open-minded to the reaction of the audience.

I'd like to ask you to remind you of the circular pattern with its two streams of effects. Now I shall talk about the internal effect which you have already seen exemplified in the comic-strip of Charlie Brown.

What is the internal effect of the interpersonal interaction? In emo-psychological researches this relation is called facial- or body-feedback. This means that bodily behaviour has an effect on ourselves. In my workshop with teacher students six years ago we had an exercise with different postures to be assumed. In the documentations I received after the workshop – I asked for an examination of the necessity to work on the body for becoming a teacher – many students were very impressed by the feelings they experienced in this exercise. They had strong emotions depending on an upright or a slumped posture, and also meeting others in the same positions while they were walking through the workspace.

Up to now, this correlation is quite unknown, but for 40 years the scientists have investigated the meaning facial expression and posture have on our emotional state (see Riskind 1972, 1974; Stepper 1992; Stepper/ Strack 1993; Döring-Seipel 1996; Kosinar 2004). Recent studies have proved the same correlation as we could observe in our workshops between an upright posture and feelings like pride, optimism, self-esteem and joy. Subjects who had been manipulated in a slumped posture felt sad, lonely and depressive or closed-in (Stepper 1992, Döring-Seipel 1996, Kosinar 2004). These feelings have a great effect on the interaction and communication, e.g. an emotional state like happiness or high self-esteem may help to be open-minded and to have a strong awareness of the pupil's needs. On the contrary, feelings like sadness or awkwardness keep people caught concentrated on their own emotions. In actual researches the connection between self-esteem and social judgement is proved as well as the correlation between an upright posture and positive communication aspects (Kosinar 2005).

To give a definition of an upright posture: It is not just the trunk that has to be stretched. Also the feet have to be grounded, the pelvis should be centered, the shoulders should be opened and the head lifted. As you can see in the illustration an upright posture is connected with the bodily tension, which should be high but flexible. The energy should lift you and the breathing enlarges you.

What happens now concerning the circular process of posture and feedback? Up to now the researchers couldn't find out what exactly happens in the feedback-process. Izard, one of the most well-known scientist in the field of emotions, investigating the facial feedback, said: „This would be equivalent to explaining consciousness, or how neuro-chemical or motor processes achieve awareness“ (Izard, Carroll E. (1990). Quoted in Schmidt-Atzert (1993), p. 6). In my opinion, and what is proved in my research-findings, there are two different ways of feedback. The physical-emotional reaction is a precognitive reaction and happens immediately when the position is taken. Our body feels the emotion. The cognitive theory is based on the self-perception theory of Bem (1967): The subject is observing his or her behaviour and by this becomes able to classify his or her emotional state. To quote Bem: „I'm frowning or slumping, I must be sad“ (Riskind 1984: 481). Here we are on the level of interpretation of our own bodily behaviour. This would be equal to the external perception while we are observing somebody, (for instance) e.g. the audience. This is not exactly what I found in my researches. My students reported in our interviews that they felt better because they knew about the positive effect of their upright posture. This point is related to the subject of body-language we were talking about before. So in my findings, 80 % of the sample of 50 students feeling frightened in a stressful situation were able to strengthen their self-esteem by taking an upright posture. Some of them felt stronger from the internal effect caused by the upright position and others knew that they looked stronger, so this helped them to develop a feeling of higher self-esteem.

So, what does all this mean for our communication? External and internal effects of bodily expression are reflected in our behaviour in communicational situations. To quote Watzlawick: „you can not not communicate“. This means we are in interaction and communication even when we don't talk or react; for instance not to react is a reaction as well. So this shows the importance of perceiving and controlling our bodily behaviour in order to change or improve it, if necessary.

Concerning the external effect it is transmitting our attitude to a situation or a person, which is visible in our motivation, our mood, authority, self-esteem, congruence etc., as I already said. The audience receives and evaluates these signals and through the feedback of their behaviour,

I can assess how they received my signals and what kind of signals I gave unconsciously. In the reaction of the audience I can test my self-concept and self-image. At best I feel understood, accepted and welcome. This would animate me to further communication and give me an assurance of my positive appearance. The internal effect is transmitting my own bodily behaviour and my emotional state. This could be self-esteem, happiness, an open heart to my surroundings, competence etc. I receive my feelings and evaluate them: is this how I want to feel? Do I feel open-minded to a conversation or to my pupils or would I prefer to be somewhere else? So what happens if I don't feel like being in a communicational situation and the audience gives me the impression that this is what they received as well?

As I tried to show you in my lecture self- and external perception enable us to perceive the actual situation and our emotional state. The more I'm able to understand the feedback of the audience or of my body the more I have the opportunity to change the actual situation in a self-regulatory way. An effective one, as I showed you, is to change the bodily behaviour, to attain an upright posture including the finding of the right position in the room, as well as the right bodily tension and a harmonic rhythm of breathing.

For this it is not necessary to have a complex training but the readiness to get in contact with your own body, to become aware of your bodily expression and to control the congruence of the signals and their effects on others. This is sure to enable an improved feedback – internally and externally.

Thank you very much for your attention.