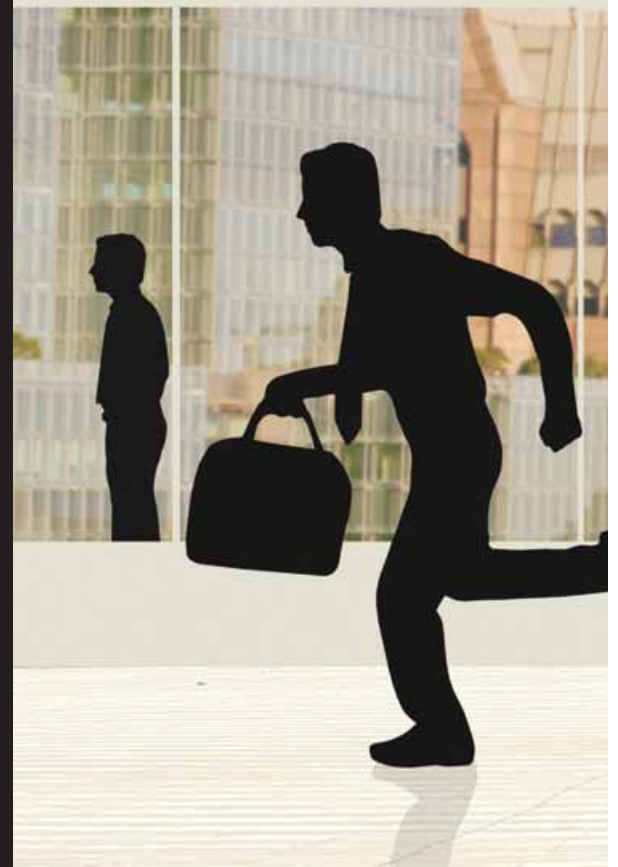


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Feature

Body language

What could your body language be saying about you and your interactions with the public, colleagues and suspects? Walter Fahey, a former consultant sociologist, police trainer and body language expert writes



Body language is an essential part of human interaction. It is crucial for every serving officer to have some genuine understanding of the non verbal signals and messages that members of the public, fellow officers, victims, criminals and terrorists alike constantly send to their peers and to other people.

It is not simply a case of knowing something of the overall culture or sub culture in which you are working. It is also having a grasp of community norms and interaction, including your own police community. This entails the understanding of non-verbal intelligence gathered from the way somebody walks, the type of eye contact they give, the low level body signals of an individual's friends and neighbours, colleagues and associates.

What makes you think that you and those you interact with are not sending off similar non-verbal messages? If your spoken word and body language are at odds with each other, take my word for it, the latter is sending out the true message.

I was born and raised in Moss Side, Manchester in the 1930s and learned at an early age how to spot 'the law'. It was not just that plain clothes officers stood tall and straight when compared with locals. Above all it was the way he

used his hands that gave him away. Such an officer invariably assumed what is now called the domineering upper hand position.

If he shook hands with you he invariably implied 'palm power' by turning his palm to face downwards onto your upward facing hand thus altering the encounter and telling you that he was taking control. The upward facing palm suggests submissiveness and is used by beggars, down and outs and those without power.

Non verbal communication is a world wide phenomenon. Why have so many American soldiers disguised in Arab mufti been killed in the last four years? As H Fatah reported in *Time* magazine in, July 2004 when warnings from Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Middle East were not always heeded. He says, 'Don't walk like you are going anywhere. We saunter as if we have nowhere to go. If you're walking with another man, hold his hand, as Saudis do. That makes it more authentic'.

I am not suggesting that British police officers hold hands on the beat. What I am arguing is that investigation can be that much easier if you understand the cultural norms and values of the people you are investigating. That said, a word of caution is necessary at this point. A single gesture by itself, from a suspect

or colleague in isolation, is best ignored. It is the cluster of body language signals that you should be looking for. For example, in reality anxious men tend to loosen their tie, or fiddle with a shirt button. If men are really tense or apprehensive they may put a hand in their pocket and play with their genitals without realising that their actions are so obvious. This applies equally to a suspect being interviewed or the chief constable who has to give a difficult speech.

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Police forces have long been aware of the value of being able to read a suspect's body language.

The Guardian, in June 1990, reported that a Midlands force was well aware that 'At least 55 percent of communication is non-verbal'.

The direction of eye contact or gaze is equally important. Do you want to project authority and power? If so research indicates that you should



Illustration: Shutterstock Inc.

Probably the wisest thing to do is call for back up double quick. In the meantime walk upright with larger than your usual movements.

This may help project that you are strong and can

defend yourself if need be.

Overall prolonged eye contact, especially staring at strangers, is considered rude in many societies, particularly Anglo-Saxon rather than Latin ones. Police officers should be aware that Japanese people prefer to avoid prolonged eye contact altogether and, rather disturbingly, gaze at one's neck while engaged in conversation.

Several researchers argue that liars, however well meaning their intention, such as a doctor or police officer giving incomplete information to reduce distress, will make only about one third of eye contact of honest individuals. Conversely, some argue that the best

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liars, e.g. conmen, deliberately maintain eye contact with a victim, so as to hide the fact that they are lying. Undoubtedly, there is some evidence that liars often make a slight pause when responding to a question and more recent research that suggests that habitual liars are so concerned with giving you prolonged

eye contact that they habitually loosen their control over their limbs and move their arms and legs much more than is normal. There is some evidence that the concentration of maintaining eye contact is

at the expense of fidgeting limbs.

All police officers should be aware of the importance of head gestures in social interaction. You may or may not be aware that a slightly tilted head has long been established as important in conversation. You do it subconsciously but it indicates that you are actually listening to someone.

When the head is held back in the straight neutral position, particularly if this action is accompanied by a cluster of other signals such as crossed arms/and or legs and leaning backwards in a chair, the respondent has ceased listening to you altogether. Even simply holding the head down, when combined with other negative signals, indicates disapproval or indifference to the speaker's comments and will be recognised as such.

Arm barriers, especially when associated with a lack of eye contact, suggest defensiveness or negative feelings towards the speaker. Even the fact that you are standing rather than sitting can be important. Standing lengthens your diaphragm and you sound more confident. So stand up to sound authoritative on the telephone.

A final associated point related to body language is having or acquiring the knowledge that just listening to other people is a very important aspect of a police officer's job.

focus your gaze on the forehead of the person being spoken to? Eye contact focussing on that area between the eyes and the mouth is social and non-threatening as shown by the large number of individuals, even strangers, who respond with a smile.

Take notice when dealing with colleagues, the public or suspects, a gaze from the neck down is sexual in context and will be recognised as such.

Eye contact has particular importance for a police officer. People tend to give a great deal of eye contact to those that they know, such as colleagues. The length of time you gaze at another person is affected by the social circumstances at the time. When you meet a person for the first time it is generally the subordinate person who looks away first. Not looking is often considered a challenge if the interaction is with a superior officer or a suspect.

More primates avert their gaze to show submission; if you are being fairly reprimanded by a superior officer, a potentially dangerous intense social interaction, if you are outnumbered or out on a limb. For example, a group of drunken young males may assume a single officer is fearful of them, and this may well be true. On the other hand, staring them out is confrontational.