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What Words Don't Tell Us: Non-verbal Communication and Turmoil in Romantic Relationships

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We only touch on rare occasions when we have sex. What happened to good old affection?

There's a lot of distance now. I guess we're just giving each other space.

We're a well-oiled machine when running the household, but sometimes I wish she'd look at me like she used to.

I don't know what's wrong; he's just so...quiet.

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R. J. Sternberg, A. Kostić (eds.), *Nonverbal Communication in Close Relationships*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-94492-6_8

What do these statements have in common? Each alludes to non-verbal communication (i.e., messages sent without words or that accompany words) that may reveal turmoil in a romantic relationship. Sometimes romantic partners are barely aware that their relationship is problematic or headed for trouble; no more or less conflict may occur than partners consider normal. Feelings and thoughts may be just under the surface, more as instincts or concerns emerging on one's radar, rather than fully thought-out, realized problems. Partners may just get a vibe or a sense that something isn't quite right, but it's not yet the time to convert the vibe into a full-fledged conversation topic. In other situations, trouble or distress is obvious, but unspoken, not dealt with nor confronted, perhaps because partners are in denial, conflict avoidant, distracted, or unwilling to work on the relationship. In yet other relationships, the turmoil is quite real, as conflict threatens the relationship's continuation. Across a range of what can be considered turmoil in a relationship, non-verbal cues are affected and revealing, if one pays attention or knows what to look for.

Given research that suggests that approximately 93% of human emotion is communicated non-verbally, with only 7% communicated verbally, a focus on non-verbal cues in relationships experiencing turmoil is appropriate (Argyle, 1988; Kunecke et al., 2017; Mehrabian, 1972, 1981; Planalp, 2008). Thus, the purpose of this chapter is, first, to explore four sets of non-verbal cues associated with romantic relationships in turmoil. Then we overview relational turbulence, primarily via the work of communication scholars Denise Haunani Solomon and Leanne Knobloch, with an emphasis on the lack of non-verbal dyadic synchrony during times of turbulence.

Non-verbal Communication and Romantic Relationships in Turmoil

Several decades of research identifies key non-verbal cues that emerge in romantic relationships experiencing turmoil, those characterized by high degrees of conflict or periods of decline. To be clear, in this chapter we do not examine relationships that necessarily fail; many relationships are

resilient, as partners determine how to weather the trouble, perhaps seeking counselling to help heal wounds, reconcile differences, and rekindle connections. Our interest is in non-verbal communication associated with the turmoil many couples experience, regardless of whether the relationship succeeds or fails. While many nonverbal cues exist that affect the health of romantic relationships, for our purposes, we will concentrate on the following four codes of non-verbal communication: (1) touch/affection; (2) proxemics (i.e., use of space and territory); (3) oculesics (i.e., eye gaze); and (4) vocalics (i.e., paralanguage, tone of voice).

Touch and Affection in Romantic Relationships

Touch is a key non-verbal cue in any relationship, but it is arguably *the* most important form of non-verbal communication in a romantic relationship. Touch and affection are primary ways we express our emotions (Durbin et al., 2021; Floyd & Hesse, 2017; Hesse & Mikkelson, 2017; Luerssen et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2011). Emotional expression is critical to the development of successful romantic relationships and the satisfaction levels of partners (Keltner et al., 2019; Sauter, 2017; Trask et al., 2020). Physical affection alters our hormones, affects our immune systems, assists in pain management, impacts sleep quality, and helps reduce the stress we register in our bodies (Eisenberger et al., 2011; Floyd, 2016, 2019; Floyd et al., 2010, 2018; Floyd & Riforgiate, 2008; Holt-Lunstad, 2018).

One potential source of difficulty for romantic couples pertains to touch ethic, people's beliefs about and preferences for touch, typically developed in early years through experiences with family members (Ivy & Wahl, 2019). Romantic partners who have divergent beliefs about the appropriateness of certain forms of touch may need to negotiate so that both persons' views are respected. For example, if one partner feels that affection in public (i.e., tie signs; Morris, 1977) communicates closeness and signals to others the status of a relationship, but the other partner believes public displays of affection are inappropriate, even embarrassing, conflict may ensue. Part of the touch ethic involves preferences. If one partner likes to sleep completely wrapped up in the other partner's body,

but that partner prefers to "go to separate corners" for sleep, such a contrast may become a source of strain.

Oxford scholar Peter Collett (2004) is an expert and scholar of nonverbal communication. While an experimental psychologist at Oxford, Collett served as a commentator on the British original version of the television show *Big Brother*. In the UK show, houseguests were videotaped in their day-to-day interactions; then hosts and experts analysed what occurred in each episode. Collett has written and lectured on nonverbal cues between royal spouses, starting with Queen Elizabeth's marriage to Prince Phillip, extending to Prince Charles and Diana's relationship, then contrasting non-verbal cues in their wedding ceremony with those evidenced in Prince Charles' wedding to Camilla Parker Bowles. Public touch was virtually nonexistent between Elizabeth and Phillip—primarily a sign of the times, in that royals were seldom seen exhibiting any form of physical contact. In their example, the lack of touch was not likely an indicator of turmoil in the relationship, but more a matter of protocol and the role of a royal. In the case of Charles and Diana, awkward and infrequent touch likely revealed relational turmoil right from the start. News accounts documented Charles' uncomfortable attempts at affection (and Diana's squeamish reactions) when prompted by reporters and well-wishers to show how they felt about each other. They exchanged a brief kiss on the balcony after their wedding, prompted by the crowd below yelling for them to kiss.

Collett (2018) has continued his analysis, writing frequently for the UK's *The Guardian* newspaper, comparing non-verbal cues between Prince William and wife Kate Middleton and Prince Harry and wife Meghan Markle. Reinforcing other research on affection in romantic relationships, touch between younger spouses is much more evident, even for royals. The younger royals seem more comfortable with public touch than their elders, with William often seen steering Kate in a direction or including her in an interaction by placing his hand on the small of her back. Harry and Meghan use more intimate proxemics than other royal couples, frequently seen sitting closely together with legs or arms touching, and often holding hands at events and during interviews.

Over several decades, scholar Antonia Abbey produced a body of research documenting sex differences in perceptions of touch (Abbey,

1982, 1987, 1991; Abbey et al., 2005). While some findings pertain to non-verbal cues in courtship and relationship initiation, other results suggest that a gap between intention and interpretation exists in ongoing romantic relationships as well. Consistent research findings have implications for heterosexual romantic couples, in that male participants in studies often misinterpreted the meaning behind women's touches. In these studies, many men interpreted women's touches as more intimate and sexual than the women intended. A woman may intend to only convey friendship, interest, and attraction through touch, but a male recipient of her touch may infer love, intimacy, and even sexual arousal. Such a gap between intention and interpretation can be a challenge in a romantic relationship, possibly leading one person to feel misunderstood and the other to feel "teased."

Scholars also examine touch in terms of quantity and quality. Partners in long-term relationships, including marriages, tend to touch each other less frequently and less intimately than people establishing relationships or repairing ones that have experienced upheaval or a loss of intimacy (Debrot et al., 2017; Guerrero & Andersen, 1991, 1994; Jakubiak & Feeney, 2017; Spott et al., 2010). Turmoil in a romantic relationship is often revealed through diminished or altered non-verbal cues, such as reduced touch either in frequency or quality, being ignored, decreased direct eye contact, increased physical distance, and a general lack of animation or energy in the voice (Patterson et al., 2012). A couple in turmoil may exhibit more or less affection than usual in the form of touch, depending on whether the relationship is in decline and characterized by frequent conflict or in a process of renewal, emerging out of turmoil.

Proxemics in Romantic Relationships

Proxemics pertains to the way distance and space non-verbally communicate messages (Ivy & Wahl, 2019). Research bears out what likely many of us have witnessed and experienced in our daily lives: Intimate partners tend to maintain closer physical distances than people in other kinds of relationships, like those among friends, coworkers, and family members (Andersen et al., 2006; Fagundes & Schindler, 2012; Okken et al., 2012;

Sluzki, 2016; Szpak et al., 2016). However, partners in troubled romantic relationships often use physical distance as a parallel to psychological distance felt toward their partner (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). According to the National Sleep Foundation (Miller, 2020), 25% of American married couples sleep in separate beds; 10% sleep in separate rooms. While decisions for separate sleeping arrangements aren't always related to a desire for physical distance, separate beds and rooms may reveal turmoil in a relationship.

Most people decrease affectionate touch and increase physical distance during periods of conflict (Allsop et al., 2021; Beebe et al., 2022; Guerrero, 2013). During conflict episodes, some partners choose to leave the scene, which may be an effective tactic to let "cooler heads prevail," although postponing or avoiding conflict by leaving the scene sometimes reduces intimacy and trust, leading to more conflict (Samp, 2016). As compared to the process of relational escalation, when relationships build and physical closeness is a key non-verbal cue, during relational de-escalation physical distance increases (Knapp et al., 2013). It is interesting that the term for major distancing between partners is "separation," which can mean partners take a break, see each other infrequently, and perhaps sever living arrangements. Whether these separations are temporary or permanent, they typically involve a significant decrease of physical proximity between partners.

One form of conflict pattern studied for decades by communication and psychology scholars is demand-withdrawal, common among married couples (Beebe et al., 2022; Burrell et al., 2014; Schrodt et al., 2014). In this pattern, one person makes a demand and the other responds by refusing to concede to (or even acknowledge) the demand, avoiding a conflict, and sometimes just walking away, increasing physical distance from the partner (Eldridge et al., 2017; Holley et al., 2018; Li & Johnson, 2018; Pickover et al., 2017). For example, one spouse might say to the other, "Why won't you talk about what's wrong in this marriage? I always have to bring things up, so this time, YOU have to talk to me about our problems." The other spouse typically ignores or disagrees with the accusation and withdraws from the conflict, often physically. As previously stated, walking away and cooling off in response to conflict can be an effective strategy. However, couples whose conflict episodes frequently

involve a demand-withdrawal pattern typically report lower levels of satisfaction with their partners and their relationship in general (Papp et al., 2009; Spencer et al., 2017).

Research on gay and lesbian couple conflict has produced mixed results. In some studies, gay and lesbian partners were more conflict avoidant than heterosexual couples, opting for a withdrawing, distancing tactic rather than actively engaging in conflict (Dominique & Mollen, 2009; Li & Samp, 2021). However, other studies found few differences across couple types in terms of frequency of conflicts, topics of disagreement, and use of the demand-withdraw pattern (Baucom et al., 2010; Holley et al., 2010; Kurdek, 2004; Ogolsky & Gray, 2016; Whitton et al., 2018).

Eye Gaze in Romantic Relationships

Mutual eye gaze (i.e., eye contact) is a critical form of non-verbal communication between people in all types of relationships, particularly romantic partners (Bernecker et al., 2019; Docan-Morgan et al., 2013; Lawson, 2015; Mason et al., 2005; Petrican et al., 2011; Tang & Schmeichel, 2015). Eye contact conveys attention, interest, attraction, even respect. We've long known of the key role the eyes play in conveying emotions—a central feature in successful romantic relationships (Campbell et al., 2017; Flykt et al., 2021; Lea et al., 2018; Widman et al., 2018).

Guerrero, Jones, and Burgoon (2000) conducted an experimental study of romantic partners across four conditions of intimacy. After an initial conversation (video recorded in a research lab), one partner in each dyad left the lab and became a confederate in the study. Each confederate was asked to manipulate verbal and non-verbal communication, including levels of eye contact, to indicate an increase or decrease in intimacy for subsequent taped conversations with their partners. Behavioural changes exhibited by partners in confederate roles impacted how their unsuspecting partners behaved, as those partners mirrored the changing language and non-verbal cues. Romantic partners are often motivated to adapt to each other's non-verbal communication, as such adaptation

indicates intimacy, closeness, understanding, and mutual respect. However, non-verbal cues that convey decreasing intimacy or distress in a relationship are also "catching," showing that non-verbal cues conveyed by one's partner have a powerful effect on one's own behaviour.

In the United States, where eye contact is highly valued, people who avoid eye gaze or exhibit low levels of eye contact tend to be viewed as suspicious, untrustworthy, and deceptive (Knapp et al., 2015; Levine & Knapp, 2018; Novotny et al., 2018). This tendency applies across all sorts of connections, from people casually passing each other on the street to intimate partners. Such negative perceptions can be devastating to romantic relational partners. Changes in eye gaze patterns between partners can signal trouble and reveal a decline in relationship satisfaction (Hessels et al., 2017; Kleinke, 1986).

Vocalics in Romantic Relationships

Vocal non-verbal cues can be revealing, given that they are so centrally connected to our physiology. For example, hormones play a significant role in voice production; hormonal changes help us discern if we're speaking on the phone to a child or an elderly person (Banai, 2017; Davidson, 2016; Wells, 2004). Our voices are hard to control when we're nervous or in heightened emotional states; the voice can shake or sound gravelly because of dry tissues in the vocal mechanism. Heightened emotions may cause us to speed up our rate of speech, as well as exhibit more speech errors, disfluencies, and awkward pausing (Frank et al., 2013; Juslin et al., 2018; Karpf, 2006).

Romantic partners experiencing turmoil may not be aware that their vocalics reveal their emotions or their declining satisfaction with the relationship. For some people, levels of volume, pitch variation, and speaking rate increase as emotions reveal turmoil. For others, pitches flatten, speaking rates slow, and volume levels decrease (Feinberg et al., 2006; Hartmann & Mast, 2017; Kuhn et al., 2017). Energy can drain out of the voice, such that articulation is affected, causing mumbling or slurred speech. Typical animation in the voice can diminish because of turmoil, such that a partner may feel like the other person "just doesn't *sound* interested anymore." In contrast, in times of high conflict, voices may reveal

turmoil through raised pitches, increased volume levels, faster speaking rates, and more frequent and intrusive interruptions (Aldeis & Afifi, 2015; Ebesu Hubbard et al., 2013; Gnisci et al., 2012; Guerrero et al., 2000).

The absence of vocalics can also indicate turmoil, sometimes called the "silent treatment" (Acheson, 2008; Baker, 1955; Bruneau, 1973; Wright & Roloff, 2009). In their book about non-verbal cues in close relationships, Guerrero and Floyd (2006) describe silence as "intimidating and threatening," especially when used as a response to conflict (p. 158). Romantic partners can be in throes of battle, then one partner stops talking *and* listening; in such a scenario, silence can be a power play or a stall tactic. While silence may also be a calming technique for oneself or one's partner and a means of promoting peace, it can heighten resentment and frustration, leading to more serious problems in the relationship (Cheng & Tardy, 2010; Knapp et al., 2013).

Laura Pritchitt (2016), a writer for *The New York Times*, published an account of how her marriage ended after two decades. She described how she spun the story to neighbors, saying that some marriages just "run their course"; some end in a civil way, quietly, without yelling and drama. But she also offered this perspective:

> I smile at neighbors and wave as they get into their cars. I do not speak about the sting of all of this. I don't tell them how I recently sank to my knees and laughed in half-sorrow, half-relief, only because of this: My marriage had long ago turned into the cliché of roommate-ness, and that it could suffer such a change without any emotional upheaval was revealing. In fact, the silence said it all. The words I don't say to my neighbors, the words that get held on my tongue, are: I wish you had heard a good fight. I wish our voices had been loud enough to carry across the valley. He and I may have free speech, but we aren't so good at frank speech.

Relational Turbulence and Non-verbal Cues

Communication scholars Denise Haunani Solomon and Leanne Knobloch (2001) proposed the relational turbulence model (RTM) as a means of better understanding turmoil in romantic relationships that had

achieved moderate levels of intimacy. They operationalized moderate intimacy as evidenced in the shift from a casual dating relationship to something more serious, a more "emotionally attached, mutually recognized, and interdependent relationship" (p. 805). This research launched a significant body of work, as scholars found relational turbulence an important construct to help better understand the role of communication in romantic relationships. Solomon et al.'s (2016) initial focus was on relationships evolving from casual dating to a deeper, more intimate, stage. However, over time, the model "shifted from an emphasis on intimacy … to a focus on relational uncertainty and interference from a partner as phenomena that increase during relationship transitions" (Solomon et al. 2016, pp. 507–508). Relational uncertainty is ambiguity about the nature of involvement in a relationship, while interdependence is how much influence one partner allows from the other. Solomon et al. (2016) revised view of turbulence focused on relationship transitions, defined as "periods of discontinuity between times of relative stability, during which individuals adapt to changing roles, identities, and circumstances" (p. 510).

Transitions that can create turbulence and affect the life and trajectory of romantic relationships include how couples manage parenthood (Theiss et al., 2013), in-law relationships (Mikucki-Enyart & Caughlin, 2018), infertility (Steuber & Solomon, 2008, 2011), military deployment and reintegration (Knobloch et al., 2015; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011), becoming empty nesters (Nagy & Theiss, 2013), cancer diagnoses (Weber & Solomon, 2008), and most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic (Goodboy et al., 2021). A variety of relational experiences have been clarified through the lens of the relational turbulence model, including the impact of hurtful messages (McLaren et al., 2011, 2012; McLaren & Solomon, 2014; Priem & Solomon, 2011; Theiss et al., 2009), negative emotional expression (Knobloch et al., 2007), and relational irritations (Theiss & Solomon, 2006).

Most of the research on turbulence has focused on verbal communication; however, one process inherent in turbulence is dyadic synchrony, which includes both verbal and non-verbal elements. Here, we briefly explore dyadic synchrony in general, then focus on key non-verbal cues emergent as romantic partners in turbulence evidence a decline in synchrony.

Dyadic Synchrony

Harrist and Waugh (2002) define dyadic synchrony as "an observable pattern of dyadic interaction that is mutually regulated, reciprocal, and harmonious" (p. 557). More succinctly, it is "the degree of coordination between individuals engaged in interaction" (Solomon et al. 2016, p. 520). Other researchers call it interactive synchrony, meaning the coordination of speech and body movement between at least two people (Alda, 2018; Baimel et al., 2018; Brambilla et al., 2016; Lozza et al., 2018; Schmidt et al., 2012). It's not unusual for relational partners in turmoil or distress to be described as being "out of synch" or "not having a rhythm." Partners may vary their schedules, such that they rarely see each other in the home environment or much of anywhere else. They may prefer to spend time with colleagues or friends rather than their partner, or they may no longer do tasks or activities with each other that they used to enjoy.

Verbal communication associated with synchrony includes coherence around a conversation topic, meaning offering comments that follow someone's thread, rather than going on a tangent or shifting to a topic one would rather talk about. For example, a couple in synch might communicate at a social gathering, where one partner raises the topic of a recent sporting contest. Rather than shifting away from sports to a different topic, the romantic partner in synch amplifies details, provides supplemental information, or adds her or his perspective on the sporting event. Voicing agreement with a partner's expressed view also conveys synchrony. Another behaviour is word choice, meaning when partners echo the language of each other's comments (Bernieri & Rosenthal, 1991; Knobloch, 2008; Knobloch & Solomon, 2003). Using our earlier example, if one partner describes the sporting event as "amazing," the other will use that descriptor in subsequent comments, reinforcing the first partner's word choice. It sounds like a tiny thing, this inspection of word choice among romantic partners, but if one partner shifts the topic or responds with "that game was completely boring," such a verbalization could be a sign of turmoil, especially when made in public. Verbal and nonverbal cues indicating synchrony (or the lack of it) often emerge to reveal a relationship.

Other research frames verbal synchrony as language style matching (Cannava & Bodie, 2017; Gleason & Ivy, 2021; Gonzalez et al., 2010; Ireland et al., 2011; Ireland & Henderson, 2014; Meinecke & Kauffeld, 2019; Pennebaker et al., 2003; Richardson et al., 2019). Scholars from various disciplines have termed the behaviour linguistic coordination (Fusaroli et al., 2012); interactive alignment (Fusaroli & Tylén, 2016; Pickering & Garrod, 2004, 2013); and the echo effect (Kulesza et al., 2014). Nelson et al. (2017) describe the phenomenon as autonomic attunement, which goes beyond an assessment of communication style to effects on interactants' physiological functioning and mental/physical health. Couples in or out of synch can affect each other's breathing, heart rates, cortisol levels, moods, and a host of other physical and mental manifestations.

Of particular interest to our investigation of dyadic synchrony among romantic partners is research that emphasizes non-verbal communication (Feniger-Schaal et al., 2021; Lakin et al., 2003; Van Bommel et al., 2021). Dyadic or interactive synchrony has been termed "nonverbal adaptation" (Bodie et al., 2016, p. 3), "the chameleon effect" (Chartrand & Bargh, 1999, p. 893), "social rhythm" (Knapp et al., 2013, p. 222), and "postural echo" ("Do You Know?", 2006, p. 40). However, we prefer the term mimicry, which Guégen (2011) defines as "the imitation of postures, facial expressions, mannerisms, and other verbal and nonverbal behaviors" (p. 725). Some scholars contend such imitation or mirroring is intentional; others believe it is organic, something that develops over time between interactants (Bernhold & Giles, 2020; Manusov, 1992). College students on the job market are often advised to mimic the nonverbal cues of potential employers in job interviews, to convey a sense of solidarity and "fit" for a position or within an organization. Salespersons are often trained in "people watching," so that they can work to mimic clients and customers, creating a stronger likelihood of being persuasive or making a sale. (If not handled subtly, such mimicry can backfire.) Wait staff at restaurants are often trained to lean down or squat by diners' tables, in an effort to put themselves more on the level of customers, a technique that research shows can actually result in enhanced customer–employee rapport, as well as increased food sales and tips (Lin & Lin, 2017; Rush, 2006).

Vocal mimicry, sometimes termed vocal accommodation (Bernhold & Giles, 2020), is the subject of much research. A good deal of this research focuses on parent–child mimicry, with studies of how mothers and infants, as well as grandparents and grandchildren, use their voices to adjust to each other and encourage language acquisition (Bernhold & Giles, 2017; Roe & Drivas, 1997). However, research also examines vocal mimicry among romantic partners (Floyd, 2019). Mimicked vocal cues can reveal coordination among romantic partners, whereas vocal cues that aren't in synch can reveal relational turbulence. It's important to use the word *can* here, in that partners may evidence coordinated vocal patterns that have developed over time, simply through the process of becoming used to each other. The coordination may be more habit than a sign of a healthy relationship. Likewise, sometimes couples may seem or sound out of synch for various reasons, not necessarily a signal of turmoil, distress, or turbulence in the relationship. It can be the result of a simple misunderstanding, minor argument, or irritation on the part of one or both partners. If the lack of mimicry persists or a wider range of non-verbal cues are in evidence, then a judgement of relational turmoil or turbulence may be justified.

Studies have linked vocal mimicry to partner affiliation, affection, and positive views of communication quality (Chartrand & Dalton, 2009; Floyd & Ray, 2003). Lee et al. (2010) found that when marital partners discussed problems in their turbulent marriage, they synchronized the energy and pitch of their voices. Couples who believed such discussions were positive and beneficial to the relationship mirrored higher vocal pitches in conversation; in contrast, couples who viewed the discussions negatively used lower vocal energy and pitches. Farley et al. (2013) studied whether third-party observers could determine through vocal cues if study participants were talking to a dating partner or a same-sex friend over the phone. The results showed high accuracy among observers, as men consistently increased pitches when saying "How are you?" to dating partners and decreased pitches with a male friend. In contrast, women decreased pitches when using the same phrase with a male dating partner and increased pitches with a female friend. While romantic relational partners more often attend to obvious non-verbal signals like distance, lack of touch, and diminished eye contact, subtle vocalic cues may be the most revealing about the status and quality of a romantic relationship.

Conclusion

Communication scholarship helps us better understand how relationships of various types are initiated, maintained, deepened, and sometimes terminated. A central part of relationship maintenance is the management of turmoil between partners. The purpose of this chapter was, first, to explore four sets of non-verbal cues associated with romantic relationships in turmoil. Specific emphasis was given to touch/affection, proxemics, eye behaviour, and vocalic cues communicated by romantic relational partners. Changes in expected patterns and non-verbal cues such as decreased frequency and quality of touch, increased physical distance and time spent apart versus together, avoiding making eye contact with one's partner, and vocal changes (greater or lesser volume, speaking rates, and pitch variation) reveal much more about a relationship than what partners say to each other.

Next we overviewed relational turbulence, defined in Solomon and Knobloch's research as periods of uncertainty and flux in partner interdependence during significant relationship transitions. Of the most interest to our inquiry was non-verbal dyadic synchrony lacking among relational partners experiencing turbulence. While most of the research on turbulence focuses on verbal communication, we contend that nonverbal cues are more revealing. Research reviewed in this chapter suggests that upwards of 93% of what human beings feel is communicated nonverbally, leaving a paltry 7% communicated verbally. Thus, an emphasis on non-verbal cues in romantic relationships is warranted and appropriate, given what words don't tell us.

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