

## Ambiguous Nonverbal Aligning Actions: Getting Away with Untoward Behavior

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### Abstract

*In this paper, I develop a conceptual framework for a much ignored family of identity maintenance strategies: ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions. Specifically, I explain how nonverbal behaviors can be used as aligning actions. I also present two specific illustrations of ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions, discuss the rationale for using these types of strategies, and how individuals might resolve ambiguous situations in general. In the discussion section, I suggest how certain categories of individuals might be more likely than others to use a given ambiguous nonverbal aligning action and how ordinary innocuous behaviors might be confused with aligning actions.*

**Keywords:** nonverbal, aligning action, deviance, identity

### 1. Introduction

Individuals typically want to maintain stable and positively valued identities (Burke, 2006; Serpe, 1987). Yet, they are often compelled to act in ways that violate social norms and challenge their own identities (Goffman, 1959). In fact, a person may purposely engage in deviant behaviors for a variety of reasons even while seeking to create the perception of culturally appropriate behavior (Goffman, 1963; Powers, 1975). In this paper, I develop a conceptual framework useful for clarifying and examining a previously overlooked category of identity maintenance strategies: ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions. Much has been written about the various strategies used to maintain or restore challenged identities (Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Goffman, 1971; Gecas, 1982; Heise, 1989a; Howard, 2000; Robinson, 2007; Stryker, 1980, 2008), including a particular set of identity maintenance strategies known collectively as aligning actions (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). Aligning actions are typically verbal strategies that are used to minimize the perceived incongruity between a situated identity and role performance. Specifically, aligning actions are conscious efforts to mitigate, neutralize, and/or deny an actor's responsibility for her/his untoward behavior by tactically aligning an act with culturally relevant norms.

Although the literature on aligning actions has largely ignored nonverbal behaviors, there is research suggesting that identity restoring behaviors can be nonverbal (Robinson, Smith-Lovin, & Tsoudis, 1994; Schlenker & Weigold, 1989; Tsoudis, & Smith-Lovin, 1998). For example, nonverbal behaviors may be used to support verbal aligning actions, including motive talk (Snyder & Higgins, 1988), apologies (Wolf-Smith & LaRossa, 1992), and excuses (Stevenson, 1999). Further, nonverbal behavior creates meaning in interaction independent of verbal behaviors (Rashotte, 2002). For example, a baseball pitcher may rub his arm before, during, and/or after a game to convey the excuse that soreness in his arm is the reason that he is/was unable to pitch well (Ball-Rokeach, 1973). Acts of contrition such as giving flowers to one's spouse or doing more chores than usual after a fight are apologetic acts (Wolf-Smith & LaRossa, 1992).

Still another identity maintenance strategy is strategic ambiguity (Goffman, 1959). Goffman suggested that individuals may use strategically ambiguous acts to misrepresent themselves in order to avoid challenges to positively valued identities. Strategic ambiguity is routinely used by politicians to determine the key issues of concern to voters before announcing a particular platform (Aragones & Neeman, 2000; Page, 1976) and by governments that want to allow for political flexibility in negotiating the competing agendas of various other governments (Williams, 1983).

Employers use strategic ambiguity to ease tensions concerning demotions and reassignments (Goldner, 1965) and corporations use strategic ambiguity in the form of loop-holes in their contracts that will allow them advantages in the future (Bernheim & Whiston, 1998). Even university administrators who must attend to individual sexual harassment issues use strategically ambiguous language in order to protect their universities (Clair, 1993). Ambiguity is a formidable obstacle to appropriately defining a situation (Ball-Rokeach, 1973). Thus, accurately attributing meanings to identities can be problematic when corresponding behaviors are ambiguous.

Much research has focused on how nonverbal behaviors may be examined to expose strategic ambiguity and to reveal deception (Sporer & Schwandt, 2007; Sternglanz, 2004; Vrij, 2008). Much less research has examined how nonverbal behaviors aid deception and/or strategic ambiguity. The notable exceptions are studies about how individuals try to use nonverbal behaviors to conceal their actual sentiments (DePaulo, Wetzel, Sternglanz, & Wilson, 2003) and how individuals are often more likely to risk untoward nonverbal actions than they are to risk problematic verbal comments (DePaulo, 1992).

Despite the abundance of research on identity, strategic ambiguity, and nonverbal behavior, scholars seem to have overlooked a basic identity maintenance strategy, i.e., the aligning actions of nonverbal behaviors. Therefore, the purposes of this paper are to develop a conceptual framework for the study of ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions, to present two specific illustrations of ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions, to discuss the rationale for using these types of strategies, and how individuals might resolve ambiguous situations in general.

## ***2. Defining Aligning Actions***

Behaviors signal our identities to others, as well as allow us to evaluate how appropriately others confirm our identities. Individuals are most likely to appropriately attribute behaviors to identities under conditions in which actors tend to share common meanings about identities and behaviors in a given situation (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). Nevertheless, occasional disruptions of the definition of the situation are inevitable. People react affectively to these disruptions and the greater the inconsistency between an act and an identity, the more disturbing the event will be to the observer (Burke & Harrod, 2005; Cast & Burke, 2002; Heise, 1989b; Smith-Lovin, 1979). For example, we expect positively valued behaviors from individuals who have positively valued identities and we expect negatively valued behaviors from individuals who have negatively valued identities. Given circumstances in which a person with a positively valued identity acts in a relatively negative way, we should expect that an observer will experience psychological strain. Under such conditions, interactants will attempt to restore the definition of the situation (Heise, 1989a; MacKinnon, 1994).

Burke (2004; 2006) argued that the set of meanings defining an identity are derived from a system of conditional rules (a classifier system) that allow an individual to adapt to new or unusual social situations. The classifier system is composed of all the rules understood by the individual to appropriately behave in ways that are consistent with the situation. Each classifier identifies a condition and the appropriate response to that condition. Using a cybernetic process, individuals attempt to satisfy each condition in their situation in relation to all other conditions being satisfied in that situation. Therefore, an individual will modify her/his performance until a satisfactory level of correspondence exists between the expected role-performance and the actual role-performance (Powers, 1975) or observers may alter previously held meanings of identities, behaviors, and settings in the situation (Heise, 1989a; MacKinnon, 1994).

Individuals routinely behave in untoward, inappropriate, and generally problematic ways (Goffman, 1959). A particular set of phenomenon frequently used to modify role performances to be consistent with a given definition of the situation are known as aligning actions. As stated above, aligning actions are conscious efforts to mitigate, neutralize, and/or deny an actor's responsibility for her/his untoward behavior by tactically aligning an act with culturally relevant norms (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). The most well known types of aligning actions include Mills' (1940) vocabularies of motive, Hewitt and Hall's (1973) quasi-theories, Scott and Lyman's (1968) accounts, Schlenker's (1980) acclamers, Wagner's (1980) dismissals, and Hewitt and Stoke's (1975) disclaimers.

Aligning actions tend to be distinguished by their temporal focus and the degree of emphasis on claims made about identity and the nature of the behavior (Hunter, 1984). Temporal focus refers to the timing of an aligning action. For example, quasi-theories, acclamers, dismissals, and accounts are primarily retrospective comments used to maintain or restore damaged identities, while disclaimers are prospective comments that buffer anticipated challenges to identity.

Vocabularies of motive are unique from other aligning actions in that Mills (1940) argued that they may be used in the past, present, and future tense.

All aligning actions make *identity* claims about the responsibility of the act as well as *substantive* claims about the nature of the act (Hunter, 1984; Stokes & Hewitt, 1975). An identity claim is made to minimize challenges to the individual's positively valued identity. Substantive claims tactically align the individual's problematic behavior with other culturally appropriate norms, thus, modifying the meaning of the act to be consistent with the definition of the situation. In order to achieve a useful, successful, and/or non-conflictual interaction, individuals may accept the perception of alignment rather than an actual alignment between behavior and cultural standards. In fact, individuals may only superficially and ritualistically act to align behaviors with expectations, especially under conditions in which the necessity of uninterrupted interaction supersedes cultural ideals (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976).

### **3. Ambiguous Nonverbal Aligning Actions**

Ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions are similar to other aligning actions in that 1) they promote claims that are intended to minimize potential incongruity between behavior and culture and 2) they are conscious and strategic. Similar to all aligning actions, the ambiguous actions emphasized in the present study provide claims, albeit nonverbal, about both identity and about the nature of the act itself. Individuals tend to resolve ambiguous acts in ways that are consistent with extant perceptions of the actor's identity and about the nature of the behavior (Ball-Rokeach, 1973; DePaulo, 1992). Therefore, to the extent that plausible and culturally acceptable meanings are attributable to an ambiguous act, an individual may avoid challenges to her/his own identity and maintain the perception of the appropriateness of the behavior. As noted above, individuals often focus on the perception of alignment rather than actual alignment between behaviors and cultural ideals (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). This aspect of aligning actions is particularly emphasized for ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions in that some individuals seek to create the perception of alignment while simultaneously accomplishing a covert objective.

Ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions are also conscious and strategic. In the event that an actor's objective is to intentionally behave in a way that could potentially violate cultural norms, s/he may act strategically ambiguous in order to satisfy her/his objective while concomitantly maintaining a positively valued identity. The ambiguity of the act produces uncertainty among observers and/or targeted individuals about the meanings of the components of the interaction, i.e., they are unsure about the appropriate meanings attributed to identities, behaviors, and settings.

Individuals may use subconscious nonverbal behaviors to convey information, such as certain types of nonverbal courtship behaviors (Moore, 2010), but ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions are distinct from subconscious behaviors. For example, a woman may subconsciously rest her hand on a man's arm because she is attracted to him and that behavior may be unwanted from the man's perspective. Yet, this is not an aligning action because the woman did not consider that her behavior might be problematic and she did not purposely attempt to align her behavior with a culturally acceptable norm. The distinction between subconscious nonverbal behaviors and aligning actions is important because of the underlying intent. Subconscious behaviors may or may not be innocuous and they are not necessarily strategic. Aligning actions are behaviors that the actor recognizes as potentially untoward or problematic and they are always strategic. Thus, it is possible that under certain conditions, a subconscious behavior could function like an ambiguous nonverbal aligning action, but would not meet the criteria to be identified as such.

Individuals negotiate meanings in face-to-face interactions (Mead, 1934), and aligning actions are often used to negotiate identities in problematic situations (Spencer, 1987). Ambiguous behavior allows the individual to evaluate the situation and s/he may choose to engage in similar ambiguous behaviors if the initial act seems effective. Depending on the individual's final objective, an ambiguous nonverbal aligning action may be considered effective when it is ignored, accepted without challenge, or welcomed. In other words, there may be circumstances in which the individual will have satisfied her/his objective to the extent that s/he is allowed to engage in a single act without scrutiny or challenge to identity. However, under conditions in which the individual has engaged in an ambiguous act in order to determine if more overt acts are prudent, the success of the aligning action will likely depend on how positively the initial act is received, i.e., the act is accepted without challenge or even welcomed. Finally, under conditions in which a person perceives that ambiguity about an act may be resolved in ways that negatively affect her/him, s/he may 1) abandon her/his objective, or 2) modify the act.

In lieu of other pertinent information, diffuse status characteristics such as race/ethnicity, age, class, and gender will tend to influence how observers resolve their ambivalence about a potentially untoward act. For example, accounts of higher status individuals tend to be accepted more than those of lower status individuals, especially when behavior is particularly ambiguous and the accounts are culturally acceptable (Blumstein, Carssow, Hall, Hawkins, Hoffman, Ishem, Maurer, Spens, Taylor, & Zimmerman, 1974; Massey, Freeman, & Zelditch, 1997). Further, the appropriateness of nonverbal behaviors like touching (Leffler, Gillespie, & Canaty, 1982) and eye gaze (Edinger & Patterson, 1983; Ridgeway, Berger, & Smith, 1985) tend to be determined by status.

Under conditions in which an individual has been observed engaging in confirmed untoward behavior, that person may be stigmatized. Once stigmatized, all subsequent behaviors will tend to be negatively evaluated (Goffman, 1963; Jones, Farina, Hastorf, Markus, Miller, & Scott, 1984; Link, Struening, Rahav, Phelan, & Nuttbrock, 1997). Therefore, to the extent that an individual has been associated with previous untoward behavior, observers will tend to resolve their ambivalence about an ambiguous act in ways that are negative for that person, i.e., they may challenge the individual's positively valued identity.

Resolving the ambiguity surrounding an act also depends on the observers' and targeted individuals' previous experiences. Individuals may determine that an ambiguous act is actually untoward if it occurs too often. Individuals are most likely to distinguish between spontaneous and deliberate acts when they are redundant (Allen & Atkinson, 1981). Further, redundant acts typically provide more clues to the content of nonverbal behavior than do spontaneous acts. Subsequently, individuals more accurately define the meanings of nonverbal acts when they are deliberate than when they are spontaneous (Allen & Atkinson, 1978). If an individual deliberately engages in a particular ambiguous nonverbal aligning action too often, clues about the untoward intent of the behavior may be discovered and the ambiguity of the act may be ineffective. The less ambiguous the untoward act, the more likely observers/targets will challenge the positive identity of the actor.

Individuals come to define their situations consistent with previous experiences (Thomas & Thomas, 1928) and from many different perspectives (Mead, 1934). Thus, individuals' previous experiences and/or observations will tend to influence their evaluations about an ambiguous nonverbal aligning action. Specifically, if an individual has experienced and/or observed an untoward act in the past, only a superficial resemblance may be needed for her/him to define subsequent ambiguous acts as untoward.

Finally, the setting in which an act occurs may influence an individual's attitudes about the act. Acts may be considered usual in some settings, but quite unusual in other settings (Emerson, 1978; Sacks, 1984). For example, it is easy to imagine innocuous reasons for two people bumping into each other in a crowded mall, e.g., one or both of the individuals were distracted, they were pushed into each other, or they couldn't avoid bumping because of the crowd. However, witnessing an individual bump into another person on a fairly isolated sidewalk is more perplexing and may influence observers to attribute the act to negative intentions or circumstances, e.g., the individual who bumps may be drunk, sick, aggressing, or some other negative attribute. Therefore, an ambiguous nonverbal aligning action will most likely be resolved positively for the offender under conditions in which positive meanings for the act are plausible given the setting. In the next section, I suggest two different illustrations of ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions. Specifically, I will present hypothetical examples of 1) an ambiguous nonverbal sexual advance, and 2) an ambiguous nonverbal aggression.

#### ***4. Illustrations of Ambiguous Nonverbal Aligning Actions***

##### **4.1 Ambiguous Nonverbal Sexual Advances**

Ambiguous nonverbal sexual advances are acts that allow an actor to deviate from cultural norms about sexual advances while concomitantly maintaining a positively valued identity. Specifically, an actor may engage in a wide variety of ambiguous nonverbal acts that satisfy her/his sexually driven urges or to determine if more overt sexual advances are prudent. The sexual advance is intended to produce ambiguity among observers and/or targeted individuals that will ultimately be resolved in ways that are consistent with the actor's positively valued identity.

Imagine a hypothetical situation involving a sixteen year old woman and her male driving instructor. While driving on a country road, the driving instructor directs the young woman to pull the car onto the shoulder of the road so that he might examine the motor. The instructor asks the young woman to look under the hood with him.

While looking under the hood, the instructor presses his lower body against the woman as he leans over her to test the tension on one of the belts on the motor. The young woman is unsure if the contact is sexual in nature or not. She might be uncomfortable and somewhat shaken by the experience. Yet, she may choose not to protest to the instructor, her parents, or other authority figures because of her uncertainty about the intentions of the instructor and the meaning of the act. To the extent that the driving instructor purposely acted inappropriately sexual towards his student, the behavior would be an example of an ambiguous nonverbal sexual advance.

The instructor has minimized potential incongruity between his behavior and identity by acting in a way that is consistent with cultural expectations. Requiring a student to observe and/or test the tension of a fan belt is a legitimate exercise for a driver's education class. Further, observing a motor with one's student requires standing in relative close proximity. Thus, the instructor created a plausible alternative motive for touching the woman by engaging her in a legitimate exercise involving the two of them standing in close proximity.

While unwanted sexual touching is rarely expected, it would be especially disturbing behavior between instructor and student. To the extent that the motive of an instructor is ambiguous, the affective response of the woman will compel her to define the meanings of the act consistently with her meanings of the instructor identity (Weiss & Lalonde, 2001). Further, it is less problematic for a student to give an instructor the benefit of the doubt than to demand clarification about the event (Hunter, 1984; Massey et al., 1997; Woodzicka & France, 2001).

#### **4.2 Ambiguous Nonverbal Aggression**

A second illustration of ambiguous nonverbal aligning action, ambiguous nonverbal aggression allows the actor to be purposively aggressive while still creating doubts about her/his intentions; thus, maintaining her/his positively valued identity as a "reasonable" person. An individual may wish to aggress against another without directly confronting the targeted person to 1) satisfy her/his need or desire to aggress against the target and/or 2) to determine the vulnerability of the target (Crick, 1996; Felson, 1983; Korbin, 2003).

Ambiguously aggressive acts can be considered aligning actions to the extent that they are consciously hostile, and they are strategic in that they are not intended as an open challenge to the target. To the contrary, ambiguous nonverbal aggression is often a conscious attempt to avoid reprisal for aggressing against a target. For example, imagine a hypothetical example of a ten year old boy who sets his lunch box in the aisle of a bus immediately before a second boy walks past, subsequently tripping the second child. The ten year old may have wanted to trip the other boy, but he did not want to get into trouble. The boy consciously and strategically aggressed against the other boy in a manner that satisfied his own goals while concomitantly maintaining the perception of normative conduct. In other words, setting a lunch box in the aisle of a bus is not an unusual behavior for a little boy and by using the lunch box, the boy established a plausible alternative explanation for the situation, i.e., it was an accident.

#### **5. Discussion**

By definition, others cannot be certain about the intentions behind an ambiguous nonverbal aligning action. For example, ordinary sexual advances are considered normative in the context of courtship behaviors. Flirting is a useful strategy to facilitate courtship and it includes many nonverbal forms of communication such as body language, eye contact, interpersonal spacing, and touching. Nevertheless, acts like winking, standing too close to another, or touching are problematic when they are unwanted and/or inappropriate in a given social context (Yagil, Karnieli-Miller, Eisikovits, & Enosh, 2006). Morris (1971) found that individuals expect nonverbal courtship to proceed slowly and systematically from subtle to more overt behaviors. However, it is often difficult for an individual to anticipate when her/his pursuit will be considered intrusive (Sinclair & Frieze, 2005).

The likelihood of using an aligning action probably varies by demographic and cultural differences. For example, Men may be particularly likely to use ambiguous nonverbal sexual advances. First, they are more likely than are women to engage in overt and unwanted touching (Eaton & Rose, 2011; Moore, 1985; Perper & Weis, 1987; Uggen & Blackstone, 2004). Second, women are more likely than are men to characterize typical courtship behaviors, including sexual touching, as unwanted (Sinclair & Frieze, 2005). Finally, men who engage in unwanted courtship or sexually motivated behaviors are often viewed extremely negatively (Frisby et al., 2011).

There seems to be relatively few negative repercussions for women that engage in courtship or quasi-courtship behaviors. Women are just as likely as are men to initiate courtship rituals, albeit more subtly. Women most frequently rely on repeated eye contact to initiate courtship and quasi-courtship (Hinde, 1979).

Women who are sexually motivated in courtship behavior are considered more attractive by the opposite sex than are men who are sexually motivated in courtship behavior (Frisby, Dillow, Gaughan, & Nordlund, 2011). Thus, women may not feel compelled to act ambiguously about sexual advances in general. By contrast, a woman's overt hostile aggression towards others is unexpected (Liu & Kaplan, 2004) and perceived as a loss of self-control; whereas, men often perceive aggression as a means of gaining control over others (Topali & O'Neal, 2003). Researchers have argued that women learn and adopt the most cost beneficial strategies of aggression early in life. To the extent that a woman can aggress without being identified as an aggressor, she is successful (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Lagerspetz, 1994). While same sex aggression is more common than cross-sex aggression, women are more likely to use covert aggression over overt aggression against men (Bjorkqvist, 1994). Men are more likely to use direct aggression against other men, but they are just as likely to use covert or indirect aggression against women as they are men (Richardson & Green, 1999). Given the literature, it seems likely that women might be particularly inclined to use ambiguous nonverbal aggression.

It is likely that the prevalence and nature of ambiguous nonverbal aggression, as well as the rationale for using ambiguous nonverbal aggression will vary by age. Studies show that the older the person, the more likely that person will misinterpret nonverbal cues (Montepare, Koff, Zaitchik & Albert, 1999) and tend to use ambiguous aggression over direct confrontation (Walker, Richardson, & Green, 2008). Cultural differences based on race, socioeconomic status, and/or region are likely to influence who and when ambiguous nonverbal aggression might be used. Racial differences have been identified in individuals' reactions to nonverbal communication (Feldman, 1985) and to ambiguous threats (Leonard & Taylor, 1981). Socioeconomic status has been linked to sensitivity to nonverbal cues (Hall, Halberstadt, & O'Brien, 1997). Further, attitudes about aggression vary by region (Felson, Liska, South, & McNulty, 1994). It is likely that ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions are commonly used by all categories of people.

Both sexual harassment and aggression are growing societal concerns (Krahe, 2009; O'Leary-Kelly, Bowes-Sperry, Bates, & Lean, 2009). Ironically, ambiguous nonverbal sexual advances are effective strategies for legitimate courtship as well as sexual harassment. This study should alert the reader to the several ways in which an innocuous ambiguous act might be perceived negatively. First, the favorable defining of an ambiguous act is most likely under conditions in which the actor has been evaluated positively. For example, the more attractive the offending individual, the less likely an ambiguous act will be seen as untoward (Golden III, Johnson, & Lopez, 2002). Second, once a person is associated with a previous untoward act all subsequent similar ambiguous acts may be defined unfavorably for that person, innocent intentions or not (Crocker & Lutsky, 1986). Finally, meanings attributed to ambiguous acts will tend to be derived from the actor's experiences and/or observations. Attractive targets are perceived to have experienced more sexual advances than unattractive individuals and so, they tend to expect unwanted sexual advances. Consequently, they tend to be more suspicious of ambiguous acts (Golden III et al., 2002). Ambiguous acts that only superficially resemble previously experienced untoward acts may be defined negatively by others. To the extent that an ambiguous nonverbal sexual advance is ineffective, that behavior might be identified as sexual harassment. However, even ineffective ambiguous nonverbal sexual advances are not necessarily identified as sexual harassment nor does sexual harassment require the use of ambiguous nonverbal sexual advances.

The conceptualization of ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions provides a framework for the much needed empirical exploration of a common identity maintenance strategy. However, the two illustrations presented in this paper are not exhaustive. Other illustrations could include how an individual might want to deviate from courtesy norms while still maintaining her/his positively valued identity as a "polite" person (ambiguous incivility) or a person might want to camouflage or conceal deviant behavior to create ambiguity about the existential nature of the act (an illusory act). Identity maintenance literature would benefit from empirical research examining the prevalence, nature, and resolution of ambiguous nonverbal aligning actions.



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