

Gary Condit's Body Language as Assessed by Patti Wood, The Body Language Lady

Following are excerpts from Patti Wood's article on Gary Condit's interview on ABC's "Primetime.

We read body language in the right hemisphere where our emotions and basic instincts reside. When your gut tells you that someone makes you uncomfortable, it's because you are subconsciously reading and processing something untrustworthy in the person's nonverbal communication. Honesty is communicated through a spontaneous and natural flow of cues and vocal variation. In his interview with Connie Chung on ABC's "Primetime," Condit gave mainly robotic rehearsed responses, keeping his upper body still and stiff.

We can control a certain amount of our body language, but there are those up-to-10,000 body language cues packed in every minute of interaction that we give out and read subconsciously. Whatever he thought he could keep private, Condit's nonverbal communication spoke volumes. His eyes, head, voice and hands leaked out cues of deception and aggression.

Body language cues are undeniable although the underlying motivation and the interpretation can vary. I base my interpretations not just on isolated cues but on what parts of the body are involved, the timing of the cues, the number of times they are repeated and the rhetorical context in which they are given.

Politicians are often labeled by those who read deception cues as "practiced" or "rehearsed" liars. They may regularly withhold information. In the congressman's case, he may have lied for years about multiple affairs. In addition, politicians are coached on their behavior and responses. Obviously, Condit was heavily coached and had several rehearsed responses at the ready.

Typically, that makes it more difficult for us to read him. In this case, I believe it worked against him. During the first half he was able to keep his upper body stiff, his face blank (with one repeated exception) and not blink very often because lawyers know when you move, you give out cues. As I have said, the lack of movement and the overt stiffness spoke strongly. They said, "If I move at all, I will give myself away."

What about his tight smile? A smile is the most common facial expression to mask emotions. It is often used to mask displeasure and anger. A real smile changes the entire face. The eyes light up. The forehead wrinkles, the eyebrows and cheek muscles rise, skin around the eyes and mouth crinkles and finally the mouth turns up. Condit's smile barely moved the corners of his mouth. The rest of his face was as frozen as a mask.

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The most disconcerting body language cue occurred when he stuck out his tongue. The tongue thrust can be a sign of deceit and of aggression. The media has told us that Gary Condit has a temper. Sticking out his tongue was an indication early in the interview that he was trying to suppress it. However controlled the rest of his body appeared, his anger came out more than once with this cue. In all my years of reading body language, this is the first time I have seen this cue repeated so often in such a short time period. And I rarely see it in a planned interview.

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Later in the interview, he began to send Connie several aggression signals. They were more apparent because he kept his hands folded in his lap in the beginning. But as Connie pressed him, he raised his palms up and pushed her away. Open palms in general are a sign of truth telling but pushed forward they are protective or aggressive. Because he followed them with finger pointing, fingers flung outward toward Connie and what is called a steeple or cannon toward her, (hands folded in front with forefingers creating a point), which is a potent sign of aggression, his hand movements could easily be interpreted as aggressive. This combination of overt signals of aggression is unusual in an interview, especially an interview with a politician that he requested. It's a pretty clear indication of repressed anger.

Reading Condit's body language and other nonverbal cues won't tell us what he is hiding or what he is so angry about, but the nonverbal message is loud and clear: this man is angry and he is hiding something.

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