

# Discerning Goodness via Nonverbal Cues: Perspectives from High-Context Cultures

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**Abstract:** The current study ventured to explore nonverbal behavioral cues associated with the construct of goodness. In a focus-group setting, perceivers from the high-context cultures of Malaysia and China were asked to define goodness and discuss how they interpreted goodness in others. Across all groups (Malaysian and Chinese) a recurring theme consisting of dynamic cues, static cues and paralinguistic cues was frequently cited, with emphasis across the spectrum. The study findings have implications for the areas of nonverbal communication, social judgments, and person perception.

**Keywords:** nonverbal communication, goodness, morality, focus-group interviews, social judgements, impression formation.

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## 1. Introduction

To make sense of the world, people tend to make spontaneous judgments by relying on nonverbal cues. When they enter a bus or a train, they scan the environment and choose to sit with the person they feel less threatened by. Making inferences about others based on brief snippets of nonverbal behavior has functional and adaptive significance in social interaction (Ambady, Hallahan, and Rosenthal 1995; Gray 2008). It is important to make rapid inferences about others, even if they are minimally diagnostic, to survive and avoid potential danger. Moll, Zahn, Oliveira-Souza, Krueger, and Grafman (2005: 805) assert that “making implicit or explicit moral appraisals when engaged in the social world requires the ability to efficiently extract social perceptual and functional features from the environment. Social perceptual features are extracted from facial expression, gaze, prosody, body posture and gestures.”

Nonverbal cues mean “perceptible behaviors, such as facial expressions and tones of voice that have the capacity to give insight into the expresser’s attributes or condition” (Hall, Bernieri, & Carney 2005: 237). In their seminal study, Mehrabian and Ferris (1967) concluded that 55% of impression formation in people’s interactions is based on visual cues; 38% is based on vocal cues, and only 7% is based on the verbal content of a message. Anderson (1999) asserts that around 60-70% of meaning is gleaned from nonverbal cues, as opposed to verbal exchange. Givens (2005) claims that the proportion of emotional communication often exceeds 99% in nonverbal exchange as compared to verbal exchange. Regardless of the differences in the proposed weighting assigned to nonverbal communication, there is a consensus among scholars that nonverbal communication is heavily relied on to make inferences about others (Knapp 1972, Ellis & Fisher 1994, Sadler-Smith 2008).

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## 2. Salience of nonverbal cues in human communication

The pivotal role of nonverbal cues in social judgments has been widely acknowledged by scholars across disciplines (Ambady & Rosenthal 1992; Argyle, Salter, Nicholson, Williams & Burgess 1970). Studies indicate that first impressions are formed primarily on the basis of nonverbal indicators as opposed to verbal messages (Mehrabian & Weiner 1967, Burgoon 1994, Ambady & Weisbuch 2010). Social judgments based on nonverbal cues of unknown others helps people survive in an uncertain world and manage affairs efficiently (Patterson, Foster & Bellmer 2001). According to the *ecological approach* to social perception (Gibson 1986, McArthur & Baron 1983), gleaning other persons' personality disposition through nonverbal behavior has adaptive value. It is pragmatic to be able to discern what the other person can do for you and vice versa (Zebrowitz & Collins 1997).

Nonverbal communication is considered a tricky domain owing to its cryptic nuances. Bente, Senokozlieva, Pening, Al-Issa, and Ficsher (2008) argue that defining nonverbal cues is challenging, since neither can its meanings be looked up in a dictionary nor does it follow any stated rule or grammar. A broad definition provided by DePaulo and Friedman (1998) declares nonverbal behavior to be a communication mode that is non-linguistic in nature. Ambady and Weisbuch (2010) define nonverbal communication as a mode of communication where encoding and decoding take place via nonverbal behavior.

### 2.1 Types of nonverbal cues

Ambady and Weisbuch (2010) stratify nonverbal behaviors into micro- and macro-level domains. Micro-level nonverbal behaviors consist of smiles, forward-leaning postures, eyebrow raising and finger tapping. Macro-level nonverbal behaviors are broad impressions of nonverbal behavior entailing wider psychological dimensions – characterized by warmth, dominance, or immediacy. According to DeGroot and Gooty (2009), nonverbal behavior comprises dynamic, static, and paralinguistic cues. Dynamic cues refer to eye contact, body posture, smile, gesture, and head movement. Static cues comprise physical attractiveness and demographics. Paralinguistic cues include vocal inflections in tone and speech. Out of all these cues, the dynamic nonverbal signals – gaze, gesture, and smile – have been reported to have the most impact with regard to impression formation (Nagel, Maurer & Reinemann 2012).

### 2.2 Nonverbal behaviour, morality, and goodness

Nonverbal behaviour (appearance as well as style) importantly affects person perception when forming social judgments (Rosenberg & McCafferty, 1987: 33). Researchers have long studied judgments. Arguably the most intriguing are the ones that deal with morality: specifically, is a certain person good or bad (Kihlstrom 2010)? Leathers (1992: 32) explains that “the face communicates evaluative judgments through either pleasant or unpleasant expressions that indicate whether the communicator sees the current object of his or her attention as good or bad”.

Several studies on person perception in social judgments have concluded that morality is a dominant element in impression formation (Goodwin *et al.* 2014, Brambilla *et al.* 2011, Brambilla *et al.* 2012, Wojciszke 2005, Parzuchowski & Wojciszke 2014). However, the existing literature on morality is too broad and vague – falling short in exploring explicitly how people understand, interpret, and discern morality in others. In instances where researchers have attempted to study this ambiguous terrain, they have often either conflated traits such as warmth and sociability with moral character or chosen to define moral character in very broad terms (Wojciszke, Bazinska & Jaworski 1998; Fisk, Cuddy & Glick, 2007; Goodwin *et al.* 2014).

Related literature in person perception has mostly assumed goodness to be a subcomponent of morality (Goodwin *et al.*, 2014) without ever delving into the notion of goodness *per se*. Empirical studies on the notion of goodness are scarce, particularly in the context of person perception. A quantitative study by Smith and colleagues (2007) attempted to define a good person by asking participants from seven countries (individualistic and collectivist) to list prototype words that they could think of in relation to a good person. The dominant concepts associated with a good person were *benevolence*, *conformity*, and *traditionalism*. The study failed to delve into the meanings associated with these broad concepts and provided little explanation into participants' frames of reference in making these associations. Furthermore, the authors relied on works relating to morality and moral traits to make strong assertions concerning the study findings – implicitly conflating these concepts.

A study by Hashmi and colleagues (2017) defined goodness by asking participants from high-context cultures to explain the construct of goodness in a focus-group setting. Participant narratives emerging from the study revealed that perceivers from high-context cultures related goodness with selfless orientation where concern for others' welfare was a key signifier of goodness: i.e., goodness was something that could be judged based on actions (actions that manifested altruistic disposition: charity initiatives, helping and supporting others, etc.) This dominant perspective aside, narratives of effective communication, close family ties, and resilience of spirit were also cited as manifestations of goodness.

### **2.3 Nonverbal communication in different cultures**

The degree of emphasis on nonverbal behavior may vary across cultures; however, some nonverbal behavioral expressions have been found to be universal. Despite differences in culture, people the world over are able to communicate feelings of anger, happiness, sadness, and surprise through facial expressions (Ekman 1999, Matsumoto 2001). However, when examining the importance of nonverbal cues in different cultures in detail, research shows disparities with regard to different classification of cultures, such as collectivistic versus individualistic cultures (Jandt 2016) and high- versus low-context cultures (Bai 2016, Lustig & Koester 1999).

Scholars studying nonverbal communication in cross-cultural contexts echo one another in asserting that there is a larger emphasis on nonverbal communication among those from high-context compared to low-context cultures (Mohd Yussof, Zakaria & Muton 2017; Bai 2016; Lustig & Koester 1999). According to Hall (1976, 1983), "high context" refers to cultures that emphasize the interpretation of a message and not the spoken words. Lustig and Koester (1999) echo this definition, noting that – in this culture – meanings are internalized while placing emphasis on nonverbal codes. Consequently, information is largely expressed by facial expressions, actions, and body movements (Bai 2016). The whole meaning of an utterance can only be understood by combining nonverbal cues together with the information communicated verbally. Countries belonging to this category include Malaysia, China, and India (Mohd Yussof, Zakaria & Muton 2017).

On the other hand, the meaning of utterances is accepted at face value while the nonverbal elements are a secondary indication in low-context cultures (Bai 2016; Hall 1976, 1983). In these cultures, people are vocal in expressing opinions, needs, and feelings. Countries that fall within this category include the US, Australia, and many Western European countries. Based on the literature, one may conclude that the world view of people from different cultures differ. Since people from high-context cultures are sensitive to nonverbal cues, social judgment may affect them differently compared to those from low-context cultures. Should this be the case, then a host of other values may be affected as well.

## 2.4 Rationale of study

Goodwin and colleagues (2014: 148) postulate that moral character is the first thing evaluated in person perception; moral character in person evaluation holds prime importance “because the goodness of another person’s character determines whether they are likely to be harmful or helpful to the self”. A recent study by Hashmi and colleagues (2017) explored how goodness is discerned in others. They delineated goodness from morality and contended that concern for others’ welfare predominantly shapes the narrative of goodness among Malaysian and Chinese perceivers. This paper furthers the discussion on goodness by delving into the nonverbal dynamics associated with the notion of goodness. It ventures to identify the nonverbal cues that signal *goodness* when forming impressions of others, producing a new body of knowledge on nonverbal indicators of goodness. To achieve this, we pose the following research question:

**RQ:** How do nonverbal cues influence lay perceptions about goodness?

The focus of this study is participants from high-context countries: Malaysia and China. Falling within the category of high-context culture is an indicator that people should be sensitive towards nonverbal cues. The data generated through this investigation provides insights with regard to the significance of nonverbal dynamics in relation to goodness, particularly in this context.

## 3. Methodology

This study used focus-group interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the nonverbal cues that signal goodness in others. Waterton and Wyne (1999: 129) postulate that “focus groups could potentially illuminate things” – which might be hard to pin down in a survey method. “If treated in an appropriate way, focus groups permit us to open up epistemological assumptions about the subject matter - for example, how, or more accurately, in what ways, do people ‘know’.”

### 3.1 Participants

Participants consisted of 32 students enrolled at a public university in Malaysia. Participants had to be reasonably proficient in English so that they could express ideas comfortably in a focus-group setting. The primary researcher and second author were both based in Malaysia when the study was conducted. The Chinese students selected for the study were from mainland China and studying in the same university. They were included in the sample to examine if there were similarities across the two high-context cultures with regard to nonverbal indicators of goodness. Scholars in qualitative research are of the view that, for the researcher to stand on firmer ground in making claims, two focus groups suffice – since “this would suggest that the differences observed are not just a feature of a one-off group, but are likely to be related to the different characteristics of participants reflected in selection” (Barbour 2007: 59). Six focus-group sessions were conducted: three groups of Malaysian participants and three of Chinese participants, comprising six to eight members each. Barbour (2007: 87) is of the view that “focus groups are well placed to explore people’s perspectives on issues to which they have previously given little thought”. Myers and Macnaughten write (1999: 174): “focus groups offer a practical way of eliciting such complex talk, and in analyzing the conversation we acknowledge the situatedness of opinion, and recover some of the richness and complexity with which people express, explore, and use opinions”.

### 3.2 Procedures

Participants were briefed on the nature of the study and signed a consent form prior to the focus-group session. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality of all participants. Participants were compensated monetarily for their participation.

The focus-group discussions were carried out in semi-structured fashion. The questions were posed in a conversational manner to put participants at ease. To avoid groupthink, the moderator borrowed the central idea of Nominal Group Technique (NGT: Porter 2013) to ensure that all participants' views were equally represented and participants primed to think independently from the outset. This format combines cycles of individual and group activity. Individuals start by thinking about their own ideas prior to sharing them – if they wish – one at a time with the group, in a round robin. When all ideas have been given, they are clarified through discussion (Porter 2013: 36). Aside from diminishing the possibility of group think in a focus-group setting, NGT helps provide extended space to people. This may be particularly important where individuals might be less articulate, not too confident or require more time – making it all the more relevant for this study since the sample comprises Malaysian and Chinese students whose first language is not English.

NGT was not rigidly applied to the group discussions but only used for certain questions. The moderator began the session by eliciting discussion about goodness: what does goodness mean? How would you define it? This gave participants a chance to reflect and state ideas without getting influenced by their peers. From the outset, participants were primed to think independently, diminishing the prospects of groupthink. Once all participants shared their ideas relating to goodness, only then was a follow-up discussion permitted, to facilitate exchange of ideas concerning goodness. Each focus-group session lasted around one and a half hours.

### 3.3 Data handling

All six sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed right after the session was over. Transcriptions averaged 8-9 pages. To analyze the data in a rigorous manner, transcripts were read and reread (D'Cruz 2002). Each transcription was transcribed by the primary researcher.

The process of coding was inductive – which, according to Patton (2002: 453), entails “discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one’s data” – based on the study’s overarching research question. The primary researcher immersed herself in the data by reading and rereading the transcripts, followed by open axial coding of the dataset. This process allowed the researcher to identify common themes emerged from constant comparison (Glazer & Strauss 1967), which calls for arranging data in a manner that facilitates systematic comparison across the dataset (O'Connor *et al.*, 2008). The transcripts were color coded to identify distinct categories and line numbered to facilitate data retrieval. Excerpts from the analysis, below, represent the themes that had the most resonance across groups.

### 3.4 Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the study was established by participant validation and peer debriefing. Participants were asked to go over the transcripts to validate if what had been recorded was in accordance with their stated views. They were instructed to flag the researcher in case of any inconsistency. Of the 32 students, 29 responded and gave feedback. Of the 29, 23 verified in the affirmative and emailed responses within the first week. Of the remaining six, five flagged typing errors but requested no substantial modification. Only one participant asked for clarification – which was provided, after which he gave his approval. This whole process of participant validation and member checking greatly helped enhance the credibility of the study.

To further lend credibility to the study, peer debriefing was used to verify data analysis. A peer debriefer “provides support, plays devil’s advocate, challenges the researchers’ assumptions, pushes the researchers to the next step methodologically, and asks hard questions about methods and interpretations” (Creswell & Miller 2000: 129). Two PhD scholars – one from the university’s Department of Communication and the other an expert in qualitative research – oversaw the data-analysis process, providing constructive feedback on the codes, categories and themes derived from the focus-group data. The feedback received helped fine tune the analysis, enhancing the study’s rigor. The conversations and correspondence with the peer debriefers throughout the process helped maintain a reflexive orientation – challenging biases that may have inadvertently been introduced into participant narratives.

## **4. Results**

Participants were asked the following questions: “What does goodness mean to you” / “what do you associate goodness with?” “What cues do you rely on to make judgments of goodness about others?” “Can you share examples of goodness / people who you consider as good -- in your family, in show business and in politics?” “What would be the opposite of goodness for you?” Probes were used judiciously to ensure fluid discussion, which enabled participants to elaborate ideas without inhibition.

Results from the analysis shows that three categories emerged from the focus-group data: (1) dynamic nonverbal cues, (2) static nonverbal cues, and (3) paralinguistic cues. Dynamic nonverbal cues of the face including smiling and eye behavior were found to play a central role in discerning goodness in others. In the category of static nonverbal cues, attire and overall appearance appeared to be very significant criteria in making judgments about the goodness of others. Finally, paralinguistic cues including intonation and pitch were important to the discernment of goodness in others but carried less weight compared to dynamic and static cues of nonverbal behavior.

### **4.1 Dynamic nonverbal cues**

Dynamic nonverbal cues comprise facial expressions (including smiling and eye behavior), gesture, and posture. All are dynamic due to their changeable nature: e.g., when a person speaks, her facial expression, gesture and posture may change according to the context. The inherent transparency of dynamic nonverbal cues results in more authentic reading of others’ personalities.

Both groups of participants associated goodness with dynamic nonverbal cues. Participants stressed the importance of smile and eyes in discerning goodness. Posture was also deemed important. There was no discussion about gesture. Hence, the resulting subcategories were labelled “deciphering goodness in the face” and “deciphering goodness in posture”.

#### **4.1.1 Deciphering goodness in the face**

*Face expressions tell a lot... we can know goodness of some person based on their expressions* (Mary, Malaysian participant).

*The face tells a lot, you can see a lot of things...* (William, Chinese participant).

Both groups of participants highlighted the significance of the face and facial expression in making judgments about the goodness of others. They cited as examples leaders, celebrities, and family members to explain their notion of goodness. They spoke at length about two nonverbal indicators in the face: smile and eye behavior.

Lee, a Malaysian participant said, “I think smile makes a good first impression, smiles are very important: they bring people closer”. Leena also viewed smiling as central to goodness. She said that goodness is a rare quality and that it’s difficult to find people who smile at others:

*First thing I will look whether the person smiles when I look at them. If they are strangers and when I look at them I smile and if they smile back then I know that ok he/she is a friendly person – maybe a good person. Nowadays, it’s hard to find that kind of person that smiles back at you...so goodness is really hard to find.*

Another Malaysian participant Mary alluded to the significance of smiling when forming impressions of goodness:

*When you are sitting in a subway or anything and when you see a person coming towards you – if the face expression is smiling then we feel oh this person is giving positive aura, positive expressions to everyone...he’s a good person.*

Chinese participants across the board echoed similar views. Santana said, “I think first thing to recognize if a person is good or not is the smile”. Some associated smiles with a friendly aura, which they – similarly to their Malaysian counterparts – interpreted as approachability and goodness. Renne said, “if someone’s smile is friendly it shows a lot”. Probed to give an example, Renne spoke of her friend who, according to her, reflects goodness due to her smiling demeanor. “My friend Zoya, because she always smiles to all people, she always talks to all people. She won’t ignore anyone”. In another focus group, Miranda said:

*Smile is something that shows your heart. When I like you of course I want to show my smile, I want to get close to you...yea its goodness. But If I don’t like you I wouldn’t like to smile or get close to you. So this means goodness is smile.*

When asked to provide examples of celebrities who exuded goodness, participants gave insightful examples. Keith, a Malaysian participant, considered Jackie Chan someone who exudes goodness. “The first person that I think of is Jackie Chan. I think he’s kind of a good guy and he always smiles in front of the camera. In a separate focus group, Chinese participant Nazia also mentioned Jackie Chan: “he’s always smiling and he looks very kind”. Chinese participant Lily spoke of Audrey Hepburn as someone whose smile reflected goodness and purity:

*Audrey Hepburn. I like her movies so much...she seems like a fairy to me. She always has that kind of very pure and very encouraging smile.*

Participants’ narratives further revolved around the role of eye behavior in communicating goodness. Alex, a Malaysian student, equated goodness with sincerity. He was of the view that the eyes are a direct window to gauging goodness: “my professor said that if you want to know the sincerity of someone look at their eyes”. George, a Chinese student, expressed similar views. He observed: “eyes tell a lot, when you look at people’s eyes, you’re able to read something”. Zena also talked about the importance of the eyes in inferring others’ intentions:

*The eyes are important, I think. It can give us a lot of information as to what this person is thinking... through the eyes....*

Yana likewise acknowledged the significance of the eyes in deciphering goodness. She said one can glean others' purity of intentions through their eyes and eye contact. She construed avoidance of eye contact as a sign of disrespect and bad behavior:

*Your eyes reflect a lot of things from your heart. From my experience, when someone is talking with me and they are not looking at me, I feel like there's no respect.*

Keith, a Malaysian student, alluded to the importance of making eye contact as an important determinant of goodness. Avoiding eye contact was the opposite of goodness:

*To me, when you talk to the people, if they don't look at you, I think that's kind of badness. So that's kind of opposite, not so good to present yourself...talking something and not looking at people....*

Terrence, a Chinese student, was convinced that the eyes can reveal a lot about one's personality. "I do believe that you can identify people's personalities like that most of the time (through eyes)... may not be 100 percent though". He explained in detail about different eye shapes that people observe in forming judgments about others:

*There are three types of eyes. People who have triangle shaped eyes, their personality is ambitious, powerful and they don't wish to spend a lot of money. People who have big eyes like cycles, are friendly, kind and helpful. People who have small eyes ... are smart, but not clever [he elaborated, saying: smarter people are thinking about short term gains and clever people are thinking about long-term gains]. People who have deep eyes ... are full of energy.*

#### 4.1.2 Deciphering goodness in posture

The Malaysian and Chinese participants overwhelmingly considered the face the central element in deciphering goodness. Nevertheless, focus-group discussions surrounding nonverbal cues of goodness elicited discussion on the relative importance of posture as well. Although the discussion was brief, it was clear that posture was still an important consideration for both nationalities when discerning goodness in others. Liya, a Malaysian participant elaborated:

**Liya:** *I guess the movements... like some people when they walk they have a slumping posture (slumping her shoulders to make her point) signaling that they might be very shy, but when someone is like that (erect shoulders) maybe that someone is outstanding, confident and all that...I think I look more towards the posture.*

**Moderator:** *Now when you're looking at the posture, are you making an opinion about that person's goodness or are you saying that this person might be a nice person?*

**Liya:** *More towards the character, more towards goodness.*

Santana, a Chinese student, likewise acknowledged that posture is an important consideration in forming impressions. He equated approachability and friendliness with goodness. He made his point about good posture by referring to the posture of the focus-group moderator:

**Santana:** *I will share one more thing about the nonverbal cues. Like how a person positions him/herself. For example, like you, when you listen to me you do like this [leaning forward] and some other people do like this [bending backwards].*

**Moderator:** *So, what is that telling you?*

**Santana:** *That's saying [leaning forward] that you are more friendly, whereas [bending backwards] this is more serious or distant.*

#### 4.2 Static nonverbal cues

Static nonverbal cues do not change during the course of interaction. These include such physical attributes as height, look, age, and race; attire; jewelry; and choice of environment. A consensus arose in the discussions that general appearance is an important signifier of goodness. It was heralded by Malaysian and Chinese participants alike. Discussion centered on choice of attire and being presentable looking / professional, meandering a little towards physical attributes (in particular, looks). At times, clothing and looks were mixed together. Bat, a Malaysian participant, commented on the importance of both:

*I would look at looks first. I mean the attraction of a person and the clothing, basically the nonverbal things that they show. For example, how they look like, what clothes they wear...things like that.*

Amy, on the other hand, focused on attire alone: “I see from the appearance, from dress up...” Probed further as to what exactly she observed in clothing, she explained:

*If he or she wears a T-shirt – round neck or collared neck. Sometimes, when we see people wearing round neck T-shirts we know that they don't have discipline, while the collared necks might be more disciplined.*

The amount of emphasis paid on dress and overall presentation was not restricted to a few voices but rather emerged as a recurring theme when perceiving goodness in others. Here is Helen:

*About wearing a coat, you know looking professional, I sometimes think people wearing coats can be a little arrogant. Because I've experienced that myself that instantly when you put on a coat you feel confident, and at times bordering on arrogance as well.*

Here is Chinese participant Zena:

**Zena:** *I think clothing, because different people choose different clothes. It can give information that this person is...what is his personality? It can tell whether a certain person is good or not.*

**Moderator:** *So you think clothing can tell whether a certain person is good or not?*

**Zena:** *Yes, I think.*

Lily similarly interpreted clothing – specifically, traditional attire – as a manifestation of goodness:

*Jackie Chan's gestures and movements and clothing also shows goodness. He often wears traditional Chinese clothes that shows he cares about traditional values...*

#### 4.3 Paralinguistic cues

Paralinguistic cues are nuances evident in speech such as variation in tone, speed, and intensity, along with pauses. Such cues influence impression formation and perceptions (Knapp *et al.*, 2013).

Malaysian and Chinese participants alike spoke of paralinguistic cues in relation to goodness, though not as much as other nonverbal channels of communication. Despite the brief

discussion, paralinguistic cues were deemed important nonverbal indicators of goodness. Wendy, a Chinese participant, alluded to the importance of tone of voice in discerning goodness. She started off the discussion by talking about the face, but later steered towards paralinguistic cues, drawing attention towards tone and intensity in particular. She stated:

*First, I think is the face, a person who always smiles and if you are friends with such people you will feel happy and relaxed. Another thing is the tone of the voice. Some people who speak loudly you can get the energy and the power. If a person's voice is not very strong, you may think that this guy is not confident, so because of that we may not want to communicate with such a person.*

Participants in all focus groups were asked to elaborate on answers by giving examples of prominent personalities. Some spoke about the nonverbal behavior of celebrities and corporate leaders, while others cited examples from politics. Keith, a Malaysian participant, remarked on Mahathir Muhammad's manner of speaking:

*Dr. Mahathir, he's the first person that comes to my mind... the way he expresses himself, the way he tried to cool down the people.*

Leena agreed with Keith's assessment, lauding Mahathir Muhammad's calm manner of speaking:

*The thing is, just like Keith, the first person that comes to mind is Tun Mahathir. But then, he's no longer a leader. I just want to add when Mahathir was the PM, he was very firm but calm, never aggressive. Nowadays, politicians are very aggressive, screaming and doing this and that...that is what makes Mahathir look good, like a good person, because he is very firm but calm.*

Wendy, a Chinese participant, spoke about the former leader of China Deng Xiaoping. She said his communication style during a time of crisis in China helped calm the situation. She explained:

*I want to say that our leader Deng Xiaoping. First, he was an old man. If some place had a disaster, he was always the first one to oversee things and was there to provide instructions. He communicated with everyone and spoke in a way which was not loud yet powerful. He could talk to anyone and help them understand and resolve things.*

Participants were asked to provide examples of celebrities who exuded goodness. Mary talked about a Malaysian celebrity, Lisa Surihani, alluding to her soft manner of speaking as a signifier of goodness: "she looks so sweet and the way she talks is very decent, soft spoken...". Zena, a Chinese participant, gave an example from the corporate world, describing Baidu CEO's speaking style as a reflection of his goodness:

*Baidu's search engine CEO is a good person I think... His tone of voice is always slow. By just listening to his voice you can see that he's not power hungry...he's very kind.*

#### **4. Discussion**

The main aim of this study was to explore the nonverbal dynamics associated with goodness among perceivers from the high-context cultures of Malaysia and China. We asked: "how do nonverbal cues influence lay perception about goodness?"

Three themes were identified from the data: dynamic nonverbal cues, static nonverbal cues and paralinguistic cues. Dynamic nonverbal cues were further subcategorized as *deciphering goodness in the face* and *deciphering goodness in posture*. When deciphering goodness in the face, participants stressed two nonverbal cues: people's smiles and eye behavior. The discussion on posture was not as extensive, but posture was still frequently cited. The one subcategory that emerged from static nonverbal cues was *deciphering goodness in appearance*, with emphasis on people's clothing and dress sense. Finally, the one subcategory that emerged from paralinguistic cues was *deciphering goodness in vocal nuances*, with emphasis on tone of the voice, pace of speech and manner of speaking / enunciation.

Our findings support those of several other scholars. First, our findings show that participants were able to decipher goodness through nonverbal behavior: i.e., they were able to form judgments without being exposed to linguistic information. This supports DePaulo and Friedman (1998), who contend that nonverbal behavior is a communication mode without the use of words. Nagel, Maurer, and Reinemann (2012) state that of all nonverbal behavior, the smile has the most impact. Our findings show that one of the first indicators of goodness offered by participants was indeed the smile.

Responses obtained from participants were similar for the Malaysian and Chinese participants. This supports Mohd Yussof, Zakaria, and Muton (2017), who categorize both Malaysia and China as countries where nonverbal cues and utterances are combined to understand the communicated message. There is a dire need for fostering understanding of nonverbal cues and the skill of deciphering them for people from low-context cultures if they are to communicate effectively with those from high-context cultures.

The most novel aspect of this study is its contribution to knowledge on goodness. A previous study on goodness by Hashmi and colleagues (2017) provided conceptual clarity on how people perceive goodness in others. The current study builds on that, probing the nonverbal aspects of communication that signal goodness in others. This adds to the body of knowledge in the conceptual domains of goodness, morality, and person perception.

Data on nonverbal cues associated with goodness provide incisive observations regarding the significance of nonverbal nuances in impression formation. This study expands the literature on nonverbal communication, underscoring the centrality of nonverbal behavioral cues in person perception. It is hoped that the narratives emerging from this study will further understanding on the notion of goodness in the context of person perception and will contribute to developing a comprehensive typology of enhancers and diminishers of perceived goodness.

This study has its share of limitations, as is the case with any research endeavor. First, the findings of the study ought to be interpreted with caution due to the relatively small sample size. Since this is a qualitative study, no generalized claims can be made. That said, the purpose of a qualitative study is not to generalize but rather to understand and describe a phenomenon holistically, from the participant's viewpoint. That is what this study has strived to achieve. It is up to the reader to decide on the transferability of the findings to a similar context.

Second, although only participants who were reasonably proficient in English were selected for the study, some nuances might have been missed during the focus-group sessions. Non-native speakers of a language struggle at times to articulate thought processes with confidence and clarity. To reduce language anxiety, the focus-group moderator encouraged reticent participants to engage in cross talk in their own language, with the more fluent members of the group helping translate the exchange.

This study assumed the Malaysian and Chinese cultures to be somewhat the same. This, too, can be construed as a limitation. Having said that, the researchers contend that, based on

their findings, Malaysians and Chinese have more similarities than differences in their conceptions concerning nonverbal indicators of goodness. The claims made by the study have an embedded collectivist context. A natural extension of this study would be to gather data from other high-context countries to enable stronger claims about the study findings. Additionally, follow-up studies should obtain participant narratives from low-context cultures to arrive at a more holistic understanding of the conceptual domain of perceived goodness.

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