

# When building rapport, sometimes less is more

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Sometimes less is more, at least when it comes to building rapport during interviews. That's according to new research from the University of Georgia, which reveals that verbal interviewing techniques have a greater

impact than nonverbal techniques—and combining the two had a detrimental effect.

The new study led by Eric Novotny, a postdoctoral research associate at the Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication, was published in *Communication Studies*. Based on a laboratory experiment that compared the effectiveness of verbal and nonverbal techniques in building rapport, it provides useful insight for situations like doctor-patient interviews, job interviews and police investigative interviews.

"It was a bit of a surprise to find that using verbal and nonverbal techniques together backfired," Novotny said. "In hindsight it was probably seen as forced or too much, making the interviewee feel that any rapport that resulted was fake. The bottom line is that using one technique or the other is better than neither or both."

During the experiment, Novotny performed one-on-one interviews with 80 participants involving their personal histories. He practiced active listening—using simple indicators of agreement (e.g., "uh-huh," "I see"), that encouraged the subject to continue—with all participants, but used four different strategies.

## **Verbal and nonverbal interview tactics**

With one group, Novotny used verbal commonalities, disclosing information about his own life (both real and fabricated) to establish common ground. Previous research indicates that people tend to like and feel similar to those who disclose information to them.

With a second group, Novotny used a nonverbal technique called mirroring, the largely nonconscious imitation of another person's [body postures](#) and movements, a strategy that has long been linked to an increase in rapport among interactive partners. He attempted to mimic

the body postures and arm/leg placements of the participant (e.g., arms on the table and legs crossed) within approximately two seconds of witnessing it.

With a third group, Novotny combined the verbal commonality and mirroring strategies. With the fourth group, or control group, he did not employ either strategy.

Prior to being interviewed, participants completed a document that required them to rank 10 topics (academics, athletics, family, finances, friends, leisure, medical history, mental health, pet ownership, romance) in terms of how personal they were. The interviewer used these responses to choose topics for the interview. After the interviews, participants rated how willing they were to continue discussions with the interviewer, as an indicator of rapport.

## **What communication techniques were most effective for building rapport?**

Results indicated that participants were more willing to discuss personal topics when verbal commonalities were used alone, versus in conjunction with nonverbal mirroring. In the group that experienced mirroring, participants were more willing to disclose personal information with the interviewer, but not at a rate that was significantly different from the control group. The combined condition produced the lower rapport of any group.

"Based on the literature, we knew that verbal and nonverbal techniques work to help build rapport during an interview, but we didn't know what happened if you used both," Novotny said. "This applies to everything from investigative interviewing to therapists and their clients, so we were interested in knowing which technique—or combination of

techniques—was going to be most effective."

While verbal commonalities and techniques that employ mirroring body language can be applied with minimal training and preparation, Novotny notes that interviewers should be aware of their cognitive load during the interview. Between formulating questions, writing, listening and attempting to build rapport, interviewers can easily get overloaded and be less effective—though that can be improved with training, he said.

Alternatively, the combined use of both techniques could seem forced or phony to participants. Novotny believes that once a person realizes someone is actively seeking rapport or manipulating them, it backfires, wiping out any gain from the verbal or nonverbal technique.

Despite the challenges, Novotny was surprised by the participants' willingness to discuss sensitive topics.

"It was interesting how willing random strangers were to tell me their deepest, darkest secrets," he said. "I think, because I was a stranger and they'd never see me again, they were more willing to open up to a simple question like, 'Why is your financial history so private to you?' And then they would start discussing their money troubles."

**More information:** Eric Novotny et al, A Laboratory Study Comparing the Effectiveness of Verbal and Nonverbal Rapport-Building Techniques in Interviews, *Communication Studies* (2021). [DOI: 10.1080/10510974.2021.1975141](https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2021.1975141)

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