



Giving the Finger: This Hurts Me More Than You

By Jeffrey Kluger Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2009

No one knows whether Plato ever flipped anyone the bird — but he might have. People have been raising their middle finger to indicate something other than "Does this cuticle need trimming?" since the time of the ancient Greeks. Like democracy and feta cheese, it spread around the world.

The middle finger isn't the only digit with a message. The thumb talks too, but generally in happier tones, with an upward point indicating approval, good news or some other nicety. That pleasant gesture is thought to have sprung from the grim business of gladiatorial combat, when spectators in the Roman Coliseum would give a thumbs-up or down to determine whether a beaten competitor should live or die. What began in Rome similarly went global.

Billions of people may speak this digital lingo — and plenty of scientists have tried to study it. Most recently, psychologists Jesse Chandler and Norbert Schwarz came at it in a new way. In a study published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, they explored the effect that finger gestures have not on the people at whom they're aimed, but on the bird-flippers and thumbs-uppers themselves. ([Learn how to use your emotions to get through the recession.](#))

The idea was to determine whether the emotional impact of learned symbolic speech, or semiotics, could be as deeply felt as that of inborn gestures. Shrugging the shoulders, for example, is a universal — and inherent — gesture of confusion or surrender, probably because it lowers the head relative to the upper body, conveying submission. Yes or no head nods may go all the way back to infancy, as babies tend to search for the breast by moving their heads up and down and detach by moving side to side — effectively saying "yes, please" and "no more." Not every culture uses head nods this way, but they are thought to be the exception rather than the rule.

It's no surprise that primally wired gestures should be connected with powerful feelings, because they exist to express just those states. But what about acquired ones? Can a gesture that had no meaning until someone explained it to us become as profound a part of our emotional language? ([See pictures of facial yoga.](#))

To test this, Chandler and Schwarz recruited a group of 58 students and told them they were studying the link between muscle movements and reading comprehension — a link that, in fact, does not exist. The subjects were asked to read a passage about a fictional character named Donald who withheld his rent from his landlord because repairs were not made to his home. The details of the story were left ambiguous enough that Donald could easily be perceived as a justifiably aggrieved tenant — or merely a jerk. While they read, different students were asked to extend either the index finger or the middle finger — though to keep the test free of the subtle influence of language, the term "middle finger" was never actually used. Instead, the students were shown a diagram in which each finger was labeled alphabetically — digit A, B and so on.

When the reading was done, the researchers asked the students to describe their own moods and, significantly, their feelings about Donald. In general, those who had extended the middle finger while reading were less happy than the ones who had held out the index finger. What's more, they were also likelier not to care very much for Donald — or at least to describe him as a hostile person.

"Making the middle-finger gesture brings hostile thoughts to mind," says Chandler. "In our studies, participants were not even aware that their finger movements resembled 'the finger,' and they nevertheless perceived an unrelated other as a more hostile person."

The thumbs-up gesture worked just the other way. When the researchers repeated the experiment, this time with 74 other students who were asked to raise either the thumb or the index finger, Donald's good-conduct marks went way up. Those results, however, were not uniform across the entire group. Women were much more positively affected by raising their thumbs than men were — a difference that did not emerge in the middle finger study. This was not entirely surprising to the researchers.

"Women are more likely than men to use a 'tend-and-befriend' strategy in conflict situations," says Chandler. "They may therefore be more sensitive to positive body language."

So is there any lesson from this work beyond, you know, next time you see Donald try not to give him the finger? Chandler believes there is. Most of the time we flip someone off, he points out, we do so secretly, in the privacy of the car or after the person has walked away — a good idea if we want to avoid getting slugged. But that doesn't mean no one gets hurt.

"Even when nobody sees the gesture, it may have an adverse effect," Chandler says, "leaving us more convinced that other people are nasty and hostile. This may lead to additional hostile acts down the road." If today's finger can indeed be tomorrow's fistfight, the best bet might simply be to keep our hands in our pockets.

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