Culture and Nonverbal Expressions of Empathy in Clinical Settings: A Systematic Review
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Objective: To conduct a systematic review of studies addressing how culture mediates nonverbal expressions of empathy and communication in healthcare.

Methods: We searched three databases (MEDLINE, PsycINFO and CINAHL) for studies of nonverbal expressions of empathy and communication across cultures in clinical settings. Included studies were peer-reviewed, experimental or observational.

Results: 16 studies met inclusion criteria. Nonverbal expressions of empathy varied across cultures and contexts. Racially discordant patient-physician dyads were associated with impaired exchange of clinical information and lower patient ratings of physician trust and warmth. Some nonverbal behaviors appear to be universally desired (e.g., open body posture, smile), others convey culturally-bound meanings (e.g., eye gaze, hand gestures, touch). Implicit cultural bias can be revealed through nonverbal expressions, which can result in conflicting signals.

Conclusion: Nonverbal communication plays a significant role in fostering respect and trust cross-culturally. Culture-based norms and dynamic communication within patient-clinician dyads significantly impact different expectations of and preferences for specific nonverbal expressions.

Practice Implications: Medical education should aim to improve interpretation of nonverbal communications with attention to cultural norms and implicit biases, and cross-cultural clinical practice training efforts should reflect the norms of local patient populations.