

# Cultural divide in ability to recognize sensual sounds

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An F1000 evaluation looks at a British study of how the six basic human emotions are universally recognized but other positive emotions are culturally specific

Humans use a wide range of different cues, both verbal and non-verbal, to share important information and particularly to warn others of danger. A team from University College London's psychology department studied a range of non-verbal emotional vocalizations, such as screams and laughs, in two very different cultural groups.

The study, published in [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#) of the USA, compared the responses of Westerners to those of the remote and culturally isolated semi-nomadic Himba people of Namibia. The experimenters discovered that vocalizations expressing the six basic emotions - anger, disgust, fear, joy, sadness, and surprise - were recognized by both groups, indicating that they, like [facial expressions](#), are universally evolved functions.

However, when an additional set of [positive emotions](#) was introduced - achievement, sensual pleasure and relief - they were only reliably recognized by the Western subjects. The cultural variations discovered by Sauter et al suggest that the [vocalization](#) of some positive emotions may be learned socially, rather than representing products of evolution.

Describing the experiment as 'fascinating' in her review, F1000 Faculty Member Argye Hills, of Johns Hopkins Medical Institute, says the study,

"highlights the importance of considering a range of positive emotions in cross-cultural research."

**More information:** The full text of the evaluation of is available free for 90 days at [www.f1000medicine.com/article/...0px41bmfg/id/2251956](http://www.f1000medicine.com/article/0px41bmfg/id/2251956)

The original paper by Sauter et al. (Cross-cultural recognition of basic emotions through nonverbal emotional vocalizations) is at [dx.doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0908239106](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0908239106)

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