

Whites struggle to tell real from fake smiles on black faces

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White people and non-black minorities have a harder time telling the difference between genuine and fake smiles on black faces than they do on white faces, a problem black people don't have, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

"Accurate identification of emotion is important to [social interaction](#) in general, but it is especially important in interracial settings, which are prone to misinterpretations and misunderstandings," said lead author Justin Friesen, Ph.D., of the University of Winnipeg. "When [emotional](#) identification is impaired, communication is inhibited and can ultimately result in negative, even tragic, outcomes."

The research was published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Previous research has suggested that whites in the United States tend to perceive black faces as angrier than comparable white faces. Thus, Friesen and his colleagues wanted to see if similar biases in emotion identification occur for positive emotions, such as happiness.

The researchers conducted a series of six experiments involving more than 425 participants. In some experiments, the participants were all white; in others, they were all black; and in some, they were a mix that included non-black minorities. What every experiment had in common, though, was that participants were shown smiling white or black faces and asked to rate the level of happiness they perceived from the faces.

Some faces portrayed a genuine smile and some were forced or faked smiles.

"We investigated the extent to which individuals could tell the difference between two subtly distinct positive facial expressions, Duchenne and non-Duchenne smiles," said Friesen. "Although both expressions depict a smiling mouth, the difference between Duchenne smiles—also known as true smiles—and non-Duchenne smiles—also called false or polite smiles—is the existence of crows' feet around the eyes in the Duchenne smile."

Throughout the experiments, white and non-black minority participants had a harder time differentiating between Duchenne and non-Duchenne smiles on black faces than on white faces. Black participants had no significant problems regardless of the color of the face.

Part of the reason for the discrepancy may be eye contact, according to Friesen. In one experiment, researchers tracked the eye movements of participants and found that whites and non-black minorities spent less time looking at the area around the eyes of black faces than white faces. And in another experiment, where some participants were shown only the eyes instead of a full face, participants had no problem distinguishing between real and fake smiles on black faces.

Friesen suggested that the lack of eye contact may have something to do with [social status](#). People who have less social standing or power may feel they must pay more attention to higher-status groups because these [group members](#) potentially have more control or influence over them.

"In North American society, where whites are the numerical majority and historically dominant group, they can often, in a sense, get away with being less skilled at reading social cues and emotions on minority group faces," said Friesen. "That's not a luxury available to lower-status or

[minority](#) groups, whose outcomes often depend on being able to accurately assess social signals, such as emotions, on whites' faces, even though they belong to a different group."

This inability to differentiate between real and false smiles could lead to serious misunderstandings and negative repercussions in interracial interactions, Friesen said.

"Normally, if someone says something that's insensitive or even insulting, if we don't object explicitly, we can still often convey that we are not impressed using non-verbal expressions, like a false [smile](#)," he said. "If [white people](#) are less sensitive to these cues of discomfort on black faces, they might be more likely to continue saying or doing things that are actually insensitive or even prejudicial, creating interpersonal difficulties for everybody involved."

Much of face processing is automatic, so people might not even realize they are looking at some groups differently, said Friesen. But awareness of these processes might encourage people to look more into the eyes of others and get a more accurate read on their emotions.

"Given that interracial interactions are often fraught with misunderstandings, our research provides clues to help understand how these events unfold and may also point us in the direction of meaningful strategies to improve group relations," said Friesen. "Directing attention to the eyes may reduce errors in identifying emotions, both negative and positive."

More information: "Perceiving Happiness in an Intergroup Context: The Role of Race and Attention to the Eyes in Differentiating Between True and False Smiles," by Justin Friesen, PhD, University of Winnipeg; David Sidhu, MSc, University of Calgary; Kurt Hugenberg, PhD, Indiana University; Elena Cañadas, PhD, University of Lausanne; Kerry

Kawakami, PhD, Larissa Vingilis-Jaremko, PhD, and Regis Caprara, MA, York University; Amanda Williams, PhD, University of Bristol; Rosa Rodriguez-Bailón, PhD, University of Granada; and Paula Niedenthal, PhD, University of Wisconsin. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, published online Jan. 7, 2019.

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