

Reading Faces: Why You Sometimes Get It Wrong



adapted from an article by Frank T. McAndrew PhD

- 1 Hundreds of studies over the past 50 years reveal that most of us can quickly and accurately distinguish basic emotional expressions from each other, even when the expression is present for as little as a tenth of a second. It is also well accepted that displaying emotion through the face is a universal, innate part of who we are. In other words, humans everywhere use the very same expressions to convey the very same feelings. There is even an area of our brain that is devoted solely to recognizing facial expressions. So why do we sometimes get it wrong?
- 2 For starters, we simply are not always looking. In our interactions with others, it would be considered 14-1 and more than a little bit creepy to stare fixedly at the face of the person with whom we are speaking. We look at others more when we are listening than when we are the ones speaking, but in either case, we frequently glance away. This means that we may miss very brief microexpressions that come and go in a fraction of a second, and these microexpressions will often reveal our partner's true feelings because they are less easy to control than more obvious emotional signals.
- 3 Also, the 'Display Rules' that are part of your culture's repertoire of 14-2 norms dictate that it is not always appropriate to show exactly what you are feeling. Display rules differ from culture to culture, with some cultures permitting more flexibility than others regarding the range and intensity of emotions that are acceptable in public. Every culture, however, has consistent expectations about how the public display of emotion should be handled.
- 4 One of my favorite examples of the pressure to act differently than we feel is what you usually see at the end of a beauty pageant or talent competition. Each of these contestants invariably beams with apparent joy at her good fortune, even when they do not win. The social pressure to smile and appear happy is so powerful that cultural norms overwhelm the display of feelings such as disappointment, envy, or anger that would almost certainly be more 14-3. And the winner, what does she do? She cries! Apparently, leaping up and down with joy and lording the victory over the also-rans is something that our culture has determined to be unseemly.

- 5 Also, we have probably all been in situations where a small 'White Lie' is 14-4: feigning gratitude for a well-intentioned gift that you hated; praising the cooking of the host after a terrible meal; offering encouraging words after the embarrassing karaoke performance of a friend. Anyway, you could say that both display rules and white lies are culturally accepted forms of deception.

- 6 Success in many occupations depends greatly upon the ability to manage emotional expressions. Actors, diplomats, lawyers, and sales representatives, among others, would not get very far without this skill. There are a few tried-and-true facial management techniques that we rely upon to keep true emotions hidden. Qualifying is a technique by which you immediately follow a genuine expression that has slipped out with a different expression, as if to say "pay no attention to what you just saw – this is how I *really* feel." Modulating is what you do when you turn the volume of an emotional expression up or down depending upon the circumstance. For example, imagine that you and one of your close friends have both applied to the same graduate school, and you get in but your friend does not. You will of course be happy about your acceptance, but you will almost certainly downplay the extent of your happiness in front of your friend. Falsifying is exactly what it sounds like – you completely fake an emotion by covering up the real expression and displaying a bogus one.

- 7 In short, as good as you are at reading the emotions of others, always remember that there will be times when you get the signals wrong – and that is 16 part of social life.

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