

# White people struggle to perceive emotion on black people's faces

May 10 2019

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Rosa Rodríguez Bailón. Professor, Department of Social Psychology, UGR  
Credit: UGR

An international study, in which the University of Granada (UGR) participated, has found that white people have difficulty distinguishing emotions on black people's faces—a problem that does not appear to arise the other way around.

Scientists have shown that white people find it difficult to tell the difference between genuine and false smiles on [black people's](#) faces—between genuine and fake happiness. What is more, they have discovered that this happens because white people do not look black people in the eye, as the former regard the latter as being different to them (part of the so-called 'outgroup').

Being able to accurately identify emotions in others is important for [social interaction](#) in general, but particularly so in interracial contexts, which are prone to misinterpretations and misunderstandings. Indeed, when there is limited emotional identification with other people, communication becomes inhibited and, ultimately, this may lead to negative—even tragic—results.

On 4 April 2015, Walter Scott, an unarmed black man, was stopped in South Carolina by a white police officer for driving with a faulty brake light. When he attempted to flee on foot, the officer, Walter Thomas Slager, shot him dead, discharging eight bullets from behind. This crime, which sent shockwaves through the United States, is just one recent example of such killings, which have, sadly, occurred repeatedly throughout the history of humanity, and to which the media are now paying attention.

These acts of violence have a common denominator: people of colour suffering violent attacks at the hands of white people. They illustrate the importance of the impressions that people belonging to [different groups](#) form about one another, in terms of the mistrust, fear, or anger, for instance, that sometimes underlie inter-group interactions.

## **Ingroups and outgroups**

Other research had previously shown that we perceive the members of the groups to which we feel we belong (ingroups) more accurately and in more detail than members of groups to which we do not consider ourselves to belong (outgroups). Indeed, a number of studies have suggested that white people in the United States tend to perceive the expressions of black people as being angrier than white facial expressions. The research team on this new study therefore wanted to determine whether similar biases occurred in the identification of expressions of positive emotion, such as happiness or joy.

The scientists conducted six experiments involving more than 425 participants. In some of these, the participants were all white; in others, they were all black; and others were based on a mixture of participants, including non-black minorities. In all of the experiments, the participants were shown the smiling faces of white or black people, and were asked to rate the level of happiness they perceived in the images. Some faces showed a genuine smile, while others presented forced or fake smiles.

Professor Rosa Rodríguez Bailón of the Department of Social Psychology at the UGR and one of the authors of this study, explains: "Using eye-tracking equipment, we showed that paying attention to people's eyes also helps us to detect important characteristics in our perceptions and in how we form our impressions about others, such as the distinction between genuine or 'faked' emotions."

## **White people distinguish emotions better among other white people**

Thus, the white participants' discernment was more accurate—in terms of correctly identifying smiles as genuine or false—when the images

they were shown were of other white people, compared to when they were shown images of black people.

No such difference was found in the case of people of colour, who were able to accurately distinguish between expressions of genuine vs. fake happiness, regardless of whether the person smiling was white or black.

"We also found that the length of time the white participants devoted to looking into the eyes of other white people in the photographs explained this difference. Again, when the white participants were asked to look just as deeply into the eyes of both black and [white people](#), this difference also disappeared," observes Professor Rodríguez.

The results of these studies, and of some others currently under development, demonstrate how important it is to pay attention to individuals' gaze when attempting to explain how we form our impressions of others, as well as to other marked effects shown in the scientific literature on perceptions and impressions of people from other groups.

We know from previous research that, of the total time we spend, on average, looking at the faces of other people and forming an impression of them, over 40% is devoted to focusing on the eyes in particular.

"By concentrating on a person's [gaze](#), it's more likely that we will avoid some of the more harmful effects of the mistrust and lack of identification we feel towards people from groups other than our own," concludes the UGR's Professor Rodríguez.

**More information:** Justin P. Friesen et al, Perceiving happiness in an intergroup context: The role of race and attention to the eyes in differentiating between true and false smiles., *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1037/pspa0000139](https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000139)

Provided by University of Granada

Citation: White people struggle to perceive emotion on black people's faces (2019, May 10)  
retrieved 20 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2019-05-white-people-struggle-emotion-black.html>

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