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Strategic Expression

Maybe it was a sweet-as-pie, pretty-please smile meant to talk a friend into sharing her dessert, or a serious stink eye intended to shake a moody kid out of his tantrum. Whatever the circumstance, we've all used our faces to get our way.

As it turns out, we pretty much always do.

Our facial expressions stem primarily from intentions — not from feelings — says [Alan J. Fridlund](#), an associate professor in the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences at UC Santa Barbara who conducts innovative research on the meaning of facial expressions. His new paper, "Facial Displays Are Tools for Social Influence," co-authored with British researcher Carlos Crivelli, makes exactly that case.

"The traditional view of our facial expressions is that they're about us, that they reveal our moods and emotions," Fridlund said. "Our faces are not about us, but about where we want a social interaction to go. For example, the 'cry' face is usually considered an expression of sadness, but we use that face to solicit succor, whether that means reassurance, words of comfort or just a hug."

[Published](#) in the journal Trends in Cognitive Sciences, the new study supports and expands on Fridlund's previous work debunking the older, widely held assumption that facial expressions reveal people's emotions. Fridlund is also a social and clinical psychologist.

"This paper is an attempt to bring the field up to a scientific understanding of human facial displays, and to restore continuity with modern views of animal

communication,” Fridlund said. “From preschool on, we see smiley faces with the word ‘happy’ written under them. We see sad faces with the word ‘sad’ written under them. That may not be the best way to understand facial expressions. A monkey at the zoo that smiles at you is not necessarily happy — it is giving a ‘submissive threat grimace.’”

In recent years, Fridlund said, biologists re-examined how animals communicate and began to see them as sophisticated communicators and negotiators, and his approach suggests that our facial expressions serve the same ends. The paper details the ways his behavioral ecology view of facial displays has been useful in primatology and in artificial intelligence, and further delves into what Fridlund called “quirky phenomena,” like the faces people make when they are alone.

“There is no doubt that what we do with our facial displays is different than what nonhumans do,” Fridlund said, “but our displays function in many of the same ways. They act as social tools in behavioral negotiation.”

The new work also incorporates Crivelli’s own research on how indigenous Trobriand Islanders in Papua New Guinea — still largely untainted by Western traditions and conventions — think about emotion and use facial expressions. The investigators found that what previously had been considered a universal face of fear, in the case of the Trobrianders actually serves as a threat display aimed at frightening others into submission.”

“Researchers in the 1960s had preconceived notions about certain expressions matching specific emotions,” Fridlund said. “And so their experiments — devised and interpreted through a Western lens — were bound to corroborate those beliefs.”

Many newer studies have investigated the links between facial expressions and emotions, he noted, finding surprisingly little evidence of a relationship between the two.

‘Angry’ faces don’t necessarily mean we’re actually angry, he explained. We may be frustrated, hurt or constipated — but regardless of how we feel, those faces serve to subdue, intimidate or signal possible retaliation against whomever we point them at.

“A ‘disgust’ face may mean a person is about to throw up, but it can also mean we don’t like atonal music, and the other person knows not to put on a Schoenberg CD,” Fridlund said. “When we ask someone about the weather outside, her smile says it’s

nice out, even if she's having a rotten day."

Fridlund's current work builds on research he first presented more than two decades ago in his book "Human Facial Expression: An Evolutionary View" (Academic Press, 1994). He is best known for his work on "audience effects," or how our knowing (or believing) that others are present influences our expressions. In past studies, Fridlund has shown that when we imagine being in situations that are fun, scary, sad or irritating, we make more expressions when we imagine being with others rather than facing those imaginary situations alone. People who watch funny videos, he said, smile more when they are watching with friends — and they smile just as much when they believe that a friend is watching the same video elsewhere at the same time.

"When we are with others, we're always checking to see how they are reacting, and they make faces when we see them looking for our reactions," Fridlund explained. "Those interacting don't have to be people, either. People make faces all the time at soda machines that don't return their change, or computers that reboot or update in the middle of a presentation. And they'll make the same faces if you ask them to imagine those situations."

Carlos Crivelli is a lecturer at De Monfort University in Leicester, England. He and Fridlund continue to collaborate at UCSB on studies of facial expressions and social interaction.

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