

The Impact of Smile on Human Interactions: A Psychological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Emotions have a great influence on the ways in which humans think, act and behave, and on the process of interpreting and deriving meaning out of life situations. Happiness is one of the primary emotions and the fundamental expression of happiness is a smile, a facial expression formed by flexing of the muscles on both sides of the mouth, forming a curve. A smile is perceived as a sign of warmth which foster human interaction. The purpose of this paper is to explore the concept of smile from a psychological perspective in order to understand its influence on human interactions. Research has attempted to uncover the biological, psychological and socio-cultural impact of a smile on human lives at various levels of analysis, including individual, dyadic, institutional, and societal influences. The act of smiling could possibly be understood as a convenient and tranquilizing form of human action which has abundant therapeutic value and potential for enhancing the individual, dyadic and societal contexts to a great extent. Future research with regard to the impact of the smile could probably be directed towards formulating an integrated approach in utilizing and enhancing the power of smile therapy.

Keywords: *Emotions, Happiness, Smile, Human Interactions*

"We shall never know all the good that a simple smile can do" (Mother Teresa).

Emotions constitute a significant part of human cognition and play a vital role in determining the day-to-day lives of human beings. Not only humans but also animals are capable of experiencing and expressing emotions in varying degrees. Emotions have a great influence on the ways in which humans think, act and behave, and on the process of interpreting and deriving meaning out of life situations. According to Ekman (1993), there are six basic emotions which are universally accepted and experienced in all cultures. The six emotions that he had identified include happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, surprise, and anger. Emotions to a great extent are conveyed through the facial expressions involving smile, tears, and other facial gestures. The facial expressions undeniably correspond with the internal and external affective states of the individual (Ekman, 1993). The communicative importance of

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facial expressions has been acknowledged widely across cultures. It was Charles Darwin who first spoke about the universality of emotional expressions followed by several methodologists. It is known that facial expression of emotions is universal, that is similar expressions convey similar meaning across time and location. However, the psychological importance of facial expressions should also be considered while contemplating over the underlying emotions.

Happiness as a basic emotion

According to Ekman (1993), happiness is the first one in the list of primary emotions. Being one of the most popular emotions, the concept of happiness has been explored in biological, psychological, socio-cultural and philosophical traditions from time to time. Though the approaches of scrutiny seem to be varying, theorists unanimously define happiness as a subjective state of mind that reflects satisfaction, contentment, pleasure or joy; and it has been postulated that the root of happiness lies in the quality and positive evaluation of life. On a philosophical note, happiness has been conceptualized as a state of the blossoming of the human soul, rather being a basic emotional expression (Nelson, 2018). The fundamental expression of happiness is a smile, a facial expression formed by flexing of the muscles on both sides of the mouth, forming a curve.

Concept of Smile

The smile is a subcategory of facial expressions that come under the broad spectrum of non-verbal communication. It could be either an intentional effort or an unintentional reaction to other people and situations. A smile is perceived to be a positive expression that could share a sense of nurturance among individuals. It has been attributed with the power to create positive energy and intensify the effectiveness of interpersonal communication. Though it is the simplest means of connecting with others, an authentic smile is considered to be a powerful indicator of the warmth and positivity of an individual. A genuine smile is one of the most influential, powerful, and persuasive parts of all body language, and perceived to be contagious; as it has the ability to build up a sense of well-being inside the one who smiles as well the one to whom he is smiling. Since time immemorial, the smile is perceived as a welcoming sign which would foster better human interaction. It plays a vital role in establishing and maintaining social relationships over the course of a lifetime.

Theoretical Background

An emotion, such as happiness or sadness, is a subjective experience that is associated with some changes in the body and it results in the manifestation of related behavior. For example, the feeling of joy is generally accompanied by a decrease in heart rate, implying a reduction in the rate of physiological arousal, and the manifestation of an overt behavior, mostly a smile; where a feeling of tension or nervousness is generally associated with palpitations, increase in the rate of breathing, tremors or any other bodily changes specific to the individual, as there occurs the manifestation of an overt behavior, mostly restlessness or crying spells. The *Facial Feedback Theory*, which has its roots in the theories of Charles Darwin and William James, states that emotional experiences or feelings could be managed by producing different or alternative facial expressions. It was also suggested that the individuals first read or infer from the facial expressions of the other person and then experience a particular emotion. Existing literature has suggested that studies making a facial expression, such as a smile, can produce effects on the body that are similar to those changes that result from experiencing the actual emotion, such as happiness or joy.

Types of Smile

The existing literature states that there are around 19 types of smiles of which only five indicate real happiness (Gorvett, 2017). It has been suggested that each type of smile conveys a particular meaning and strengthens the channel of communication accordingly. The following are the types of smile which are generally considered to be associated with happiness and subjective well-being (Ekman, 1993):

1. **Duchenne Smile:** This type of smile is considered to be the true smile of happiness. The Duchenne Smile is identified by the narrowed, twinkling eyes that leave wrinkles, popularly called as “crow’s feet”, in addition to the upturned corners of the mouth. This type of smile could be produced while having genuine human interactions where the person is able to find their own reservoir of happiness and gratitude, that is when he or she is able to find real happiness and feel better while being in a particular context.
2. **Fake Smile:** This type of smile suggests that the individual is feigning true happiness as the eyes do not reflect the sense of well-being while a fake smile is being produced. The most appropriate example of this could be the smile of a person who is posing for a photograph purposefully.
3. **Uncomfortable Smile:** An uncomfortable smile is produced when someone wants to cover up their true feeling of discomfort. Usually, an uncomfortable smile could be found when the person feels uncomfortable, such as while being asked an inappropriate question or while being in a social situation which provokes inhibition and withdrawal.
4. **Seductive Smile:** Gorvett (2017) and her team had found that a slight smile accompanied by direct eye contact, with a slow glance away, would appear on an individual's face when he or she tries to be seductive. It was suggested that this type of smile could be accompanied either by submissive or dominant behavior towards the other person.
5. **Sarcastic Smile:** This type of smile is generally considered to be demonstrating the conflicting emotions of amusement and dislike. It is suggested that a sarcastic smile manifests a positive emotion where the mouth turns upward and the eyes can often get it away, implying a look of disdain.

It has been suggested the functions served by a smile varies according to its type and how it impacts the behavior of the individual as well as the response from others, however it has to be presumed that a smile could be complex enough and convey mixed messages, just like other facial expressions (Ronald, 2010).

Functions of Smile

The concept of the smile has been endowed with immense power in ensuring the effectiveness of communication. It has been suggested that a smile is one of the most common non-verbal means of communication used in human interactions (Kraut & Johnston, 1979). According to the emotional expression view, a smile is the most important component of a facial display associated with and caused by feelings of happiness, pleasure or joy (Kraut & Johnston, 1979). It holds the power to influence the channel of communication right from the start till the end of the process of interaction. Abel and Kruger (2009) had suggested that emotions are having a positive association with mental health, physical health, and longevity of an individual. Selig (2016) had suggested that a good smile can make a person look younger and thinner. It has been stated that smiling helps in enhancing mood and creating a sense of well-being thereby creating a positive impact on the daily life functioning of the individual to a great extent.

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The impact of a smile on human lives

The act of smiling has been accredited as having a physical, psychological and spiritual impact on human beings. Though a smile is a small gesture in terms of muscular movements, the impact it could make on human lives is tremendous. Research has attempted to uncover the biological, psychological and socio-cultural impact of a smile on human lives at various levels of analysis, including individual, dyadic, institutional, and societal influences.

Ekman (1990) had suggested that children would smile approximately 400 times a day. In fact, the frequency of smiling reduces as they grow up. Existing literature says that smiling at a child is very important because of a number of reasons, as it plays a vital role in maintaining the bonding and attachment between the child and parents, it helps the child feel secure and safe, thereby contributing to the expansion of the child's understanding about the world (Lewis, 2005).

It has been said that 'social smiling' is learned practice and is nothing but an intentional gesture of warmth towards others. It has been considered as a part of acquiring human behavior as well as an advancement of the brain structure. Research suggests that smiling can make alterations in the way the human brain develops by working on a powerful loop system. The brain cortex sends messages (neuronal signals) to the brainstem and the cranial muscles responsible for carrying signals to facial muscles initiate smile. When those muscles get contracted, signals would be sent back to the brain and the person eventually receives a sense of well-being. This loop continues as the brain gets rewarded every time.

The process is much quicker and frequent in children and they tend to smile more than adults. It has been suggested that smiling behavior could help in strengthening the facial muscles, instill a positive feeling and enhance the functioning of the brain cortex in children (Gerhardt, 2015). A smile thus affects the physical growth and psychological development of individuals to a great extent. It has been opined that an act of smiling results in the release of feel-good-messengers that helps in reducing stress (Riggio, 2012). As per the scientific explanation, neurotransmitters such as dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin would be released to the bloodstream when a smile flashes across an individual's face, thereby helping the individual experience a sense of relaxation to his or her body and mind. It has been said that the orbitofrontal cortex, the region in the brain where the processing of sensory rewards occur, gets activated while an attractive smile is being produced. The cingulate cortex, an unconscious automatic response area in the brain, helps in maintaining the infectious nature of smiling where an individual mimics the other person's smile and experience subjective well-being.

According to Riggio (2012), the results of a Swedish study had shown that the participants had echoed the emotions of other people rather than following the instructions of the investigator when they were shown photographs of different emotions such as joy, fear, anger, and surprise. Being the most frequent facial expression, a smile could be delegated with the maintenance of social functioning, as it serves to be means of facilitating reward, affiliation, nurturance and negotiation in the hierarchy of human lives. The meaning of smile conveyed across cultures tend to converge at the point where the account of social and emotional functions of a smile is maintained as the same.

Implications

From the beginning of the early 1920s, several attempts have been made to understand how smiling affects the interdependence and interpersonal functioning among human beings.

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Human facial expressions, particularly smiling was considered to be making a huge impact on the physical, emotional and socio-cultural functioning of the smiling person as well as for others around the person. Smiling could possibly be understood as a convenient and tranquilizing form of human action which has abundant therapeutic value and potential for enhancing the individual, dyadic and societal contexts to a great extent. Future research with regard to the impact of the smile could probably be directed towards formulating an integrated approach in utilizing and enhancing the power of smile therapy.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors carefully declare this paper to bear not conflict of interests

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