**Perceptions of facial expressions differ across cultures**

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Facial expressions have been called the “universal language of emotion,” but people from different cultures perceive happy, sad or angry facial expressions in unique ways, according to new research from the University of Glasgow.

Fifteen Chinese people and 15 Caucasians living in Glasgow took part in the study.

They viewed emotion-neutral faces that were randomly altered on a computer screen and then categorized the facial expressions as happy, sad, surprised, fearful, disgusted or angry.

The responses allowed researchers to identify the expressive facial features that participants associated with each emotion.

Dr Rachael Jack who co-authored the project with Professor Philippe Schyns director of the Institute of Neuroscience and Psychology at the University of Glasgow, and Professor Roberto Caldara of the University of Fribourg in Switzerland, said:  “By conducting this project, we hoped to show that people from different cultures think about facial expressions in different ways.

What we found was that East Asians and Western Caucasians differ in terms of the features they think constitute an angry face or a happy face.”

Existing research supports the notion that facial expressions are a hard-wired human behaviour with evolutionary origins, implying that facial expressions should not differ across cultures.

But this study challenges that theory and used statistical image processing techniques to examine how study participants perceived facial expressions through their own mental representations.

According to Dr Jack, “A mental representation of a facial expression is the image we see in our ‘mind's eye’ when we think about what a fearful or happy face looks like.

Mental representations are shaped by our past experiences and help us know what to expect when we are interpreting facial expressions.”

The study found that the Chinese participants relied on the eyes more to represent facial expressions, while Western Caucasians relied on the eyebrows and mouth.

Those cultural distinctions could lead to missed cues or misinterpreted signals about emotions during cross-cultural communications.

“Our findings highlight the importance of understanding cultural differences in communication, which is particularly relevant in our increasingly connected world,” Jack said.

“We hope that our work will facilitate clearer channels of communication between diverse cultures and help promote the understanding of cultural differences within society.”

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**EDITORIAL NOTES**

* The article: “Internal Representations Reveal Cultural Diversity in Expectations of Facial Expressions of Emotion,” Rachael E. Jack, Roberto Caldara and Philippe G. Schyns, PhDs; University of Glasgow is published in the Journal of Experimental Psychology: General; Vol. 141, No. 1
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* The University of Glasgow was the joint top rated University in Scotland in the 2011 National Students Survey, and joint seventh in the UK. www.unistats.com