San Francisco, California, USA

In Your Face

Why is this man so angry? We don't know the reason, but we can see the emotion in his face. Whatever culture you come from, you can understand the feeling that he is expressing.

Forty years ago, psychologist Paul Ekman of the University of California, San Francisco, became interested in how people's faces show their feelings. He took photographs of Americans expressing various emotions. Then he showed them to the Fore people, who live in the jungle in New Guinea. Most of the Fore had never seen foreign faces, but they easily understood Americans' expressions of anger, happiness, sadness, disgust, fear, and surprise.

Then Ekman did the same experiment in reverse. He showed pictures of Fore faces to Americans, and the results were similar. Americans had no problems reading the emotions on the Fore people's faces. Ekman's research gave powerful support to the theory that facial expressions for basic emotions are the same everywhere. He did more research in Japan, Brazil, and Argentina, and got the same results. According to Ekman, these six emotions are universal because they are built into our brains. They developed to help us deal with things quickly that might hurt us. Some emotional triggers are universal as well. When something suddenly comes into sight, people feel fear, because it might be dangerous. But most emotional triggers are learned. For example, two people might smell newly cut grass. One person spent wonderful summers in the country as a child, so the smell makes him happy. The other person remembers working very hard on a farm and being hungry, so he feels sad.

Once we make an emotional association in our brain, it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to change it. "Emotion is the least changeable part of the brain," says Ekman. But we can learn to manage our emotions better. For instance, we can be more aware of things that make us angry, and we can think before we react.

There are many differences between cultures, in their languages and customs. But a smile is exactly the same everywhere.