

About Face

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Boston Magazine:

Forty-six years ago a young San Francisco-based cowboy of a psychologist named Paul Ekman emerged from the jungle with proof of a powerful idea. During the previous couple of years, he had set out trying to prove a theory popularized in the 19th century by Charles Darwin: that people of all ages and races, from all over the world, manifest emotions the same way. Ekman had traveled the globe with photographs that showed faces experiencing six basic emotions—happiness, sadness, fear, disgust, anger, and surprise. Everywhere he went, from Japan to Brazil to the remotest village of Papua New Guinea, he asked subjects to look at those faces and then to identify the emotions they saw on them. To do so, they had to pick from a set list of options presented to them by Ekman. The results were impressive. Everybody, it turned out, even preliterate Fore tribesmen in New Guinea who'd never seen a foreigner before in their lives, matched the same emotions to the same faces. Darwin, it seemed, had been right.

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Honestly, this is going to sound terrible,” Lisa Barrett told me when I asked her about Ekman and his original study. “But at first, when I read that work, I thought, Well, nobody can take this seriously. This can't possibly be right. It's too cartoonish.”

Barrett is a professor of psychology at Northeastern, and for years she's been troubled by Ekman's ideas. People don't display and recognize emotions in universal ways, she believes, and emotions themselves don't have their own places in the brain or their own patterns in the body. Instead, her research has led her to conclude that each of us constructs them in our own individual ways, from a diversity of sources: our internal sensations, our reactions to the environments we live in, our ever-evolving bodies of experience and learning, our cultures.

This may seem like nothing more than a semantic distinction. But it's not. It's a paradigm shift that has put Barrett on the front lines of one of the fiercest debates in the study of emotion today, because if Barrett is correct, we'll need to rethink how we interpret mental illness, how we understand the mind and self, and even what psychology as a whole should become in the 21st century.

Read the whole story: [*Boston Magazine*](#)