

# Phony Friends? Rejected People Better Able to Spot Fake Smiles

October 24, 2008

“There are hundreds of languages in the world, but a smile speaks them all.” It’s true too—next time you are lost in a foreign country, just flash a smile and the locals will be happy to help you find your way. An honest smile can convey a wide range of meanings, from being happy to having fun. Although, not all smiles are genuine. All of us have “faked a smile” at some point.

Now, a new study might make us think twice about sending out a phony grin. It has been shown that individuals who are experiencing rejection are better at picking up subtle social cues and according to a recent study published in the October issue of *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, socially rejected people are particularly good at discerning fake smiles from real ones.

Psychologist Michael J. Bernstein and his colleagues from Miami University wanted to see to what extent rejected individuals would be able to identify the authenticity of a facial expression. The researchers induced feelings of social rejection in a group of the participants by making them think about a time when they felt socially isolated. Conversely, another group of participants were asked to recall times they felt accepted or included in a group. A control group of participants were asked to recall the previous morning’s activities (resulting in neutral feelings). The participants then viewed videos of people smiling—some of the videos showed people expressing genuine smiles and the rest depicted people with fake smiles. Participants were to indicate which of the videos contained real smiles.

The results show that socially rejected individuals are better at distinguishing fake smiles from real smiles compared to individuals who feel socially accepted or who were in the control group. The authors propose that socially rejected people have an increased motivation to be accepted, thus making them more sensitive to specific social cues indicating opportunities for inclusion. The authors conclude, “It seems essential to detect legitimate signs of positivity that indicate possible reaffiliation with other people. Otherwise, rejected individuals could miss out on new chances for acceptance or ‘waste’ affiliation efforts on people who are not receptive.”