

Why our facial expressions don't reflect our feelings

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While conducting research on emotions and facial expressions in Papua New Guinea in 2015, psychologist Carlos Crivelli discovered something startling.

He showed Trobriand Islanders photographs of the standard Western face of fear – wide-eyed, mouth agape – and asked them to identify what they saw. The Trobrianders didn't see a frightened face. Instead, they saw an indication of threat and aggression.

In other words, what we think of as a universal expression of fear isn't universal at all. But if Trobrianders have a different interpretation of facial expressions, what does that mean?

One emerging – and increasingly supported – theory is that facial expressions don't reflect our feelings. Instead of reliable readouts of our emotional states, they show our intentions and social goals.

The face acts “like a road sign to affect the traffic that's going past it,” says Alan Fridlund, a psychology professor at University of California Santa Barbara who co-authored a recent study with De Montfort University's Crivelli arguing for a [more utilitarian view of facial expressions](#). “Our faces are ways we direct the trajectory of a social interaction.”