

Why Bowlers Smile

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In March 1980, Senator William Proxmire (D-Wisc) awarded the National Institute for Mental Health a Golden Fleece Award for funding research on why bowlers, hockey fans, and pedestrians smile. According to the press release accompanying the announcement, the Senator wasn't bowled over by the research, puckish though it might have been.

Robert E. Johnston and I conducted this research (Kraut & Johnston, 1979). It was a serious study of the evolution of human facial expressions, inspired by a course on human ethology that we had taught in 1977, and was one of the first published experiments in what would eventually become evolutionary psychology. Just as non-human primates use bared-teeth displays in the presence of members of their species to signal appeasement and affiliation (Van Hooff, 1972), humans are much more likely to smile when they are engaged in a social interaction with another person than they are when they are solitarily experiencing a pleasant emotion. This article has been cited frequently and replicated several times. Even though the research was no laughing matter, I believed that its designation for a Golden Fleece Award was.

Although my work was not nearly as sexy as the research on class relationships in Peruvian brothels, conducted by an earlier Golden Fleece Award winner (van den Berghe & Primov, 1979), it did get media attention. This may have been the first time that non-specialists, except for my wife and mother, had ever read one of my papers, and I gloried in the brief media attention. I announced the award on my academic resume and even designed and printed a Golden Fleece t-shirt, which I, members of the social psychology group at Cornell, my two-year-old son and a member of Proxmire's staff proudly wore.

Can we learn anything from Proxmire's legacy of railing against government waste, from luxurious jets for top government officials to scientific research that he didn't consider in the public interest? Federal funding for research depends on politics and PR as much as it does on good science. If psychologists do not want to have their research misconstrued by the general public and grandstanding politicians, they can guard against this fate by using one of two approaches. The first is to make their work incomprehensibly scientific and fool the public through this camouflage. Bob Johnston, my co-author on the smiling research and an animal behaviorist studying pheromone communication, occasionally uses this ploy. You would never know from the titles of some of his papers that he spends his federal research funding watching small furry animals sniff each others' genitals (e.g., Reasner et al., 1993.).

The other approach is to frame the work in such a way that the public cares about it. This communicative goal is one I have had in much of my writing and I am gratified when the popular press – whether it is *The New York Times* or the *National Enquirer* – reports on my work.

Can I credit the Golden Fleece Award for my sensitivity to the audience in my writing? Probably not. The award coincided with my leaving academia for a spell to work in industry. I suspect that having bosses who were electrical engineers and skeptical about the value of social psychological research

mattered much more than the 15 minutes of notoriety given to me by Senator Proxmire.

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