

DECONSTRUCTING AMERICAN SMILE

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Abstract: *In this paper, the cultural aspects of smiling have been discussed. The smile has been defined as an important social signal, which often has a different meaning in various cultural settings. The author focuses on the mainstream US culture and analyzes the cultural scripts that are crucial in understanding the functions and meanings of smiling in the American context. The most important of these cultural values is friendliness. Friendliness has its roots in American egalitarianism. Following their egalitarian beliefs, most Americans are friendly and outgoing. They feel that everyone should be treated the same way and are pretty indiscriminate with their friendliness and smiles. Another important factor in understanding the American way of smiling is cheerfulness: the central importance of optimism and emphasis on positive feelings. The ethic of cheerfulness is strongly connected to the cultural preoccupation with happiness, so deep that it has been reflected in the American constitution. In the final paragraph, the possible negative impact of the growing heterogeneity of American society on smiling etiquette has been discussed. The author concludes that friendliness is probably the best social glue that keeps people from very different cultural backgrounds together.*

Keywords: *smiling, cultural scripts, American culture, cultural heterogeneity*

A smile is arguably one of the most important signals in human interaction. Among its most studied functions in Western cultures is its efficiency in signaling a state of happiness (Ekman, 1994). Although smiles often communicate that the smiling person feels “happiness” or “joy,” some smiles signal affiliative intent or other social motives (Fridlund, 1994). Quite recently, Niedenthal et al. (2010; see also Niedenthal, Rychlowska, & Szarota, 2013) presented the Simulation of Smiles (SIMS) model, which integrates the existing behavioral and neuroimaging studies. Its authors suggested new ways to explain the processing of smiles and introduced a novel typology of smiles based on their social function. *An enjoyment (or reward) smile* displays positive internal states, such as joy, amusement, or happiness; a *dominance smile* communicates higher social status or control, and an *affiliative smile* expresses positive social motives.

Affiliative smiles are probably the most interesting from the perspective of social sciences. As Niedenthal et al. (2010) put it: “[affiliative] smiles can be readouts of positive social intentions that are essential for the creation and maintenance of social bonds, without necessarily being about personal enjoyment” (p. 419). Such smiles have been proposed as a means to establish and

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maintain effective interpersonal interactions by signaling trustworthiness and cooperative intent (cf. Miles, 2009; Scharlemann et al., 2001). They can also signal compassion (Barankova et al., 2019), goodwill (Lockard, McVittie, Isaac, 1977), sexual invitation (Gueguen, 2008), or appeasement (Eibl-Eibesfeldt, 1972; Hess et al., 2002; Keltner 1995).

According to the SIMS model, affiliative smiles are culturally universal; however, there might be cultural norms specifying the use of smiles in different social settings and their preferred morphology (Szarota, 2011). Such cultural differences manifest themselves even when people choose their profile pictures. Szarota (2010) analyzed profile photos posted by users of one of the most popular instant messaging sites, MSN Messenger, available in more than 60 countries. As it turned out, there were many places where a vast majority of MSN users presented a smiling face, but there were few others where people preferred a serious look. For instance, in Poland and Finland, only around 40 percent of the photographs included a smile, while in the UK, the corresponding number was 73.5 percent.

In this paper, I will clarify the specificity of the American smile and look for its cultural roots. Anthropologists have written about American culture since the beginning of the discipline. At first, they studied cultural values, themes, and symbols. (cf. Spindler & Spindler, 1983). There were studies focused on different communities or ethnic groups, but there were attempts to look at the American culture as a whole. Today this approach has been largely abandoned, especially a tradition of national character studies. When writing about US culture, social scientists often refer to the “American middle-class culture” or “mainstream European American norms,” distancing themselves from dangerous generalizations of the earlier periods.

Trying to escape the essentialist trap, a Polish/Australian linguist, Anna Wierzbicka (1994), developed a theory of cultural scripts. According to Wierzbicka (2015, p. 339): “Cultural scripts are representations of cultural norms that are widely held in a given society and that are reflected in the language”. Such scripts formulated in universal human concepts allow us to understand cultural norms and attitudes from within, that is, from the point of view of the “actors,” while at the same time making them intelligible to outsiders. In this article, I will focus on one of the most important American cultural scripts: friendliness.

Friendliness and the American smile

Friendliness has its roots in American egalitarianism. Following their egalitarian beliefs, most Americans are friendly and outgoing. They feel that everyone should be treated the same way, and they are pretty indiscriminate with their friendliness and smiles. Smiling is also part of American informality, founded on the absence of a formalized class system. The frequent use of the first name in addressing others (even just meeting strangers) is a good example. Americans tend to consider formality as somewhat pompous or even arrogant. On the other

hand, as Cas Wouters (1988) observed, the lack of historical hierarchy created considerable social anxiety. Consequently, there is a constant need to lubricate social relations, and the rules of friendliness became openly embraced forms of social engineering.

Friendliness is also associated with the high mobility of Americans. Increased mobility is not a recent cultural development but a phenomenon that played a crucial role in forming the American mentality at the turn of the 18th century. The rise of friendliness as a central cultural value in those early years has been described by Bellah et al. (1995):

In the new, mobile middle-class world, one autonomous individual had to deal with other autonomous individuals in situations where one's self-esteem and prospects depended on one's ability to impress and negotiate. 'Friendliness' became almost compulsory as a means of assuaging the difficulties of these interactions, while friendship in the classical sense became more and more difficult. (p. 118)

On a psychological level, the constant display of friendliness might be attributed to a deep need for approval and a drive for popularity. Many authors (McClelland et al., 1958; Hall & Hall, 1990) noted that Americans are preoccupied with what other people think, do, and say about them. As Stewart and Bennett (1991, p. 58) observed: "Americans tend to judge their personal and social success by popularity – almost literally by the number of people who like them." According to McClelland et al. (1958, p. 250), this attitude is "culturally induced at an early and continued throughout life through regular participation in group activities." The smile is indispensable in the entire process of socializing. The importance of smiles in building a pleasant, friendly atmosphere is generally acknowledged. Difficult and potentially controversial, hence dangerous topics should be avoided, and there are polite ways to avoid answering threatening questions.

Friendliness is quintessentially American invention, and most other cultures do not share the idea that it is good to be friendly to everyone. According to Anna Wierzbicka (1994), the cultural norm of friendliness encourages the display of an attitude that can be represented as follows "I feel something good toward anyone." For most European and Asian visitors, it comes as a big surprise. In East Asia, Confucian values do not encourage courtesy toward strangers. Patterson et al. (2007) analyzed the behavior of pedestrians in Japan and the US. They focused on pedestrians' reactions toward a stranger who either smiled or nodded in their direction. The results show that only one percent of Japanese smiled back, whereas 25 percent of Americans reacted similarly. Also, Chinese people do not display good feelings to all people, but only to *shuren* (lit. cooked/ripe person), namely, those they know (Ye, 2006). It would be considered strange or frivolous if one smiled at a *shegren* (stranger).

Reserve towards strangers is also a norm in most European cultures: Spaniards, Poles, Germans, and French people are usually struck by the friendliness of Americans. In Spain, a stranger is no longer a stranger after the first encounter;

from then on, the relationship is '*Ya nos conocemos*' (We know each other), and a different treatment follows with a smiling option finally enabled (Wattley-Ames, 1999), but elsewhere it takes much more time and effort to become acquainted. As Polly Platt (1995, p. 24-27) notes:

What is there to smile about when you don't know someone?" says my French son-in-law. That person is a stranger until you know him. One must be on one's guard with strangers.

Moreover, in most European cultures, not only in the Mediterranean region, a smile exchange between a man and woman often has implicit sexual undertones, and it might be easily interpreted as a sexual invitation (Furstenberg, 2003; Sokol, 1999). On the contrary, the American friendliness script seems devoid of sexual connotations. Visitors from Europe often comment on American "de-sexualized" public life, lack of seductive looks and smiles in casual encounters – virtually no flirting, which, back home, is usually considered the "spice of life" (cf. Platt, 1995, p.248). But this apparent lack of sexual undertones is essential to friendliness as a cultural concept.

Foreigners also misinterpret American friendliness as a token of friendship. After a friendly chat on a plane and exchange of business cards, they expect a relationship to be maintained and eventually flourish, but superficial friendliness is often used to keep people at a distance. Americans are friendly, but at the same time, they tend to avoid personal commitment, which is a big surprise to many foreigners. This need for privacy is deeply rooted and associated with the core American value, individualism. It is quite telling that even in their most friendly mood, Americans tend to avoid close physical contact and keep their distance during a conversation. The smile might be a sign of intimacy, but surprisingly (at least for the European and Hispanic people), it is never accompanied by other intimate and "warm" gestures.

It is worth noting that American friendliness may trigger the most hostile and violent reactions, which might be surprising for Americans. A prominent French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard (1989), who visited States in the late 1980s, was clearly not charmed by the American smile:

And that smile everyone gives you as they pass, that friendly contraction of the jaws triggered by human warmth [...] Whether I am right in all these or not, they certainly do smile at you here, though neither from courtesy nor from an effort to charm. This smile signifies only the need to smile. It is a bit like Cheshire's cat's grin: it continues to flow on faces long after all emotion has disappeared [...] No ulterior motive lurks behind it, but it keeps you at a distance. It is a part of general cryogenization of emotions [...] smile to show how transparent, how candid, you are. Smile if you have nothing to say. Most of all, do not hide the fact you have nothing to say or your total indifference to others. Give your emptiness and indifference to others, light up your face with the zero degree of joy and pleasure, smile, smile, smile... (p. 33-34)

A brief history of cheerfulness

Many Americans initiate conversations with strangers by offering compliments such as “Nice outfit!” or “Cute doggie”! Everybody knows that praise or positive feedback costs nothing, but like friendly smiles, they help to maintain goodwill. It is also a way to appear likable. But here, American friendliness meets other cultural phenomena – the central importance of optimism and emphasis on positive feelings.

One of the scholars who extensively studied American cheerfulness is Bulgarian-born Christina Kotchemidova. Interestingly, she decided to research the topic after immigrating to New York and being taken aback by the American smiles and friendliness. According to Kotchemidova (2005), the origins of cheerfulness (the same as friendliness) could be traced back to the beginning of American history. In her brilliant study on the social history of cheerfulness, Kotchemidova (2005) describes a major emotional shift from melancholy to good cheer over the eighteenth century. In the early modern period, Americans, like Europeans, were fascinated with feelings of sadness. Still, as early as the late 18th century, cheerfulness has been identified as a unique American disposition. One of the first Europeans who commented on the “good humor of Americans” was British journalist William Cobbett, who emigrated to the States in 1792.

Kotchemidova (2005) describes cheerfulness as a “typically American emotion”:

It is socially and economically effective and individually beneficial. It emerged as the most useful of emotions in an increasingly rational culture. While we have no statistical data on emotion experience, cheerfulness must have been welcome on more social occasions than any other emotion and was thus persistently socially encouraged. Its deliberate cultivation is revealed by codes of conduct, etiquette books, business, and social relations manuals, psychological counseling, and magazine advice columns. (p. 17)

Cheerfulness reflects the American optimistic attitude and individualistic approach to emotional management. Although nobody will even think of questioning the importance of individualism in American culture, its connection to smiling might seem quite vague. The link is not straightforward; however, a cultural concept of individualism is closely related to the American attitude to emotions and self-regulation.

Emotions might be intimate and very individual, but it also means that each person has to cope with them on their own. Particularly negative emotions are seen as potentially harmful. Optimism is another core value of American culture which shapes American attitude to emotions and smiling and could be seen as a foundation of the cultural concept of cheerfulness. As individualism, optimism is not strictly an American invention; however, as individualism, it has its own specific flavor.

Kluckhohn and Kluckhohn (1947) identified and described American “effort-optimism.” There is a general belief that everyone can achieve one’s ambition through effort. According to this view, no goal is too remote and no obstacle too difficult because hard work is always rewarded by success. This attitude is essential in the workplace. As Storti (1993) comments somewhat ironically:

Americans can overlook, forgive, or explain away almost any fault in their workers, but they can’t abide someone with a negative or pessimistic attitude. In this context, it should be noted that for optimistic Americans, anything less than being positive and upbeat – and that would include being realistic and objective – actually comes across as being negative. (p.23)

The ethic of cheerfulness is strongly connected to the cultural preoccupation with happiness, so deep that it has been reflected in the American constitution. The Declaration of Independence proclaims that the pursuit of happiness is an inalienable right of every American citizen. As Lu and Gilmour put it (2006), “Failing to be happy implies that one is shirking one’s responsibility and failing to realize the American cultural mandate.” (p.37)

Cheerfulness is paramount in business and service sectors, the political space, and popular culture. The American media industry invented special devices to induce cheerfulness, like the “laugh track” accompanying TV sitcoms. Some scholars speak of the tyranny of the positive attitude in America, evident in a vast and growing inventory of self-help books. Many authors, starting with Carnegie (1936), draw heavily on William James’ (1884) classical theory of emotion, or at least on its simplified version. The theory holds that emotion is the mind’s perception of physiological conditions that result from some stimulus. In James’ often cited example, it is not that we see a bear, fear it, and run. We see a bear and run; consequently, we fear the bear. Our mind’s perception of the higher adrenaline level, heartbeat, etc., is the emotion. In this context, James’ remark on cheerfulness comes as no surprise: “The path to cheerfulness is to sit cheerfully and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there.”

Smiling and multicultural identities

Some might argue that friendliness and cheerfulness are old-school values that might not stand the present cultural change. This careflessness is fully understandable. Since the mid-1960s, immigration has completely reshaped America; what has been previously perceived as minority cultures slowly became an important part of society. Today in cities such as Los Angeles or New York, more than half of the population has an immigrant background.

What has changed is also the simplistic view of assimilation; the famous melting pot is a metaphor that has only historical value. In the 1990s, the concept of “segmented assimilation” was introduced by Portes and Zhou (1993). The model implies a diversity of outcomes among today’s second generation. Some

will follow the straight path of assimilation into the white middle-class majority. Others will choose to live and work successfully in ethnically homogenous communities. The rest, however, may experience downward assimilation into the downtown underclass.

Obviously, in culturally diverse cities like New York or Los Angeles, the rules of everyday life may collide. One of the most interesting cases of a service-related cultural misunderstanding was the conflict between Korean shop owners and African-American customers in the Crenshaw neighborhood of Los Angeles, which in 1992 resulted in numerous incidents of racial hatred and fierce riots (cf. Bailey, 2000). In the interviews conducted soon after these events, African-Americans described how they were disrespected in Korean stores by emphasizing perceptions of what the store-owners do not do, e.g., greet with a smile, and make small talk, i.e., personably engage the customer. The problem is that such behaviors are considered an imposition and a sign of poor manners by many Korean immigrants.

However, the heterogeneity of American society could also be seen as a key factor in the formation of a society of smiling citizens. More recently, Rychlowska et al. (2015) documented that some cultural differences in expressive behavior are determined by historical heterogeneity or the extent to which a country's present-day population descended from migration from numerous vs. few source countries over a period of 500 years. According to the authors, the United States scores 83 on the scale of historical heterogeneity, the highest score of all.

As Rychlowska et al. (2015, p. 2) put it: "society that emerged from a large number of source countries is inherently a context of social uncertainty, in which trust and commitment formation is of critical importance. Unrestrained expressivity may help reduce such uncertainty in the absence of other information about another person's intentions. Expressions of positive emotions and motives can be especially informative: During interactions with strangers, the presence of a smile reliably predicts trust and sharing resources [...] Thus, smiles that signal friendly (rather than aggressive or competitive) intent should be more common, and recognized as more common, in historically heterogeneous societies". One might assume that making friends in heterogeneous societies has become an essential survival strategy, and consequently, strangers have been treated as potential allies.

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