

## **Differences Between Men and Women Reading Facial Expressions**

### **Different Abilities Reading Facial Expressions**

A recent study, published in the June issue of *Current Biology*, analyzed the different abilities of men and women reading facial expressions. Headed by Dr. Mark Williams, a postdoctoral fellow at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and his co-author, Jason B. Mattingley, a psychology professor at the University of Melbourne in Australia, the team sought to measure how effectively facial expressions convey emotions that are recognized by a large group of both sexes.

In the experiment, the scientists showed a group of 78 men and 78 women volunteers photographs displaying a wide range of facial expressions – angry, sad, happy, surprised, fearful, disgusted or neutral expressions.

To begin, the volunteers were shown four photographs consisting of three neutral expressions and one expression that was clearly angry – brow compressed, eyes narrowed, teeth flashing in a menacing grimace. The volunteers were directed to identify, as fast as possible, the angry face.

Next, the researchers applied the same method in showing the volunteers seven neutral faces and one that was clearly in a rage of anger. Some photos displayed an irate man, while others an angry woman. Then the scientists inserted photos of fearful, terrified faces in place of angry ones.

### **Angry Faces Were Relative To The Sex of the Person**

Both men and women repeatedly identified the faces of anger faster than the terrified ones. However, the facility of identifying angry faces was relative to the sex of the person in the photograph and the sex of the observer.

The time needed to spot the face of a woman, whether angry or frightened, increased with the rise in the number of photographs from four to eight. However there was no difference in the speed with which the men and women were able to identify the angry man, no matter how many faces were shown in the array.

In interpreting the results, the scientists concluded that spotting the angry man in an array of faces contained a survival factor for both sexes, since there is more danger and potential threat from a male more than a female.

### **Differences Between Men and Women**

It has been established in earlier documentation of the cognitive differences between men and woman that women display better performance at fine motor tasks, while men are usually more proficient at finding directions using a map.

In this experiment, though both sexes spotted the fearful faces with equal ability, the men were faster than women in finding the angry faces. In contrast, the women displayed more facility in spotting the happy, sad, surprised or disgusted faces than the men. In conclusion, it can be said that while men are more adept at spotting anger, the women are more skilled in identifying a wider range of human emotions.

Their findings seem to support the theory that identifying facial expressions have evolved differently in both sexes, and most likely as a reaction to detecting threats and danger.

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**Sources: Look at Me, I'm Smiling: Visual Search for Threatening and Non-Threatening Facial Expressions** *Visual Cognition* Volume 12, Issue 1, January 2005 Pages 29-50 **Visual Search is Not**

**Blind to Emotion** *Perception and Psychophysics* 70, 1047-1059 **Do Angry Men Get Noticed?**  
*McGovern Institute for Brain Research Massachusetts Institute of Technology* June 5 2006