Ekman: Emotion in the Human Face

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and linear. We may read from the first page to the last (and even this is not necessary or recommended in some books), but within the reading one may take a hundred different detours in thought and mood, and consecutive readings may yield insights at first unrealized. Moreover, many books have excursuses built in which become independent of the body of the text and can be read apart from the rest ("The Grand Inquisitor" in The Brothers Karamazov comes to mind), and readers may have favorite chapters or sections, conclusions or quotes, which stand out from the remainder of the book (one of my favorites is Mynheer Peepencorn's speech by the waterfall in Mann's The Magic Mountain). A photograph can only capture the straight lines of reading and not its circles, diversions, and detours.

All of this leads us to the observation that photography alone is ill equipped to render accurately the experience of reading. Perhaps if there were a text to supplement the pictures of Kertész' readers, the intertextuality of words and images would better reveal the reality of reading. But there is no text, only a listing of the place and date of each photograph at the end of the book. We are left only with the marvelous photographs of André Kertész and this one thought: photographs may open our eyes to aspects of reading otherwise unseen, but only written words themselves can reveal what reading cannot be viewed but only experienced. This book reminds us that there is no substitute for reading in order to understand reading.

Reference

• Steiner, George


Reviewed by Stuart J. Sigman
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The first edition of this book, written by Ekman and two colleagues, Wallace Friesen and Phoebe Ellsworth, met with generally enthusiastic and approving critical response. In one review, Izard wrote that Emotion in the Human Face "strike[s] a blow for the vindication of Darwin" and is an excellent source for "people who want to know the facts about facial expressions and their recognizability" (1973:219). However, Izard also suggested that the book lacked a firm theoretical base.

The present edition is a significant revision and expansion of the first one, containing over two hundred additional pages and discussions of several new topics. Chapter titles include the following: "What Emotion Categories or Dimensions Can Observers Judge from Facial Behavior?"; "Does the Face Provide Accurate Information?"; "An Evolutionary Perspective on Human Facial Displays"; and "Affect Theory." The inclusion of the last-named chapter (by Silvani Tomkins) is especially noteworthy in light of Izard's criticism of the lack of adequate theory in the first edition.

The book’s primary concern is limited to "consideration of only one type of information that can be obtained from the face (information about emotion), from only one type of organism (human adults), using only one type of evidence (empirical research)" (p. 2). These are important and, in many ways, unfortunate restrictions. The book’s exclusive focus on emotion displays permits little more than a single paragraph to be devoted to the multiple communication functions of the face. There is no discussion of the interrelations of the numerous systems and constraints operating on the face, a shortcoming for a contemporary book on nonverbal behavior.

Equally restrictive are Ekman’s remarks about the methodological basis for his and his colleagues’ data. Ekman equates science with the experimental method typically found in psychology; he suggests that experimentation provides answers as opposed to speculations, and he largely negates the usefulness of naturalistic fieldwork and phenomenological accounts. The arguments for such methodological puritanism
fail in the eyes of this reviewer, as in the case of Ekman’s discussion of two different approaches to the study of emotion:

Though it would be important to determine which approach, categorical or dimensional, is more similar to the phenomenology of social interaction, this is not the sole or even necessarily the most important criterion for choosing between these two schemes and judgment tasks.

One may also ask, which approach offers the more economical approach for measuring emotional information? That is, which employs the smallest number of independent variables to account for the information observed from the face? (p. 55)

A willingness to explore social actors’ “emotion vocabularies” and “emotion grammars” might be of considerable value in the development of a more complete theory of the role of emotions in social life. This book is rooted in Ekman’s now widely published universalist approach to human emotions and nonverbal behavior. At one point in the volume, Ekman critiques the anthropologists who have been arguing for a cultural and contextual approach to gestural meaning. His rhetoric obscures the fact that he too has had to indicate that the full import of an emotion display is shaped by rules of situational appropriateness. Ekman should be seen as tapping into biological substrata of behavior, but not into social communication.

Recognizing the above reservations, I must hasten to note my belief that this book makes a number of important contributions to our understanding of the nonverbal aspects of communication and the place of emotions in face-to-face interaction. The book systematically and extensively roots Ekman’s research program in several decades’ worth of psychological work on emotions and facial configurations. Both the first and second editions provide extensive summaries and critiques of research from the 1960s through the 1990s (the latter book also includes a new review chapter on the seventies by Ekman and Harriet Oster). Especially interesting are the analyses of why certain “classic” studies should be dismissed, while previously ignored ones invite closer attention and appreciation. To wit:

In summary, Landis’s findings, that observers could not make accurate judgments, as compared with either the expected emotional nature of the eliciting circumstance or the subject’s self-reported experience, should be credited only if (1) the same or similar reactions were elicited during at least some of the situations in most of the subjects, (2) the elicited reactions were different for at least some of the different situations, and (3) the selection of subjects and experimental arrangements did not encourage the subjects to mask or otherwise to control their facial behavior and/or to falsify their self-report. The three criticisms discussed suggest that these conditions were probably not met. (p. 61)

Other excellent methodological and substantive chapters are included in the book. For example, Ekman meticulously describes the work involved in establishing FAST and FACs, two of his systems for noting facial behavior. Maureen O’Sullivan presents a thorough discussion of the need to distinguish face validity and construct validity when studying individuals’ perceptions of facial movement, and details the several stages in ascertaining construct validity.

Finally, there is an accessible discussion by Tomkins of the original “affect theory,” as well as of recent reformulations. Again, however, it is disconcerting to find in this paper no sociological awareness of the situational factors producing specific emotions.

To conclude, the book is most probably not suited for use in a beginning nonverbal course because of its specificity of content and the technicality of certain arguments. It should prove useful to advanced students and researchers seeking a detailed exposure to Ekman’s approach and contributions to nonverbal research.

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