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# Ekman, emotional expression, and the art of empirical epiphany

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## Introduction

In the mid and late 1960s, Paul Ekman offered a variety of bold assertions, some seemingly more radical today than others (Ekman, 1984, 1992, 1993). Emotions are expressed in a limited number of particular facial expressions. These expressions are universal and evolved. Facial expressions of emotion are remarkably brief, typically lasting 1 to 5 s. And germane to the interests of the present article, these brief facial expressions of emotion reveal a great deal about people's lives.

In the present article I will present evidence that supports this last notion advanced by Ekman, that brief expressions of emotion reveal important things about the individual's life course. To do so I first theorize about how individual differences in emotion shape the life context. With this reasoning as backdrop, I then review four kinds of evidence that indicate that facial expression is revealing of the life that the individual has led and is likely to continue leading.

## Individual differences in emotion and the shaping of the life context

People, as a function of their personality or psychological disorder, create the situations in which they act (e.g., Buss, 1987). Individuals selectively attend to certain features of complex situations, thus endowing contexts with idiosyncratic meaning. Individuals evoke responses in others, thus shaping the shared, social meaning of the situation. In these ways, individuals act with consistency across situations, thus

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expressing their underlying traits and dispositions in stable fashion. And across the life course, individuals will create certain motifs, themes, and relationship patterns that reveal the particular facets of individual identity.

Emotion is one important part of the way individuals shape their life context (e.g., Keltner, 1996; Malatesta, 1990). Individual differences in emotion lead individuals to selectively construe situations in idiosyncratic ways. Each emotion is defined by a certain appraisal theme (Keltner, Ellsworth, & Edwards, 1993; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), which defines in part how the individual will construe any particular situation. Anxious individuals perceive more threat and risk in situations, whereas anger prone individuals perceive less risk and threat, as do cheerful individuals (Lerner & Keltner, 2001).

Individuals tend to consistently evoke different responses in others, thus shaping the emotional tenor of social interactions and relationships (for full review, see Keltner & Kring, 1998). Individuals will evoke different responses in strangers and intimates, at home and at work, as a function of their tendency to express particular emotions. For example, in one study we found that roommates and romantic partners became more similar in their emotional responses over the course of an academic year, they mutually shaped each other's emotional styles, and by implication, the emotional tone of their relationships (Anderson, Keltner, & John, 2003).

Through these selective and evocative processes, individuals create life contexts and cumulative life outcomes. Facial expression, therefore, should be particularly revealing. More specifically, facial expressions reflect different experiences (e.g., Rosenberg & Ekman, 1994), patterns of appraisal (Bonanno & Keltner, *in press*), and patterns of autonomic nervous system activity (Levenson, Ekman, & Friesen, 1990). In this fashion, facial expression reveals how the individual selectively interprets and reacts to important life events. Facial expression should also reveal the responses the individual evokes in others, and by implication, patterns of relating to others. Although fleeting and often beyond control, facial expressions appear to be measurable signs of the course of life, they indeed are windows into the human soul.

### **Expression as the register of significant life events**

How might facial expressions relate to individual adjustment in response to one of life's most devastating losses—the early death of a spouse? Traditional bereavement theories offer clear predictions. These theories, based on Freudian notions of “working through” the emotional pain of loss, hypothesize that recovery depends on the expression of negative emotions, such as anger and sadness. The expression of positive emotion, from this perspective, indicates denial and impedes grief resolution. Social functional accounts of emotion, in contrast, suggest that negative emotional expression may bring about problematic outcomes, whereas positive emotional expression may facilitate the adaptive response to stress.

We pitted these contrasting hypotheses against one another in a longitudinal study of midlife conjugal bereavement (Bonanno & Keltner, 1997). Bereaved adults'

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