

READ MY EYES

This simple but engaging two-person activity focuses participants on our ability to interpret subtle nonverbal communications by “reading” the facial expressions of another. It is also a fun way to introduce topics in human physiology and psychology, such as the nature of nonverbal communication, the scientific study of human emotions and facial expressions, and basic principles in experimental design. And the experience provides a vivid example of the emotional power of intense eye contact with others. Setup time is very minimal.

PROCEDURE

MATERIALS

- A sheet of cardboard or construction paper with a 2" x 12" rectangular slot cut out of the middle.

PREPARATION

Write these 10 statements on a white/blackboard so the entire group can see them. (You can also print them on sheets of paper and hand them out to the group.)

Let's get out of here!

Do you want to join me?

I'm disappointed.

I don't understand.

I'm optimistic.

I'm scared.

I like you.

That's amazing!

That's disgusting.

That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.

Determine how you will select two volunteers to play. If you have a large class, you can either have each pair play in turn or have many pairs playing simultaneously. (You need one cardboard slot for each pair of players.)

Place two chairs or desks next to each other so that two players can comfortably look at each other's faces.

PROCEDURE (CONT'D)

INSTRUCTIONS

Tell players:

“ We’re going to play a very simple game called Read My Eyes. All you need to do is something you do every day: Communicate with each other. But in this game, you can’t speak—you can only use facial expressions, and your partner can only see your eyes. ”

Ask the pair of players to decide who will be the first Sender. Give that person the cardboard slot.

Tell players:

“ The person with the slot is the Sender. The other person is the Receiver. The Sender will choose one of the questions written on the board, without telling anyone which one. Then the Sender will hold up the slot so that the Receiver can only see the Sender’s eyes and, without speaking, try to “send” the message they’ve chosen to the Receiver. The Receiver will try to determine which message the Sender has in mind. Any questions? ”

When everyone is ready, ask the Sender to hold the slot up to her face so that the Receiver can only see the eyes and begin.

Once the Sender and Receiver have tried a few messages, have them switch roles, and/or form other participant pairs and have them try.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Senders, how did you try to send your messages? Did you concentrate on particular aspects of your face, on your internal feelings, on something else?
- Receivers, how did you try to read your partner's face? Were you looking for something in particular? Was any part of the Sender's face particularly informative or helpful?
- Generally, which seems harder: sending or receiving a message using only your facial expression? Why do you think so? How would you design an experiment that would show which role was more difficult?
- Are some kinds of messages harder to communicate without words than others? What kinds are easiest? Questions? Positive messages? Negative messages?
- How did staring into your partner's eyes make you feel? Why is eye contact such a powerful emotional tool?

VARIATIONS

- Ask the group to suggest new messages to try to send/receive, then play again with those new suggestions. You could also ask the group to rank them in terms of predicted difficulty *before* actually playing with them.
- Try the game using cards with smaller openings. At what point do Receivers become unable to read a message? What specific aspects of the Sender's eyes need to be visible for success? You could also play with an opening that shows only the Sender's mouth. Are some messages readable this way?
- Increase the distance between players. At what point do even "easy" messages become impossible to communicate?
- Keep track of which messages are and are not successfully communicated. Do you find any messages that most or all pairs are good at or that few or no pairs got?
- Try comparing pairs of good friends to pairs of strangers or casual acquaintances. Do closer relationships lead to more successful communications?

RESOURCES

Emotions Revealed: Recognizing Faces and Feelings to Improve Communication and Emotional Life (revised 2007)

Psychologist Paul Ekman has been studying human emotions for decades. Here he reviews research on how we perceive and interpret the subtle indicators of emotional states found in human facial expressions.

Peoplewatching: The Desmond Morris Guide to Body Language (2012)

We send social signals with our bodies as well as our faces. In this book, anthropologist Desmond Morris investigates the ways in which posture, gait, and gesture transmit information about thoughts and emotions.

The Psychological Study of Smiling

psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2010/december-10/the-psychological-study-of-smiling.html

This article from the Association for Psychological Sciences explores research on the human smile and its role in conveying emotional information.



This material is based upon work supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant No. 1114781. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.