



# The Culture Hour

A CASUAL FORUM FOR STUDENT  
INSIGHTS, QUESTIONS AND CONCERNS  
ABOUT CULTURE

## When Americans Smile is it Genuine?

Comments from THE CULTURE HOUR MEETING, 9/9/2008

### AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE:

Dear Students,

What an interesting question and topic...what American would have thought that a smile could cause confusion and other emotions in people?!?

We even have a saying, “**WE ALL SMILE IN THE SAME LANGUAGE**” which implies that a smile means the same to everyone, everywhere...But, does it?

Evidently, not!

Here's my thought. Midwesterners, smile to greet others. People in New York typically do not. People in the South typically do more...so, it's not all Americans. But, as a Midwesterner myself, I try to recognize others. I believe that it is polite, and kind, and that I am recognizing you as a fellow traveler on this Earth when I smile at you. My message to you is, “I greet you as an equal, as a fellow human being...Hello.”

It is that simple. And it is a sincere *greeting*.

Kimberly

### TERAH'S PERSPECTIVE:

Q. When Americans smile, is their smile sincere or fake?

Dear Students,

I would like to take this time to thank each one of you who came to our first “The Culture Hour” meeting. I would like to hear your comments about the meeting, and how we can make it better for you.

I really enjoyed the discussion about the “fake smile”. My comments, in addition to other suggestions from internet sources are below:

#### Reasons why people pretend to smile:

- ❖ A person is more likely to give a fake smile if he/she has had a tough day or night (Yahoo! Answers, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080821133627AAxgRVG>, September 16, 2008). Stress or tiredness (e.g. job, school, family, and many other reasons) increase emotional drain. When a person is emotionally drained, even a simple task like smiling might be a huge task for him/her. Therefore the person “giving” you a fake smile might be having a difficult day, and a fake smile is all she/he could afford (Yahoo! Answers, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080821133627AAxgRVG>, September 16, 2008).

- ❖ We all have different approaches when we meet a person for the first time. Some people are bold, some people are nervous, and some are unsure of how they feel. Therefore a fake smile could be the person's way of acknowledging a stranger. Remember, you would still be a stranger to this person until you get to know each other well. Therefore don't expect "fake smiles" to stop after a few meetings, unless you really get to know each other.
- ❖ Pretend smile from an individual might indeed be exactly what it is: fake (Yahoo! Answers, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080821133627AAxgRVG>, September 16, 2008). Fake smiles for the individual could have been in the making for a long time, and thus the sad part is you can't change it. If this has been part of the way they act for a period of time, then there is no way you will change it. However, there are a few things you can do to keep your emotional stability in the face of pretend smiles:

### **How to deal with pretend smiles:**

- ❖ *Recognize that how you think affects how you feel:*

The way you perceive the fake smile directly influences the way you would feel after witnessing the smile. For example, if you perceive the fake smile as something positive (e.g. being acknowledged/recognized), then your feelings won't get hurt, unlike if you perceive it negatively (Greenberger and Padesky, 1995). Therefore it would serve you better to think positively rather than negatively because you will not end up with hurt feelings.

- ❖ *Give back a genuine smile*

The person giving you a fake smile might just be surprised to see you give back a genuine smile (Yahoo! Answers, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080821133627AAxgRVG>, September 16, 2008). That genuine smile might brighten their day. This could also be an opportunity to teach them the correct way of smiling genuinely. Giving back a fake smile might not serve you any good. According to Mahatma Gandhi "an eye for an eye will make the whole world blind" ([Peaceheroes.com](http://www.peaceheroes.com), <http://www.peaceheroes.com/PeaceHeroes/mahatmagandhi.htm>, September 16, 2008), therefore returning a fake smile may breed even more fake smiles.

- ❖ Do not acknowledge the fake smile:

If it is difficult for you to give back a genuine smile, then just walk away from the fake smile as if you didn't see it (Yahoo! Answers, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080821133627AAxgRVG>, September 16, 2008).

Furthermore push it out of your mind. The suggestions above serve two purposes:

- a) To deter the person giving you the fake smile from doing it again, and
- b) "Pushing it" out of your mind helps you avoid ruminating over it days after the incident.

Some of the people giving fake smiles are attention seekers (Yahoo! Answers, <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080821133627AAxgRVG>, September 16, 2008). So if you make the mistake of acknowledging the smile in any way, e.g. frowning, staring, smiling back etc, then they will do it more often.

- ❖ Confront the person:

When I say confront, I do not mean fight or argue with them about their fake smile. Some people might be doing this without realizing it. It could take a simple action to make them stop, e.g. letting

them know that you are offended by their fake smile. Nothing is worth fighting over. When you confront, be nice about, e.g. “Hey so and so, I have noticed that whenever you smile at me, it comes out to me as not genuine. I could be wrong, but what do you think about this?”

**Final Note:**

It’s not so easy to distinguish a fake smile from a genuine smile. A person could indeed be giving a genuine smile only for the smile to be perceived as not genuine.

Do the following exercise (adapted from [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk) ) to understand what I am talking about. This exercise is a series of 20 fake and genuine smiles. Your task is to identify which smile is pretend and which is genuine. It takes approximately 5 minutes to complete the task. The computer would generate your score along with the right answers. Have fun!

Here is the link: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/humanbody/mind/surveys/smiles/>

References:

1. Yahoo! Answers: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20080821133627AAxgRVG>
2. Peaceheroes.com: <http://www.peaceheroes.com/PeaceHeroes/mahatmagandhi.htm>
3. Greenberger, D., and Padesky, C. (1995). *Mind Over Mood: A Cognitive Therapy Treatment Manual for Clients* (pp.15-25). New York, NY: The Guildford Press.