

The movements that betray who you are

On the other hand, some faces do seem to record information about the life they've lived. When shown a selection of neutral expressions taken from dating apps, participants in a 2017 study were able to [tell rich people from poor more accurately than if they were just guessing](#). Indeed they could still do it with pictures of only the person's eyes or, in particular, their mouth. After further investigation, the researchers came to the conclusion that rich people just look a little more attractive or more positive (a mixture of happy and likeable) than poor people do. When shown photographs in which everybody was smiling and looking deliberately positive, participants lost their ability to tell rich and poor apart.

The presence of these subtle cues might help to explain the bias that can creep into our thinking about people from different backgrounds. As we've seen, non-verbal accents often have the effect of [making outsiders more difficult to understand](#).

When people want to be understood, however, they do have ways to make their feelings clear.

One ingenious but speculative recent study from the University of Wisconsin-Madison suggests that this might even have given an upbeat accent to modern Americans. The theory is that the residents of a place experiencing high immigration will often struggle to understand each other, but in order to cope in ordinary life they have to try. As a result, the authors guessed that a lot of smiling and pantomiming of emotions would have been required.

When they checked the available data, they found that people in countries with "high ancestral diversity", including the US, [reported smiling more](#)

[often](#). Even looking state-by-state within the US, the same pattern emerged. If outsiders seem cold and snooty to Americans, and Americans seem inanely cheerful to everyone else, then perhaps their diverging histories might explain why these stereotypes evolved.

At the very least, when people really want to understand each other, non-verbal accents show us that it's good to talk.

--

Join one million Future fans by liking us on [Facebook](#), or follow us on [Twitter](#) or [Instagram](#).

If you liked this story, [sign up for the weekly bbc.com features newsletter](#), called "The Essential List". A handpicked selection of stories from [BBC Future](#), [Culture](#), [Worklife](#), and [Travel](#), delivered to your inbox every Friday.