Ekman and O'Sullivan's (1988) comments on our article (Russell & Fehr, 1987) convey various misunderstandings. Let us first set the record straight on at least the more important of these:

1. We neither believe nor said that facial expressions lack information. Our concern was with human judgment of the meaning of the information contained in a facial expression.

2. Our study did not address whether "context is more important than facial expression in the perception of emotion." We did say and offer evidence to show that context influences perception of emotion.

3. Ekman and O'Sullivan charge us with logical inconsistency for portraying facial expression as both a strong (when used as an anchor) and a weak (when used as a target) conveyor of information. Our portrayal amounts to this: Perception of one facial expression can both influence and be influenced by perception of another. Facts can sometimes be phrased paradoxically—"I'm strong (relative to my kid brother) and weak (relative to Arnold Schwarzenegger)—but no logical inconsistency is revealed by doing so.

4. Ekman and O'Sullivan misread our paragraph on Darwin and the skeptics, and thus raise issues we did not address. We do not "oppose" anyone's findings, nor endorse everything said by the skeptics.

5. Our stimuli were never shown in rapid succession. Each stimulus was available for as much time as a subject wanted while rating it.

6. We too call for studies of emotion perception with more natural expressions and contexts. Ekman and O'Sullivan imply that had we carried out such a study, we would have found more evidence of accuracy. Maybe, but we doubt it. We chose a calm laboratory and still photographs published by Ekman to maximize the chances that the face alone would determine the emotion attributed to it. What little evidence we have suggests that as the situation becomes more naturalistic, agreement among observers declines (Condry & Condry, 1976; Wagner, MacDonald, & Manstead, 1986).

7. Studies have not "demonstrated that bipolar factors result only when bipolar judgments are used"; see, for example, Bentler's (1969) refutation of Green and Goldfried's (1965) study. (For our side in this general debate, see Russell, 1979, and Russell & Bullock, 1986.) In fact, as we said, our current results would be hard to explain for those who think of emotion judgment space as unipolar rather than bipolar. Ekman and O'Sullivan appear indeed to have found an explanation difficult, because they offer none.

Let us now turn to more substantive issues. Different scientists draw different conclusions from the same data; this much at least is clear from Ekman and O'Sullivan's (1988) comments. We believe that upon seeing a facial expression, human observers are in an analogous epistemological position: The observer's judgment of the emotion expressed by the face is not fixed by the data—by the physical features of the expression—but depends to some extent on other factors.

Ekman and O'Sullivan (1988) concede this point only for "neutral or ambiguous facial expressions." This is more of a concession than it might appear. Mistaking neutral for sad is as much an error as mistaking sad for neutral (just as mistaking pyrite for gold is as much an error as mistaking gold for pyrite). When observers make such errors, we cannot trust their judgments to distinguish sad people from others, and all their judgments of the emotion expressed by a face are suspect. Moreover, such errors could be common in natural settings, if neutral or ambiguous expressions are common, which they surely are. Indeed, all or most expressions may be ambiguous, if by ambiguous is meant being perceived differently in different contexts. We reported data on two targets, surprise and anger, that we had selected to be as unambiguous as possible. Perception of these targets too varied reliably with context. The "surprise" target was seen as surprise by some observers, as a surprise-fear blend by others, and as a surprise-excitement blend by still others. The "anger" target was seen as anger by some observers, sad by others. Of course, these targets might now be considered ambiguous, but then the question remains whether any expressions are not.

Ekman and O'Sullivan (1988) emphasize that average category choice was often predictable from the face alone: subjects frequently chose calm for the relatively neutral targets, surprise for the surprise target, and anger for the anger target. Let us emphasize that category choice may be a less sensitive measure of emotion perception than are the pleasure and arousal ratings, that the category choice data are compatible with our hypothesis, and that Ekman and O'Sullivan ignore data incompatible with their view: The pleasure and arousal...
ratings and the category choices varied in a reliable and predictable manner. Two extreme positions can be ruled out: Judgments of the emotion expressed in a face are neither unrelated to nor completely determined by that face. Abandoning either extreme does not force us to the other.

Ekman and O'Sullivan also defend the notion of accuracy as used in studies of emotion perception and question whether our findings bear on this issue. As they say, we had no independent criterion against which our observers could be evaluated as accurate or inaccurate. To demonstrate accuracy would require such a criterion, but to demonstrate inaccuracy requires no criterion. When one observer sees anger and another sees sadness in the same expression, then one of them is wrong—on the view that there is only one right answer. But our point was that there may be no one indisputable right answer, and so accuracy may not be the right question.

References


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