

# First Impressions, Cultural Assimilation, and Hireability in Job Interviews: Examining Body Language and Facial Expressions' Impact on Employer's Perceptions of Applicants

**Written & Compiled by**

**Renee Cortez, David Marshall, Cydi Yang, Loc Luong**

**April 18, 2017**

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to discover what nonverbal facial behaviors are important in an interview setting. This was done by conducting interviews with eight current employers as well as four college age persons who have recently interviewed for a job. As a result, the data suggests that the two main facial behaviors sought by employers in the interview of the applicant were smiling and eye contact. Other nonverbal communication behaviors were analyzed as well. These findings will allow people to be better prepared and be more conscious of what they are displaying in the interview setting in the terms of nonverbal facial cues when interviewing for a future career.

## **PURPOSE & OVERVIEW OF CONTENTS**

The job interview setting is a common topic of research and analysis, and yet there is still much to be learned. As the world advances into this new millennium, the means of communication within the job interview is also changing. The communication phenomenon of interviews is ever present in our society where obtaining a job to sustain one's life is vital. While employers/interviewers are only human, there are certain guidelines that many of them agree upon while interviewing an applicant for an open position. Entering into this working world every year are countless groups of fresh college graduates and people changing careers. Knowledge of what employers look for will aide them in their job obtainment journey.

The current study focuses on the nonverbal facial features presented in a job interview by the applicant and how the employer responds to them. What facial cues do employers use to make a first impression of an applicant? In the interview process, so many key factors of making an impression are present, not in what the applicant says, but in what they do not say. In general,

humans have an instinct to gather data about another individual just by looking at them. Humans gather judgments by how a person appears and acts before he/she even speaks. These hastily made judgements sometimes have a lasting effect and can make or break how someone is perceived by another. In a job interview, every nonverbal action the applicants make can either add to their hireability or diminish from it.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Extensive research has explored facial features and the job interview setting. The researchers of the current study read comprehensively to become acquainted with the broad topics of facial features, eyes, the mouth, gender and impression formation. The fundamental idea was to discover the nonverbal facial behaviors that an applicant displays in an interview that add in his or her favor of obtaining the position in question. These five items and the data that supports them are discussed further below.

### **Facial Features**

Looking into the facial factors that determine how favorably an employer will look at a potential employee, encompasses three subsections of investigation: the face as a whole, the eyes, and the mouth. Interviews themselves are a highly studied environment because they are something most everyone will go through at least once in their lifetime. Many aspects go into the interview setting that determine whether an applicant has a chance of obtaining the position. Nonverbal communication is one large category. From the moment an applicant walks into room to the moment they leave, the interviewer is constantly making judgements on their work ethic and abilities. One of those judgements has to do with the nonverbal actions and reactions of the facial region of the interviewee: the facial region as a whole, eyes, and the mouth.

When formulating a first impression, facial expressions play a big role in determining what one thinks. Whether or not they look happy, sad, upset etc. can completely alter what one thinks of someone. First impressions of people's personalities are often formulated by analyzing the multiple facial expressions displayed on their faces. Calculating how fast someone's first impressions can be formulated is very important in understanding how people interact with each other and determining the different visual properties used in shaping them. Bar, Neta, and Linz , in an article called "Very First Impressions" (2005) seek to understand just that. In this article, an experiment was conducted to see how quickly participants could formulate an impression and test to determine the consistency of the impression made. In their experiment, threat judgements were made by participants on faces with neutral expressions. Participants' judgments referred to the personality of the face opposed to their temporary emotional state. The results of this experiment demonstrate that first impressions can be formed in a very short amount of time and the impressions are consistent, based on whatever information that they have in the first 39 milliseconds of them meeting. First impressions were not as consistent under these conditions when the participants were to make judgements about the intelligence of the person shown to them, which suggests that traits that are judging whether or not someone is in danger are formulated quicker than those judging the intelligence of someone. This information is important because it shows that impressions are formed in a short amount of time and that first impressions are not always accurate.

Trustworthiness is one of the first things determined in a first impression. Mattarozzi, Marzocchi, Alba, Vicari, Paolo, Maria, & Russo (2015) state that judgements on one's trustworthiness are affected by the gender of the perceiver more than the gender of the person being perceived. Features of the perceived face play a part as well. "Women tend to judge

trustworthy-looking faces as significantly more trustworthy than men do, and this is particularly pronounced for judgments of female faces” (Matarozzi et al, p. 1, 2015 ). Which just states that woman clearly realize more trustworthiness faces than men. There doesn't appear to be any gender differences for judgements of untrustworthy faces. “Specifically, women were generally less confident than men in judging trustworthiness of unfamiliar faces. Personality also affected judgment. Both low agreeable individuals and high trait aggressive individuals tend to perceive unfamiliar faces as less trustworthy” (Matarozzi et al, p.2 2015). The present findings suggest that both gender and personality traits play a role in understanding how people evaluate the trustworthiness of others. Whom we decide to trust is a function not only of their facial features but also of gender and individual differences in personality traits.

## **Eyes**

To look into how eyes can play a monumental role in a person's interview process, takes a peek at the deceitful intentions of what the eyes can express. According to the folklore, the eyes are “a window to the soul” or a “mirror of the soul”. The eyes have more power than we think they do. “Accordingly, the eyes should be a powerful and reliable source of emotional and motivational information” (Calvo, Martin, 2012, p. 202). The Calvo study looked at how the eyes can affect the mouth, and how those two can affect how people perceive the individual. Whether eye expressions are especially susceptible to being influenced by a smiling mouth, in comparison with an angry or a sad mouth. It all depends on how people perceive the individual depending on the structure of his or her mouth.

According to Calvo (2012), happy eyes were recognized in a more friendly way compared than sad or angry eyes. For people they feel more comfortable approaching people who appear to be happy rather than sad or angry. Response latencies were found shorter when

the eyes were shown as sad or angry. Response latency is the time from when someone receives a message to when they give a response. Calvo (2012) found that the response rate was significantly lower if the mouth doesn't match up with the eyes. For example, if the eyes look to be happy, but the mouth says that the individual is angry, people might be afraid to approach that person because of the way his or her mouth is shaped. The mouth can be a big influence on how people perceive the eyes. People's first impression is biased towards the emotional expression of the mouth. A smile can influence the other person's evaluation of the eye expression more than a sad or angry mouth. Even though your eyes say the individual is happy, the way the mouth is shaped can be incorrectly judged by what people perceive the facial expressions to mean. The perception of the eyes is also dependent upon the face. The effects of the eyes are greater when the individual is smiling compared to when that same individual is sad; this is because of the high saliency a smile has. With such blended expressions, humans can never really tell how an individual is feeling just by his or her eyes. Calvo (2012) explained that the eyes could be saying one thing but the mouth is saying another thing, so it can be deceiving. The eyes can say a lot about how that particular individual is feeling. But it is not just the eyes that can do so much, it is also the mouth. It is important to know in an interview setting what the mouth and eyes might be saying in conjunction with each other.

People like to feel as if they are being recognized, or to feel special. When two individuals are speaking, breaking eye contact can sever the connection that the two people were sharing. When in an interview, breaking that eye contact is a certain way to discontinue the connection between the interviewee and interviewer. According to Gallo (2007), "only 7 percent of communication involves actual words. Fifty-five percent of communication is visual such as body language, and eye contact. Thirty-eight percent is your vocal pitch, and how you control the

pitch, speed, volume, and voice” (2007 p. 22). A majority of communications comes from more than just the words being used, but also the nonverbal cues. Eye contact is important because it can show the interviewer that the interviewee is confident in what he or she is saying. According to White (2015), “More than 2,100 hiring managers who responded to CareerBuilder's survey said that a lack of eye contact is the most common problem, with a roughly two-thirds saying they have seen job applicants do this” (2015 p. 1). In White (2015) their study found that a lack of eye contact can be perceived as if the individual has something to hide when he or she is being interviewed. In addition, White states that avoiding eye contact can mean that the individual is not confident in what he or she has to say and that he or she is afraid that the answer is wrong. Thus, the eyes play a big role in how an applicant does in the interview process.

## **Mouth**

The mouth is a vital feature in an interview setting. Most people focus on how words form and what to say. However, just as much importance goes into the analyzing the nonverbals of the mouth. Krumhuber, Manstead, Cosker, Marshall & Rosin (2009) examined the impact of the facial information of social perceptions and decisions made on the basis of short segments of expressive mouth behavior. In their two simulated job interview settings, participants gave more positive job evaluations of the interviewees who showed an authentic smile than those who exhibited a fake one or a neutral expression. The smiles not only influenced the impressions but also affected consequential decisions like hireability. The results of the second setting were quite similar to the first, where smiles had a significant impact on the impression ratings and employment decisions. The results of the two experiments confirmed that temporal dynamics had an effect on job, person and expression ratings, and on employment decisions. Perceived fake smiles were given lower ratings and less hireability chances.

Fake smiles and real smiles are also called Duchenne or Non Duchenne. Duchenne, genuine smiles, involve two specific action units. One action entails the lip corners, which are pulled up and back; the second facial action in genuine smiles is observed by the cheeks being raised causing wrinkles to form at the outer corners of the eyes. Non-Duchenne smiles, on the other hand, only involve mouth movement and show no reliable relationship to positive feelings (Ekman, Friesen, & Ancoli, 1980). This changes when the variable of gender is introduced. Research suggests that judgments of smiling women are dependent on the type of smile shown and the context in which the smile occurs. For example, Woodzicka and LaFrance (2005) asked male and female participants to rate videotaped female interviewees on several dimensions including how competent, smart, and sincere they appeared and how likely they would be to hire them. Female interviewees that displayed Duchenne smiles were rated positively. Duchenne smiling was associated with ratings of increased sincerity and likelihood to hire the interviewee. However, non-Duchenne smiling was associated with negative evaluations of interviewee competence and intelligence. Thus it appears that inexperienced raters can discern real from fake smiles, and fake smiling by women during a job interview may be judged harshly. Non-smiling women are often judged more severely than non-smiling men. For example, Deutsch, LeBaron, & Fryer, (1987) showed participants photographs of smiling and non-smiling women and men. When not smiling, women were rated as less carefree, happy, and relaxed than were non-smiling men.

### **Gender and Smiling**

Smiling or fake smiling regardless of gender is recognized by the interviewer. Woodzicka, J. (2008) examined the reasons given by both men and women for why they displayed false smiles during the job interview setting. Women frequently said that they used the



non-Duchenne smile as a filler or cover in instances when they couldn't readily come up with an answer. If they used the non-Duchenne smile to appear enthusiastic, they might have felt that smiling, even false smiling, would make them appear more hireable. However, the study suggests that false smiling during an interview (regardless of sex) leads to worse evaluation than does genuine smiling. Furthermore, the use of a false smile as a mask was particularly pernicious for women. Judges rated women who displayed non-Duchenne smiles as an attempt to mask negative emotions as less competent and hireable than men who displayed non-Duchenne smiles for the same reason. It seems that women's use of false smiling as an attempt to mask negative emotion may actually backfire during an interview.

Social judgements may be affected by gender-based expectations. According to social norms theory, women are expected to be more communal and expressive than men and also more cooperative, kind to others and protective of social harmony (e.g., Brody & Hall, 2008). Gender differences occur across countries in smiling. Krys, Hansen, Xing, Espinosa, Szarota, & Morales (2015) hypothesized in a study conducted in seven countries that women perceive smiling individuals as more honest than men. Indeed women assessed smiling individuals as more honest than men did, whereas there was no significant gender difference in the assessment of honesty in non-smiling individuals. This was congruent with the social norms theories indicating that social judgements may be affected by gender-based expectations. (women are more communal and expressive than men). In the cultural aspect, further research is needed to verify the hypothesis on cultural diversity of the analyzed phenomena. However, this study showed that impression formation is based on processes that are fast, automatic and not fully conscious. Perception of honesty is one of the basic pre-conditions for sound social interactions. Understanding the basic mechanisms of impression formation as well as its cultural and gender

specificities can come from knowledge of the differences in the social perception of smiling persons.

An experiment done by Wolffhechel, Fagertun, Jacobsen, Majewski, Hemmingsen, Larsen, Lorentzen, & Jarmer (2014), studied first impressions and how personality traits are determined through facial features, “For appearing friendly the mouth seems to have an impact: a wider mouth with neutrally or upwards pointed corners of the lips resulted in higher scores for friendliness [...] For women, the extreme faces for adventurous indicate a positive impact of fuller lips and dark lashes” (pg. 3). The information validated that people are judged first by their features, and in society, certain features are already assigned to certain traits a person can have. The roundness of the mouth or color of the lips can be judged and analyzed for a certain attribute to that individual (Wolffhechel, et. al., 2014). First impressions and how an individual presents themselves in the work field is very important.

### **Impression Formation**

“Reliable effects for stimulus sets showed that, similar to targets (facial expressions), it was more difficult to decide that a target was not present with the faces that lacked a mouth” (Lundqvist & Ohman, 2005, pg. 60). This revealed the importance the mouth in forming impressions. People can judge someone by the features of their face, but if a certain face feature disappeared like the mouth, it can greatly impact how a person judges that individual. Humans look for the emotion in the face that will convey an idea of what that person will be like, and the mouth is an integral part of that. However, they did not find enough evidence to determine a complete successful correlation of personality through facial features.

Lundqvist & Ohman discussed how facial features affected the attention of the viewer. It revealed that faces without eyebrows but with a mouth had a long response time, but without the

expressive eyebrows or mouth, it resulted in the viewer having an even longer response reaction to the face (2005). This indicated that eyebrows conveyed more expression than mouth. The participants took longer to respond whether the mouth seemed threatening or friendly, but the mouth was still an important component to facial features and first impressions because without it complementing the eyebrows, the recognition of emotion on the face was a longer process (Lundqvist, Arne, Ohman, 2005). It also stated, “that facial features affect both attention and emotion measures in hierarchical way” (Lundqvist & Ohman, 2005, pg. 76). People based off their first impressions by looking at someone’s facial features, because human beings are emotional beings and instinctively act upon the emotion that someone’s face gives off. Lundqvist and Ohman also discovered that “Threatening faces were detected more efficiently than friendly configurations, in terms of both of higher hit rate and shorter response latencies” (2005, pg. 76). Lundqvist and Ohman’s study stated that eyebrows conveyed more emotion, but without the mouth to complete the face, there is a missing void and “Hypothetically, the incomplete facial structure of these stimuli could introduce either a delayed emotional recognition, a general noise in attentional response measures due to ambiguous processing, or a combination of both” (pg. 77). It is important to analyze the mouth and how that feature can make an effect on first impression.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the facial nonverbal elements of an interviewee in a job interview setting can have a great effect on their hireability. The face as a whole, the eyes, and the mouth are features that are looked at and observed by the interviewer as they makes their judgements on the person’s effective work ability. The more an applicant smiles, genuinely smiles, and has their eyes’ nonverbal message match their mouth’s nonverbal message they will be more likely to get

hired than those who do not. As proven, that first impression can be made in only milliseconds, thus it is crucial for an applicant to pass that first test. It paints the road for the rest of the interview process. The current study looks at what nonverbal facial features on the interviewee increase the impression of a good work ethic on the employer for them to formulate an appealing impression of said applicant by examining the face, eyes, and mouth.

### **RESEARCH QUESTION/ HYPOTHESIS & JUSTIFICATION**

The topic of first impressions in job interviews was necessary to research because after college graduations in the spring, many young people enter the workforce at a similar time. If they are trained or know what employers look for, their success rate might be more substantial. Krumhuber, Manstead, Cosker, Marshall & Rosin, (2009) found that the impact of facial information on social perceptions and decisions made on the basis of short segments of expressive behavior in a simulated job interview was examined. It was necessary to research first impressions in job interviews as to provide the graduate who is entering the workplace with a blueprint to success. In the study by Krumhuber et al, they used two different experiments: one with real human faces and one with synthetic faces in a simulated job interview setting which was watched by the participants who then rated their perspectives on the interviewees. There was considerable evidence that nonverbal behavior played an important role in influencing interview impressions and hiring decisions. It was found that job applicants who displayed higher levels of smiling were found to be evaluated more favorably and their chances of being hired were increased.

What the study did not focus on were the specific facial features that employers deemed appealing and that showed a good work ethic. What they did address was the specifics of the

smile and how more positive evaluations were made of interviewees who showed authentic smiles than those who did not or gave a perceived fake smile. Smiles not only influenced impressions of the target person but also more consequential decisions like hiring. This study showed that it was not only what you showed on your face but how you showed it that influenced the overall impression and following decisions, but it only focused on smiling. It would be beneficial to do a more in depth study of which facial expressions do employers find appealing to hiring in order to condense the gap from graduating college to workforce preparedness. The question that this study will seek to find out is what facial cues employers look for upon the first interaction with an applicant that makes the applicant hireable. The hypothesis that was concluded by the researchers is that the more positive facial nonverbals the applicant displays in the interview, the more favorably the employer will look into hiring said applicant. After all the research has been gathered it has been decided to have the following question and hypothesis for the current study.

**RQ:** "Upon the first interaction with an applicant, what facial cues do employers look for when formulating an impression?"

**H:** The more positive facial nonverbals the applicant displays in the interview, the more favorably the employer will look into hiring said applicant.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The ideological perspective of this research study contained inquiries into seeking knowledge on what nonverbal facial features applicants displayed in a job interview setting that would increase the impression of a good work ethic on the employer, helping them formulate an appealing impression of said applicant. This was done under the modern worldview point.

Employees were interviewed on what nonverbal facial features they look for in an applicant. This study also interviewed applicants on what their perspective was on facial features during an interview and what they believed was appealing to employers. This information was then taken and compared to see how ready applicants were for the job world by comparing applicants' answers with the employers'. The method of interviews gained a great deal of information and data in this situation because this was a real world domain; interacting with participants first hand gave the study a more in depth perspective.

### **Participants**

Eight employers from a large metropolitan area were used to conduct the interviews for data. They were approached as former bosses of the researchers and then some who were recommended by other colleagues. The requirement was they had to be employers who did the interviewing and the hiring themselves. An additional four job applicants, who had a job interview within the last month at the time of the data collection, were interviewed as well. The convenience sampling method was used. Each employer engaged in an interview with a researcher in a setting where that employer and the interviewing researcher had previously agreed upon. The four researchers sought out two employers each to interview and gather data from. This was done through convenience and snowball sampling. One researcher sat down with each of their two employers in the set environment and asked a prepared set of open ended questions. If the situation allowed, additional questions were asked. Six questions for the employers and five questions for the applicants were asked followed by probing questions for certain participants.

The applicants were also interviewed in a setting that was previously agreed upon between them and the researcher conducting the data collection interviews, not necessarily the

actual job interview setting. Each applicant was asked about their perspectives on what interviewers/employers looked for. There was no incentive used to motivate participants. Requirements retained within the study included what the applicants' perspectives were on what employers looked for in a hireable applicant in terms of nonverbal facial behavior, and how prepared the job applicant today is for the working world.

### **Logistics**

The unit of analysis was the eight employers with a secondary unit of the four applicants. The current study's research design was cross sectional and field independent. The researchers engaged in convenience sampling for picking both the employers and the job interviewees. The interviews were conducted in the semi-structured format as to optimize the data. Each researcher took field notes during these interviews and collectively created a code for identifying the gathered information coherently. The researchers transcribed the interviews in their entirety. The point of saturation was reached upon receiving repetitive patterns in the data. When the data was not giving out any more insight into what facial features employers looked for, the researcher ended the interviews. This point was reached after the set of eight employers and four applicants. The data collection happened with in-depth interviews of the employers and job applicants. Further data analysis occurred later once all the data had been obtained to the point of saturation. The questions asked of the employers were along the lines of what do they look for in a hireable applicant with regards to nonverbal facial behavior. The interviewees were asked questions of their perception of what they thought employers looked for in a job interview setting. Once collected, the data was analyzed on the basis of how congruent the opinions of the employers and the applicants matched up when it came to favorable nonverbal facial cues given by the applicant in the interview setting.

## RESULTS

### Employers

The employers/interviewers shared their insights into what they look for in an applicant's nonverbal facial reactions in an interview that deems them worthy of being hired. These results can be seen in Figure 1.1 in the Appendix. Out of the eight employers interviewed, many nonverbal cues were said. Not all of them were strictly limited to the facial region. The cues that came up the most in the data were good eye contact, good posture, displays of confidence, initiated handshakes, smiling, looking relaxed and preparation. Out of the employers interviewed, 75% stated that good eye contact was something they look for, 50% looked for good posture (sitting in attention), 37.5% stated they look for displays of confidence and handshakes initiated by the applicant and 25% liked applicants who are smiling, look relaxed, and are prepared for the interview. Two of these nonverbal cues are in the facial region: eye contact and smiling.

Within the first 10 seconds of meeting an applicant employers saw and noticed many things. The main ones that stood out to the participants were the smiling, eye contact, lack of nerves, handshake, and confidence. These results can be seen in Figure 1.2. In the Appendix. Not all of these are in the facial region, however; the two that came up the most in the data were smile and eye contact. Eighty-seven point five percent of employers said they noticed smiling or the lack thereof and 62.5% noticed eye contact.

As for what nonverbal facial behaviors employers found unappealing, there were numerous. However, six attributes stood out. These results can be seen in Figure 1.3 in the Appendix. Rolling of the eyes, being unfocused, and lacking confidence were seen as negative by 25% of employers. Frowning and confused looks were seen as negative by 37.5% of the employers. Having bad or a complete lack of eye contact with the interviewer was seen as a



debilitating factor for the applicant's hireability by 62.5% of the employers. The researchers predicted that eye contact would be a monumental factor in predicting how an employer deems an applicant worthy of the position he or she is applying for. When asked how important eye contact is in an interview setting, 100% of the employers interviewed said it was of the utmost importance and, in fact, crucial to how they view that applicant. Thus, good eye contact can be broken down into the categories of cultural, interest, listening/in attention, confidence, and displaying good communication skills. The results of the data break down can be seen in Figure 1.4 in the Appendix. These categories were created by the researchers with the data provided by the employers interviewed.

Nonverbal facial cues of the interviewee impacted the way the employer viewed the applicant. Four out of the eight employers interviewed (50%) provided their views on the impact. Collectively, they stated that the nonverbal facial behavior of an applicant can provide them information on four things: if that applicant was enthusiastic/invested in the position being applied for, showed level of respect for the interviewer, painted a picture of who that applicant was as a person and displayed their level of preparation if hired for the position.

The nonverbal facial actions of an applicant in an interview stood up against the resume and the attire of that applicant. According to the results obtained for the employers interviewed, 25% thought that all three were equally as important, 12.5% thought the resume was the most important, and 62.5% thought nonverbal actions were the most important determining factor in an interview. These results can be seen in Figure 1.5 in the Appendix.

In depth, probing questions were asked of two employers. The data gathered through this are as follows: Employer one believed that eye contact, while important, depended on the cultural background of the applicant and gave the applicant more leeway in the interview setting

if they were from a cultural background where eye contact was not common. However, as an employer of a position that included polished communication skills, she was weary of this cultural norm. She believed that the resume told where the applicant was from and gave the interviewer an assumption to have in mind of the applicant and their background before the interview occurred. This gave the employer a small picture of how the applicant may act. Employer two addressed cultural factors as being a hard determinant of how an applicant responded to the employer in an interview. The cultural background of the applicant greatly influenced their actions in the interview setting, one of those being eye contact.

Facial piercings and tattoos were addressed. Employer one believed that minimal amounts (like studs in the nose) were acceptable, however, if they had something like a lip ring and started playing with it with their tongue, employer one will get distracted and risks not hearing the applicant's answers. She also addressed excessive makeup and colored contacts as a distraction for the interviewer. Employer two also addressed facial piercings as something if kept at a minimum, would be alright.

## **Applicants**

The four applicants interviewed shared their knowledge on different aspects of what nonverbal communication, more specifically, what facial expressions displayed by the applicant in the interview setting deems them more appealing to the interviewer/employer. They believed employers looked for good eye contact and smiling. An outlier believed employers look for signs of lying. When in the actual interview setting, participants stated they would purposefully display the facial emotions of happiness and interest, yet only one stated they focused on their own eye contact. When asked how important eye contact was to the employer, all of the participants said it was crucial. One outlier stated that she believed eye contact would become

less crucial as the people of her generation begin conducting the interviews because she believed people can listen to each other without eye contact.

When it comes to genuine versus fake smiles, the applicants did not agree on what employers saw. One felt nervous the employer could see through a fake smile but did not worry about it because a fake smile made her laugh, which produced a genuine smile. Another applicant felt his fake smile and real smile looked exactly the same. One participant felt showing a fake smile meant he was showing that he understood the interviewer's comments. Finally, the fourth applicant simply said he knew the difference when he displayed a fake or a real smile, but did not elaborate on that.

While in the job interview setting, applicants elaborated on what kind of negative facial cues they might give off. Applicant one saw giving off a serious, concentrated face as being negative but simultaneously showing the interviewer that she was serious about the job. Applicant two believed yawning and being too relaxed were things he did in the interview setting that can have negative connotations in the eyes of the employer. Applicant three said on occasion he gave a confused look, which was a negative reaction because it showed he did not understand something. The fourth applicant stressed that looking elsewhere other than the interviewer(s) is frowned upon.

## **DISCUSSION**

Upon analysis, four themes emerged from the data collected through the interviews with the applicants and the employers. The themes of eye contact, smiling, facial reactions/responses and other nonverbal features were concluded to be present.

## **Eye Contact**

Judee Burgoon, creator of the Expectancy Violations Theory, states in her collaborative 1999 study that any single one verbal indicator can have multiple meanings. “For instance, direct eye contact can signal intimacy, imitation or anger” (Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999, p.107). Each nonverbal action of the individual (facial, body, etc.) has to be taken into account along with the rest of that individual’s nonverbals, meaning the combination an individual’s use of facial nonverbals with body nonverbals must be analyzed together and not separately. However, in the current study, eye contact took a more excessive importance as it was stressed as more significant and more impressionable ahead of its other nonverbal action counterparts.

All of the employers interviewed stated that eye contact was of the utmost importance in the interview setting, and if the applicant did not have good eye contact, that was seen as a negative trait. Out of the applicants interviewed, 100% of them agreed that eye contact was crucial in a job interview. Of the many nonverbal traits in existence, this one received the most data and agreement among all those interviewed.

Among the participants of the current study, applicant number one was an outlier of the eye contact data. “However important, I believe that as my generation gets older and starts becoming the ones doing the interviews, eye contact will become less important because I think it is an old people thing.” It was a viewpoint that was far from the rest of the applicants and drew in the researchers’ attention. As with a study with this small of a participant pool, this viewpoint deserves further research.

Individual perceptions in an interaction like a job interview setting can have profound effects on both persons or all involved if more than one person is doing the interviewing. Each individual will have an expectation of how the other should act or speak. Any violations to these

predicted actions can create a negative atmosphere, which could affect the success of the interview. However, “People behave differently according to the cultural values they grow up in, and this influences the reaction of the people considerably” (Psychology, Behavioral, and Social Science, 2015). This certainly applies to eye contact within interactions. Eye contact is heavily based on culture.

Burgoon and colleague Amy Hubbard found in 2004 that communication expectancies that are predicted by the parties involved in the interaction are developed through three factors: the characteristics of individual communicators, the characteristics of the relationship between sender and receiver, and the features of the communication context itself. “The presence of such expectancies does not imply that expectancies will be identical across cultures. To the contrary, the content of each culture’s interactional expectancies will vary substantially along (...) cultural dimensions” (Burgoon & Hubbard, 2004, p. 151). The amount of eye contact an applicant has in an interview greatly relies on what culture they were raised in and have come from. According to Burgoon and Hubbard (2004), the many factors of cultural backgrounds such as where the applicant falls on but is not limited to where he or she falls on the spectrums of the following scales: collectivism-individualism, uncertainty-avoidance, power distance, masculinity/femininity, polychronic and monochronic, universalism-particularism, degree of face concern, and high-versus low-context communication. In many cultures, looking down when someone of authority speaks to you is the norm. Akechi, H., Senju, A., Uibo, H., Kikuchi, Y., Hasegawa, T., and Hietanen, J. K. found in their 2013 study that “individuals from an East Asian culture perceive another's face as being angrier, unapproachable, and unpleasant when making eye contact as compared to individuals from a Western European culture” (Akechi et al., 2013 p. 9).

The results in the current study reflected a viewpoint of one that comprehends the variety of cultural backgrounds when considering the amount of eye contact. Many employer participants stated in their answers that they acknowledge the cultural backgrounds of their applicants and that eye contact might not be a norm where the applicant is from or from the background in which the applicant was raised. Employer two stated this:

“I wonder if you look at it in different terms of cultural factors, say different gestures and reactions in other cultures might mean different things. It is hard to evaluate. Interviews can be very intimidating for different cultures. Interviews in this country could seem like an interrogation. That person might be intimidated by the interview process if they come from a cultural background where that is not the norm.”

Culture can determine how much eye contact an applicant gives. However, when working in a country where the cultural norm has eye contact on an elevated pedestal, one might have to accommodate to a degree. Employer one stated she understood the backgrounds of her applicants were varied, but that for the position she was hiring for, eye contact and good communication skills were crucial. Thus, depending on the job the applicant is applying for, maintaining adequate eye contact would be in their best interest.

Eye contact is a crucial nonverbal facial component in the interview setting for the applicant. All participants viewed it as important and as a determinant of the applicant’s appeal to the employer. It’s a sign of respect and that the interviewee is giving the employer their full attention in their listening ears and cognitive functions. Despite acknowledging cultural differences, the American employers interviewed in the current study felt that a certain amount of eye contact, regardless of the cultural background of the applicant, should occur within the

interview setting. The only other nonverbal facial feature that came as close in the final data was an applicant's smiling behavior.

## **Smiling**

When it comes to job interviews smiling is the one of the most important nonverbal actions applicants can do. Three of the four applicants interviewed agreed that smiling was one of the facial reactions interviewers look for during an interview process. Two quotes from applicant participants were:

“Employers look for a positive facial like looking happy or smiling.”

“Employers look for those smiles to signify that you are happy to be there.”

Hall, Mast and Ruben state, “The appropriateness of smiling in an interview setting varies according to the type of job being interviewed for” (2015, p. 107).

When asked whether or not the applicants knew the difference between a fake smile and a real smile, few of the applicants knew when they were displaying a real smile or a fake smile. One applicant had trouble answering this question because he wasn't sure when he was giving a genuine smile or when he was giving a fake smile. Another applicant was nervous that the employer might see through her fake smile, but also believes that when she fake smiles that is funny to her and then she smiles a genuine grin. Another applicant believed that by showing a fake smile he is trying to show to the interviewer that he understands what is being said even if he doesn't really understand.

The latter two responses above are examples of how participants were able to utilize the “fake smile” in an interview. One applicant said that she uses the fake smile to get herself to a genuine smile. Whereas the other applicant uses a fake smile to show the interviewer that he is trying to understand what is being said.

This can correlate with the Uncertainty Reduction Theory that was developed by Charles Berger and Richard Calabrese. This theory can be defined as “the assumption that when strangers meet, their primary concern is one of uncertainty reduction or increasing predictability about the behavior of both themselves and others in the interaction” (as cited in Hebanni & Frey 2007, pg. 37). According to Clatterbuck, “Uncertainty is reduced by the strangers gathering information, which is perceived as adequate for the making of necessary decisions within the interaction” (as cited in Gudykunst, 1983, p.49 ). Employers do their best in collecting data from applicants to gain an understanding of their values and input on how they can best fit the company. If applicants are displaying facial reactions of uninterest such as yawning, rolling of eyes or looks of confusion when being asked questions, employers will formulate their idea of this applicant’s qualities, which will reduce uncertainty of the situation, but in turn will only make employers assume their reactions are negative.

The Uncertainty Reduction Theory plays a role in an interview process especially when in a situation where two people are having a conversation for the first time; there will be some uncertainty. A smile can take away some of that uncertainty when in an interview process. A smile can take away tension between the employer and the applicant to make the situation feel more comfortable. The following two quotes from employer participants emphasize this:

“I am also looking for an applicant who is smiling, it shows that they’re interested in the positions”

“(I look for) smiling and a confident look on their face”

Many of the employers agreed that if the applicant is not smiling that it could mean that he or she is not excited to be at the interview, and that the applicant is not happy to be there. When in an interview it is expected that an applicant looks happy, and that he or she happy to be there. This



correlates to the Expectancy Violations Theory, which is where if you are not smiling it may cause some uncertainty within the interview which would then tie back to the Uncertainty Reduction Theory to reduce that uncertainty by smiling. All eight of the employees that were interviewed agreed that smiling was second to eye contact in the most important non-verbal action category.

So how can one distinguish the difference between a fake smile and a real smile? A genuine smile is also called a Duchenne smile in scientific terms. A real smile is triggered by a major cheek bone known as the zygomatic muscle, which would cause the cheeks to enlarge and the exposing of the teeth. In a real smile the cheek bone is raised higher, whereas compared to a fake smile, Jewell (2013) stated, “studies have found that the human brain easily recognizes a false smile as different facial muscles are used to create it compared to a natural smile” ( para.4 ). The majority of the human population are able to recognize a fake smile from a real smile, however, falsification of smiles in interviews and other settings still occurs. And, of course, a real smile does come more naturally.

### **Facial Reactions and Responses**

The data suggested that the way employers viewed facial reactions was significant to the hireability of the potential employees. Positive facial reactions that the employers found appealing were looks of happiness, excitement, and looking interested when the applicants were being questioned or how they initially presented themselves. Employers also highly emphasized looking confident.

Employer 1 stated, “We look for people who are confident in approaching people, talking on the phone, meeting with constituents.” Employer 7 also noted, “Smiling and looking excited says a lot .” Ralph V. Exline, who studied non-verbal communication, discovered that the more

appealing an individual is to the other person, the higher the demonstration of eye contact and head nods is; more hand gestures are used, and more displays of pleasant facial expressions come into play (Hebbani & Frey, 2007). Facial expressions such as smiling, portraying a relaxed face, and kind eyes are examples of pleasant facial expressions.

Employers did their best in collecting data from applicants to gain an understanding of their values and input on how they can best fit the company. If applicants displayed facial reactions of disinterest such as yawning, rolling of eyes or looks of confusion when being asked questions, employers were able to formulate an idea of this applicant's qualities, which reduced uncertainty of the situation, but in turn, only made employers assume those reactions as negative. A few employers mentioned nervousness in the applicants; they said it was okay for applicants to be nervous but they still looked at how the applicant can impress them. There were also many comments on unfavorable facial reactions such as looks of confusion or cluelessness. Applying Uncertainty Reduction Theory, using interactive strategies in this case, employers not only looked for verbal cues to predict the behaviors of the applicant but the non-verbal facial expressions revealed the applicant's character and capability as well. Employer 1 stated that, "Facial expressions are important because if they give a funny scrunched up face when you ask a question you could assume they think that you asked a stupid question. When they look thoughtful or trying to be honest. It's important to look relaxed even though they are in a nervous situation."

Employer 2 said, "The nervousness, if they are constantly confused or if they look uncomfortable, look like they are not focused, if their eyebrows are raised and looking at me funny or if I can sense they are not very good at communicating with people, that is a turn off. In the interview I talk about the things that the intern would be doing and I watch their reactions to

the things that I tell them. If they seemed uninterested, not invested or confused I can probably ask if they have questions. If they don't indicate why they had that facial expression that may make me think they are not interested or that they do not intend to learn during the position.” Employers 4, 5, and 6 also mentioned that confused or shocked faces can make them assume that the applicants were not prepared for the job. They also stressed the look of confidence and how that can positively impact the interview process.

Hebbani and Frey (2007), looked at the aspect of the intercultural hiring process, and the application of the Uncertainty Reduction Theory, exploring non-verbal behaviors between U.S interviewers and Indian applicants. Their results of similarity/dissimilarity nonverbal behavior between applicant and employer did not seem to correlate with the hireability. They discovered that the verbal behavior was deemed more important versus the facial expressions due to the low-context culture. Even though facial expression did not play a major role compared to verbal expression, they found that when interviewers displayed more pleasant nonverbal behaviors, the interviewees reciprocated.

“Specifically, eye contact, facial expressions, and forward lean predicted (to varying degrees) hireability, whereas hand gestures and professional dress did not. More specifically, applicants’ eye contact and the similarity of facial expressions between interviewers and interviewees predicted hireability for interviewer 2, facial expressions were a marginally significant predictor for each interviewer” (Hebbani & Frey, 2007, p. 47).

Uncertainty Reduction Theory also suggests “that the more similar the nonverbal behaviors are of those in an initial interaction, then the more their uncertainty will be reduced and, consequently, the greater their liking for one another will be” (as cited in Hebbani & Frey, 2007, p. 37). For example, if the employer smiles, the applicant should follow suit and smile as

well. Instead of examining just positive facial expressions of applicants, Employer 6 mentioned that employers wanted to hire people like them, which in turn meant showing similar facial expressions to what the employers displayed, which can increase likeability. People in general like to hire people that are like them, because that resembles shared qualities, shared values, and a shared vision for the company.

### **Other Nonverbal Actions**

After viewing the results of all the interviews it was seen that each of the employers that were interviewed had one glaring similarity. When it comes to nonverbal communication, facial reactions were not the only forms that they were interested in. While eye contact, smiling and other facial expressions are important, employers are also interested in bodily nonverbal communication. Things such as posture, shaking hands, as well as hand gestures all play a role in the employers' interpretation of an applicant.

Throughout the interviews with the employers it was evident that they cared deeply about the posture of the applicant. They did not want an applicant who was slouching in the chair during the interview. This action made the applicants come across as lazy or uninterested. A 1978 study found that, "In humans, one of the means of communication is the posture of the body, in addition to facial expressions, personal distances, gestures and body movements. Posture conveys information about: Interpersonal relations. Personality traits such as confidence, submissiveness and openness" (Knapp, 1978, p. 5). Instead, the employers expected the interviewee to be sitting with an acceptable, straight posture which indicated leadership and tells the employer that you have confidence in your competence, sit with a slight forward lean. Sitting up straight shows formality and confidence in one's own abilities. The slight forward lean shows

that the applicant is interested in what they are hearing from the employer and are eager to learn more (Knapp, 1978).

Another aspect of bodily nonverbal communication that was evident throughout the interviews was shaking hands. The majority of the employers stated that they would expect the applicant to shake their hand when first meeting them as well as shaking it again at the end of the interview. Culture can have an effect on whether or not to expect a handshake. “In western countries the greetings are mostly the same. When Western people or businessmen meet each other the first time, they will shake hands. But also when western people already know each other the first body movement is to shake hands” (Knapp 1978, p. 6). This is a reason why it is important for the employer to know the possible cultural background of the applicant. In some countries, and in different cultures, men don’t typically shake women’s hands but if they do, it must be gentle and typically the woman has to offer. It is equally important for the applicant to know the culture of the employer as well as the company in order for both to reduce the uncertainty they have.

In addition to knowing the culture that is involved, knowledge of what not to do in interviews is also needed. Some of the data from the current study was worthy of extra interest in the results that many of the participants admitted to doing some behaviors that may be perceived as negative to the potential employer, but seemed to be able to explain away or justify said behavior so that it can be viewed in a positive manner. This data’s significance may help to explain maybe why some applicants continue to make the same negative behaviors even when they learn that those are not favorable. This could commence future further research and extend on the current study.

A third aspect of bodily nonverbal communication that the people who were interviewed made evident are hand gestures. "There are many kinds of gestures: folding arms, smoothing hair, looking away, waving or hands on the hips. These have many different meanings in different cultures, and what may be friendly in one country or region can be an insult in another" (Knapp, 1978, p. 8). Here is another reason why it is important for the employer and applicant to reduce the uncertainty of this interaction by becoming accustomed to the various cultures of the world. One should be aware, to the best of their ability, of the various customs and rituals of other cultures. Many of these nonverbal gestures were viewed as negative by the employers interviewed in this study. Many believed having arms folded makes the person seem closed off and uncomfortable. While they viewed gestures like hands folded or at their side to be more formal and viewed positively.

## **CONCLUSION**

After conducting the interviews, the researchers came to conclusion that the main non-verbal cues that both employers and applicants found important are eye contact and smiling, and other non-verbal body language. In addition to these non-verbal attributes, many other non-verbal cues were found in the data, but were not discussed in full due to only a small percentage of participants discussion them. The purpose of the current study to show fresh college graduates what employers are looking for in terms of facial behavior in the interview has been accomplished and current applicants' views seem to link well with what employers are looking for. In conclusion, the data has shed light and insight on the importance of the nonverbal/facial cues in an interview for a job. The current study's research question of "Upon the first interaction with an applicant, what facial cues do employers look for when formulating an impression?" was answered through the data collected to be smiles and eye contact. The null was rejected. The

hypothesis of “the more positive facial nonverbals the applicant displays in the interview, the more favorably the employer will look into hiring said applicant,” was proven to be true.

### **Limitations**

Some of the limitations that were found after conducting the research and data analysis was the majority of the employers that were interviewed were only looking to hire student workers rather than college graduates looking to start their careers. The researchers choose a convenience sampling to gather the data which limited the results of the research data to a certain demographic and type of employer. In addition, the participant size was also very small and cannot be applied to the general public.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

With this being said future research that can be applied to the current study is gathering data on how employers who hire their main employee base on new career professionals instead of those that work mainly with student workers who are still in their academic years. Some of the employers interviewed in the current study mentioned that they apply different qualities and expectations to those who are still in school than to those who have graduated. A future study should focus on interviewing employers who working in a career setting.

Also a suggestion for future research is further data collection on the outliers’ points of view from the current study. One applicant stated her belief that eye contact was valued more by the older generations than the younger ones. Another applicant stated that by looking confused he shows the employer that he understands what he or she is saying, which seems to contradict itself.

A final suggestion for further research is that many of the participants in the current study admitted to doing some behaviors that may be perceived as negative to the potential employer, but seemed to be able to explain away or justify said behavior so that it can be viewed in a positive manner. A study that could build on the current one could examine these behaviors and seek knowledge as to how they affect an applicant's hireability in the workforce.



## REFERENCES

- Akechi, H., Senju, A., Uibo, H., Kikuchi, Y., Hasegawa, T., & Hietanen, J. K. (2013). Attention to eye contact in the west and east: Autonomic responses and evaluative ratings. *Plos ONE*, 8(3), 1-10. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0059312
- Bar, M., Neta, M., & Linz, H. (2006). Very first impressions. *Emotion*, 6(2), 269-278.  
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/1528-35>
- Brody, L., & Hall, J. (2008). Gender and emotion in context. In M. Lewis, J. Haviland-Jones, & L. Feldman Barrett (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (pp. 395–408). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Hubbard, A. E. (2004). Cross-cultural and intercultural applications of Expectancy Violations Theory and Interaction Adaptation Theory, in *Theorizing About Intercultural Communication*, William B. Gudykunst (ed.). Sage, Thousand Oaks. p. 149-171.
- Burgoon, J. K., & Le Poire, B. A. (1999). Nonverbal cues and interpersonal judgments: Participant and observer perceptions of intimacy,.. *Communication Monographs*, 66(2), 105. Retrieved from *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost.  
<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=17&sid=8e38ed89-1e70-413b-b27a-73f36b4909d8%40sessionmgr4008&hid=4207&bdata=#AN=1987858&db=a9h>.
- Calvo, M., & Fernández-Martín, A. (2013). Can the eyes reveal a person's emotions? Biasing role of the mouth expression. *Motivation & Emotion*, 37(1), 202-211.  
doi:10.1007/s11031-012-9298-1

- Deutsch, F. M., LeBaron, D., & Fryer, M. M. (1987). What's in a smile? *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 11, 341–352.
- Ekman, P., Friesen, W. V., & Ancoli, S. (1980). Facial signs of emotional experience. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, 1125–1134.
- Gallo, C. (2007, February 8). It's Not Your Mouth That Speaks Volumes. *BusinessWeek Online*. p. 22. Retrieved from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=36fee8d7-f481-4db5-9d67-f98efbad79f8%40sessionmgr4001&hid=4109&bdata=#AN=23968498&db=keh>
- Gudykunst, W. B. (1983). Uncertainty reduction and predictability of behavior in low- and high-context cultures: An exploratory study. *Communication Quarterly*, 31(1). Retrieved from <http://web.b.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.csp.edu/ehost/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=930c5a19-d15d-4634-a541-ba5a2f5c19f1@sessionmgr120&hid=125&bdata=#db=ufh&AN=18515630>
- Hebbani, A., & Frey, L. R. (2007). The intercultural hiring interview: Applying Uncertainty Reduction Theory to the study of nonverbal behavior between U.S. interviewers and Indian applicants. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 16(3). Retrieved from <http://web.uri.edu/iaics/files/03-Aparna-Hebbani-Lawrence-R.-Frey.pdf>
- Jewell, J. (2013, October 30). The importance of smiling in interviews. *Career Addict*. Retrieved from <http://www.careeraddict.com/the-importance-of-smiling-in-interviews>.
- Knapp, M. L. (1978). *Nonverbal communication in human interaction*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Krumhuber, E., Manstead, A., Cosker, D., Marshall, D., & Rosin, P. (2009). Effects of Dynamic Attributes of Smiles in Human and Synthetic Faces: A Simulated Job Interview Setting. *Journal Of Nonverbal Behavior*, 33(1), 1-15. doi:10.1007/s10919-008-0056-8

Krys, K., Hansen, K., Xing, C., Espinosa, A. D., Szarota, P., & Morales, M. F. (2015). It is better to smile to women: Gender modifies perception of honesty of smiling individuals across cultures. *International Journal Of Psychology*, 50(2), 150-154. doi:10.1002/ijop.12087

Lundqvist, D., & Ohman, A. (2005). Emotion regulates attention: The relation between facial configurations, facial emotion, and visual attention. *Visual Cognition*, 12(1), 60-77.  
Retrieved March 2, 2016.

Mattarozzi, K., Todorov, A., Marzocchi, M., & Russo, P. M. (2015). Effects of gender and personality on first impression. *Effects on Gender and Personality on First Impression*. Retrieved February 9, 2016, from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.elm4you.org/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=c3d1116a-c5db-4728-847b-c7b0decb0812@sessionmgr4002&vid=3&hid=4214>

Psychology, Behavioral, and Social Science. Expectancy Violation Theory. (2015).

*Communication Theory*. Retrieved from <http://communicationtheory.org/expectancy-violation-theory/>

Ruben, M., Hall, J., & Mast, M. (2014, August 29). Smiling in a job interview: When less is more. *The Journey of Social Psychology*. Retrieved from <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=8ca6b3fd-2796-4356-bc52-d2cb6f158747@sessionmgr4010&vid=4&hid=4112>.

White, M. C. (2015). How You Could Botch a Job Interview Without Saying a Word. *Time.Com*, N.PAG.<http://web.a.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=7&sid=fab4fa9b-4fd6-4595-a09f-7512c582b2ba%40sessionmgr4005&hid=4109&bdata=#AN=100947432&db=keh>

Wolffhechel K, Fagertun J, Jacobsen UP, Majewski W, Hemmingsen AS, Larsen CL. (2014)

Interpretation of Appearance: The Effect of Facial Features on First Impressions and Personality. PLoS ONE 9(9): e107721. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0107721

Woodzicka, J. A., & LaFrance, M (2005). The effects of subtle sexual harassment on women's performance in a job interview. *Sex Roles*, 53, 67–77.

# ABSTRACT

Figure 1.1

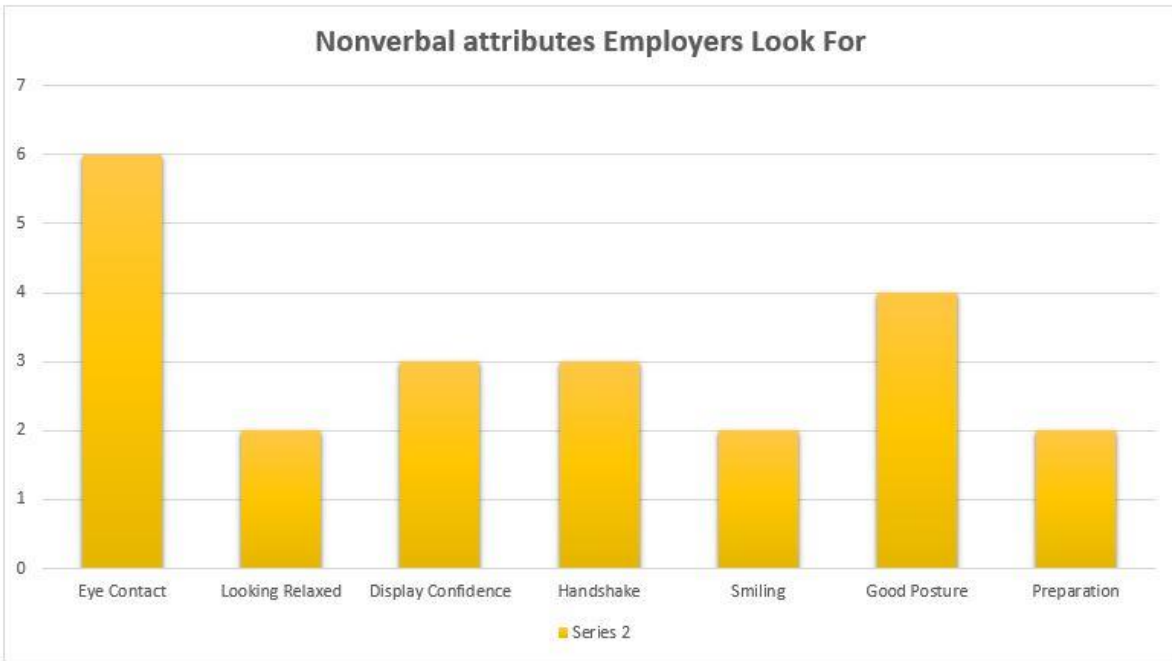


Figure 1.2

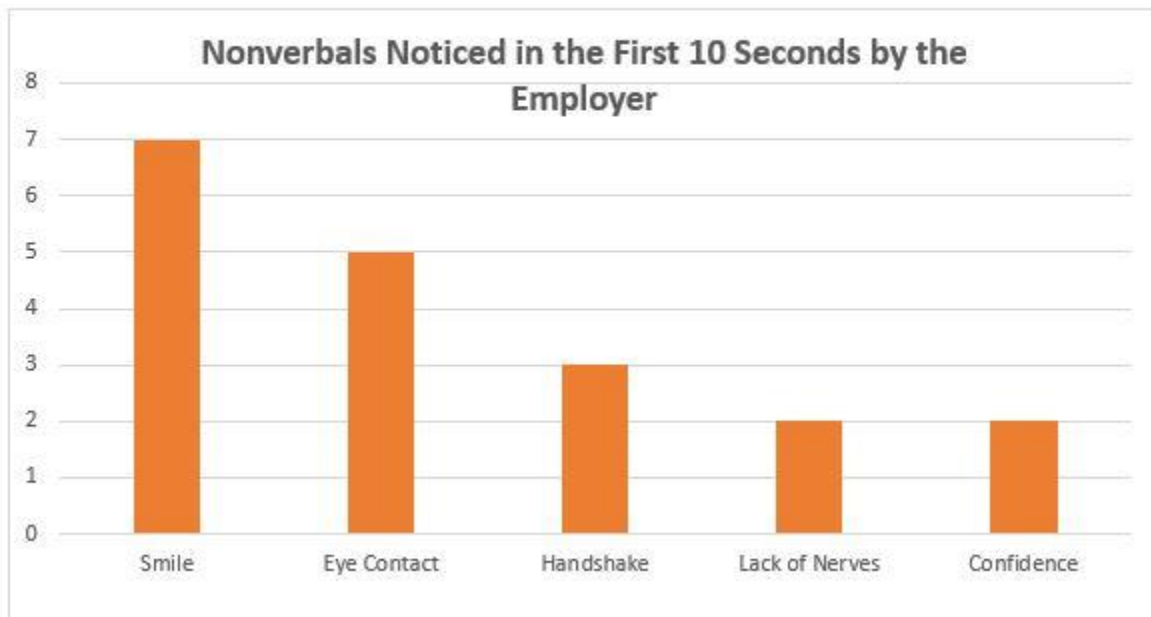


Figure 1.3

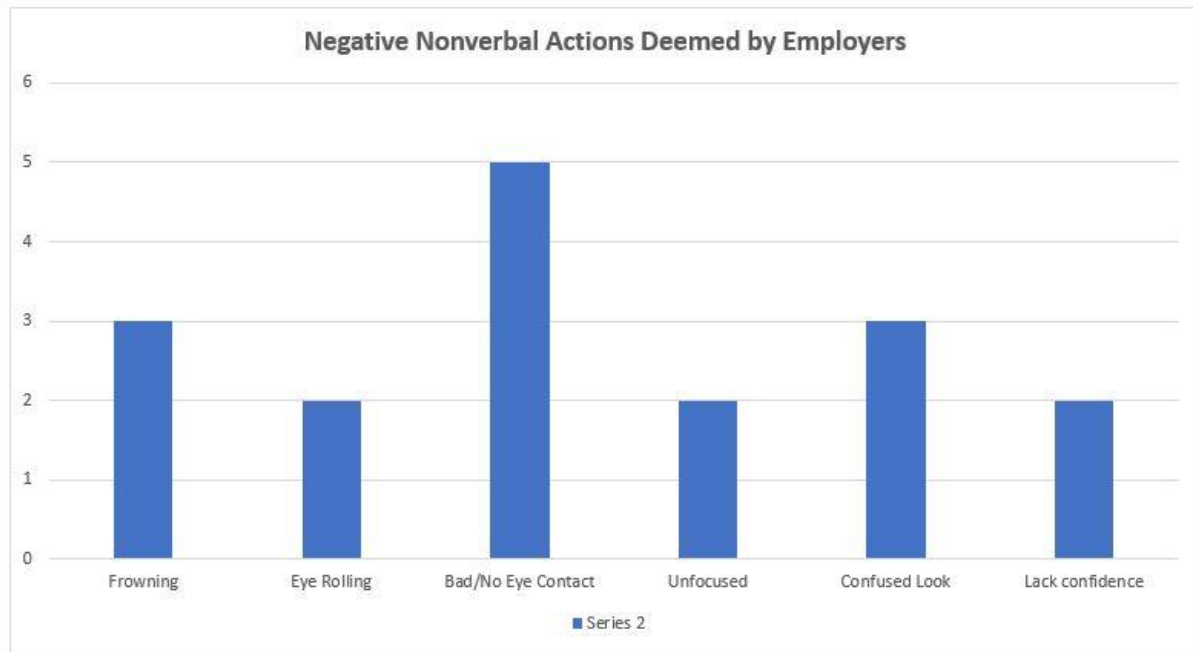


Figure 1.4

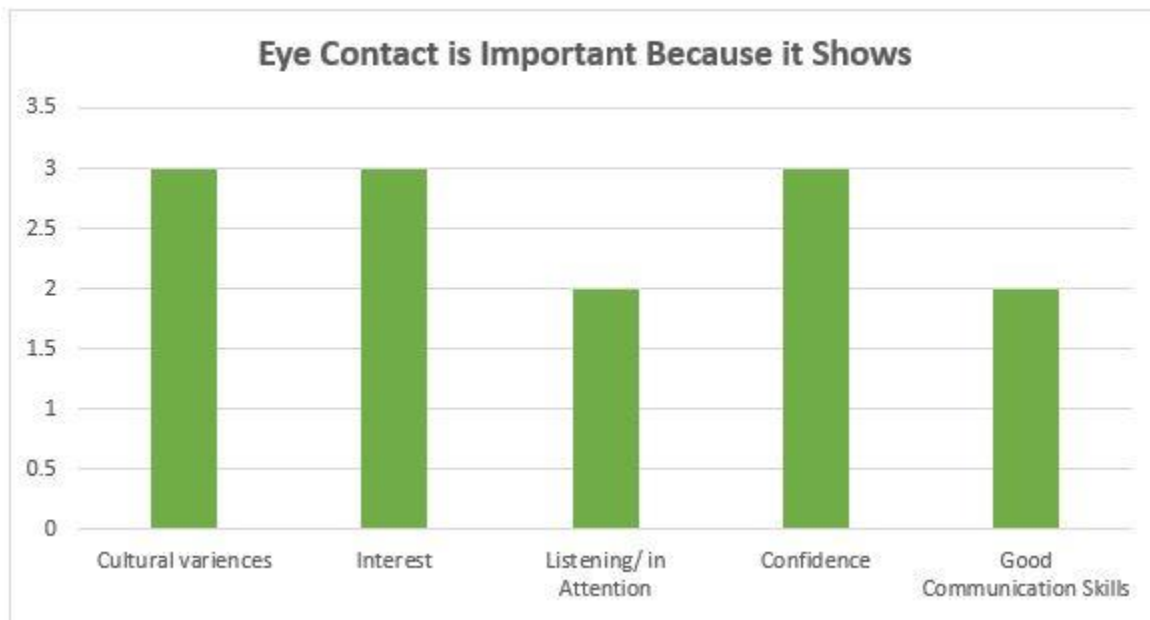
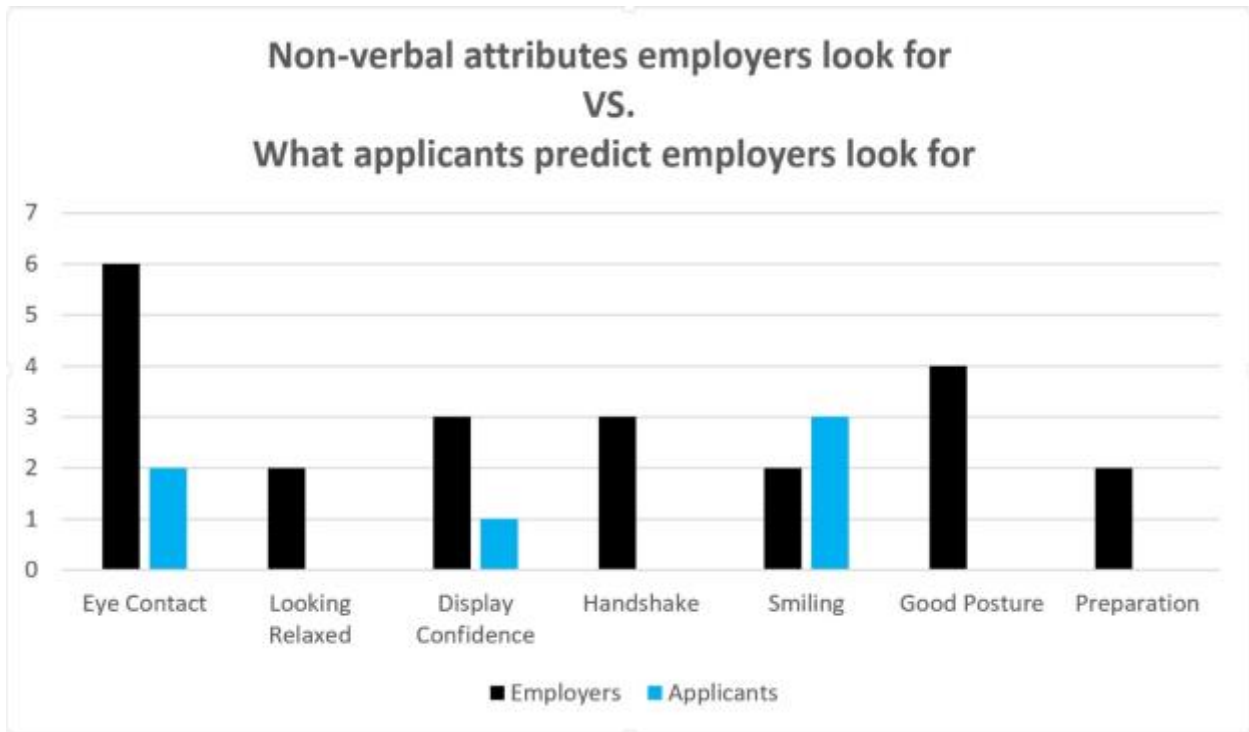
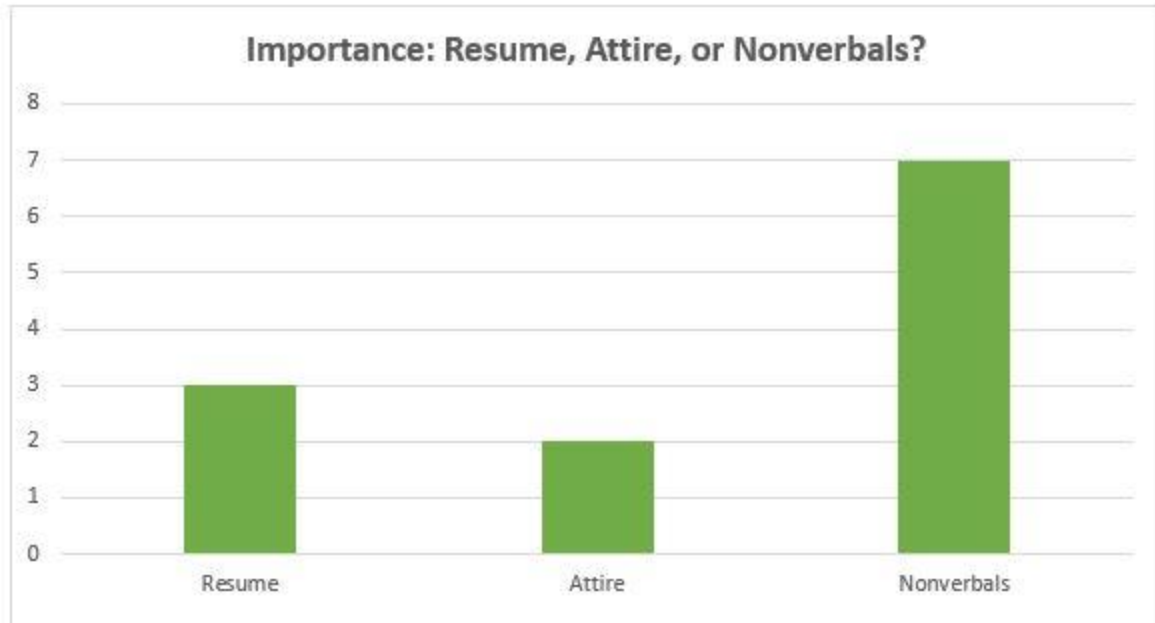


Figure 1.5



## Employer and Applicant Views of Negative Non-Verbal Facial reactions

