Why we see faces everywhere we look

13th July, 2021

Creative Commons 2.0
via Katheirne Hitt on flickr.com

If you have ever imagined a face in an inanimate object, your brain is engaged in a process called pareidolia. This is the tendency to see a pattern or meaning in something, where actually there is nothing there. Seeing faces in everyday objects is a common experience. Many of us perceive a smiley face in the clouds, in the froth of a cappuccino, or in an object as mundane as an electrical plug socket. Scientists from the University of Sydney in Australia conducted a study to investigate whether our brain processes these illusory faces in the same way it does with real human faces. Their research suggests there are some similarities in how we recognise both human and "false" faces.

In the study, 17 volunteers looked at a series of illusory and human faces. They had to rate the strength of emotional attachment they felt upon seeing each one. The researchers' conclusion was that the same neural circuitry was involved in determining what was or wasn't a real face. Psychologist David Alais said: "We know these objects are not truly faces, yet the perception of a face lingers." He added: "We end up with...a parallel experience that the object is both a compelling face and an object." Mr Alais said the brain sees two things at once, and that we focus more on the image of a face than the fact it is an object. He added: "The first impression of a face does not give way to the second perception of an object."

Sources: *sciencealert.com / theguardian.com / royalsocietypublishing.org*

Writing

We need to see more happy faces everywhere. Discuss.

Chat

Talk about these words from the article.

imagine / face / inanimate / process / tendency / smiley / clouds / investigate / false / volunteers / human / emotional / conclusion / perception / object / brain / object

True / False

1) Pareidolia is the brain seeing images in inanimate objects. T / F

2) The article says seeing faces in everyday objects is not so common. T / F

3) The article says many of us see smiley faces in coffee froth. T / F

4) Scientists say we recognise real and "false" faces in similar ways. T / F

5) Researchers conducted their tests on 170 people. T / F

6) The brain used a different neural circuitry when looking at false faces. T / F

7) A psychologist says we have a parallel experience with false faces. T / F

8) The psychologist says the image of a false face lingers in our mind. T / F

Synonym Match

(The words in **bold** are from the news article.)

1.	**imagined**	a.	fake
2.	**pattern**	b.	look into
3.	**common**	c.	image
4.	**investigate**	d.	design
5.	**illusory**	e.	sequence
6.	**series**	f.	awareness
7.	**attachment**	g.	visualised
8.	**perception**	h.	stays
9.	**lingers**	i.	normal
10.	**impression**	j.	affection

Discussion – Student A

a) Do you see faces in inanimate objects?

b) What do you think when you see faces in things?

c) What do you think of smiley faces?

d) What other things do you see in inanimate objects?

e) What does a smiley face represent?

f) What do you think of this research?

g) How often do you draw happy faces?

h) What makes you happy?

Phrase Match

1. imagined a face in
2. Seeing faces in everyday
3. an electrical plug
4. our brain processes these illusory faces
5. Their research suggests there
6. volunteers looked at a series of illusory
7. rate the strength of emotional
8. determining what was
9. the perception of a face
10. we focus more

a. on the image
b. in the same way
c. and human faces
d. lingers
e. an inanimate object
f. socket
g. or wasn't a real face
h. are some similarities
i. attachment
j. objects

Discussion – Student B

a) What do you think about what you read?
b) Does looking at a happy face change your mood?
c) Who is the happiest person you know?
d) Why do cartoons and drawings show inanimate things with happy faces?
e) What makes a happy face look happy?
f) Should people always look happy in photographs?
g) What would make you happier?
h) What questions would you like to ask the researchers?

Spelling

1. an tnimienaa object
2. your brain is egaendg in a process
3. the ncndeyet to see a pattern
4. Many of us eercipve a smiley face
5. an electrical plug sekcto
6. these srylolui faces
7. 17 urnevstole
8. rate the strength of oomtainel attachment
9. the same neural tyircuric
10. the perception of a face inslegr
11. a cnlpgelmoi face
12. The first mipsroensi of a face

Role Play

Role A – Happiness
You think happiness is the most interesting facial expression. Tell the others three reasons why. Tell them what is wrong with their expressions. Also, tell the others which is the least interesting of these (and why): surprise, awe or disgust.

Role B – Surprise
You think surprise is the most interesting facial expression. Tell the others three reasons why. Tell them what is wrong with their expressions. Also, tell the others which is the least interesting of these (and why): happiness, awe or disgust.

Role C – Awe
You think awe is the most interesting facial expression. Tell the others three reasons why. Tell them what is wrong with their expressions. Also, tell the others which is the least interesting of these (and why): surprise, happiness or disgust.

Role D – Disgust
You think disgust is the most interesting facial expression. Tell the others three reasons why. Tell them what is wrong with their expressions. Also, tell the others which is the least interesting of these (and why): surprise, awe or happiness.

Speaking – Expressions

Rank these with your partner. Put the most interesting facial expressions at the top. Change partners often and share your rankings.

- Happiness
- Surprise
- Disgust
- Anger
- Sadness
- Fear
- Awe
- Hatred

Answers – Synonym Match

1. g	2. d	3. i	4. b	5. a
6. e	7. j	8. f	9. h	10. c

Answers – True False

1 T	2 F	3 T	4 T	5 F	6 F	7 T	8 T

Answers to Phrase Match and Spelling are in the text.