All in My Head?: How Does Mood Affect How We Interpret Facial Expressions?

What visual cues do people use to judge facial expressions? Do those cues change with the observer’s mood, or is emotion recognition in facial expressions based on objective, formulaic facial cues that Ekman’s notion of universal facial expressions suggests (Ekman, 1970)? After manipulating mood using classical music, subjects were asked to rate the emotion of Mona Lisa’s facial expression on a Sad-Happy continuum over many trials, in which different parts of her face were distorted by superimposed grayscale pixels of random noise. Results showed both happy and sad mood groups only focused on the mouth. The mood manipulation was not statistically significant; however, the analysis of facial expression interacted with mood context. These findings complement the results of Kontsevich and Tyler (2004) and provide evidence for an objective analysis of facial expression.