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QUESTION STATS

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Why do Russians rarely smile?

Or:

- What is considered a smile if you are in Russia?
- How do you define a smile in Russia if you are not a native?

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Tony Silva

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27 Answers



Gideon Lichfield, Covered Russia and the CIS for The Economist 2002-2004.

I asked Russian friends this when I lived in Moscow. Their answer was that smiling for no obvious reason makes Russians suspect you're being false. (Russian society, for historical reasons*, is one in which people are distrustful of anyone they don't know; the flipside is they form very strong bonds and close friendships.)

I was stopped by a policeman one day as I was walking down the street smiling. 'Where are you going, looking so happy?' he asked. Then he insisted on checking my documents and searching my pockets. He either thought I was on drugs, or he figured I was a foreigner and good for a shakedown.

* Historical reasons: a violent history with many wars and invasions; large distances and harsh weather conditions that make living an exercise in survival; and a repressive state, both under the tsars and the Soviets, in which dissidence was punished severely and anyone could be an informant.

12,746 views • 385 upvotes • Updated 4 Sep, 2010

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Artem Kliatchkine, software developer

An average russian doesn't expect anything good from a stranger, doesn't matter if a stranger is a foreigner or another russian, here we are true internationalists :-). Smile is something you keep for a circle of close people, friends and relatives who help you to protect against the generally unfriendly world.

The answer of [Natalia Nezvanova](#) contains a big part of a joke of course. But also a bit of true. In 1990s, during a heavy economical crisis the streets of many Russian cities were not a safe place. In an unsafe place a smile on your face marks you as someone careless, not prepared for defence, which means an easy target.

When coming to a European country for the first time a russian initially has a strange feeling of a safety and a psychological comfort. "They smile. They are friends." I know it for myself. Then he understands that they are just polite in such a way, otherwise it is not different from his homeland. For some it becomes a reason for a disappointment. "They all smile, but their smiles are all fake". I heard it several times.

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Note that for a Russian coming to US the situation could be different and the feeling of fake comes immediately, American smiles look too exaggerated for a Russian.

Also, since Russia is now much more open, the situation changes. The younger people in big Russian cities are now about the same as the ones in European countries.

1,077 views • 23 upvotes • Updated 24 Jun

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Lyena Solomon, Internet Consultant - SEO, Analytics

Weighing in as a native Russian. My 2 kopecks.

When you are working, studying, etc. you take your task seriously. There is no room for smiling. When you are relaxed, in the company of your friends, enjoying life - then you smile. There has always been a clear division between "serious business" and leisure. That's why Russians do not smile at work but very friendly when you get to know them.

It is not customary in Russia to smile at a person in the street. It is an American custom and I quite like it. For Russians, if a person smiles all the time, it is an indication that they have retarded mental development. In order not to appear slow, Russians don't smile at strangers.

1,994 views • 25 upvotes • Written 24 Jan, 2011

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Lee Thé, native Californian; BA Sociology UCLA; backgrounds in advertising, school tea...

I have a friend who emigrated to the USA from Moscow around 20 years ago. Recently she spent a few months traveling in Europe and Russia, and found that she had become an American "smiler."

This was driven home to her in Paris, when a stranger struck up a conversation with her--difficult since she doesn't speak French--but she was eventually able to determine that he was asking her price.

Oops.

However, it's clear to me (trained as a sociologist) that her unsmiling visage when she lived in Russia wasn't fake, and her smiling one now isn't fake either.

The Russians in this thread who complain that American smiles are fake don't get it. Not all human expressions are universal. Different expressions mean different things in different cultures.

Americans are highly mobile, residentially, at work, you name it. So for us it's a survival trait to be able to cooperate with strangers. Also, Americans are some of the most law-abiding people on Earth, which makes it safer to cooperate with strangers.

What many non-Americans don't "get" about us is that we are not a country based on a race; we're a country based on an idea--an idea of strangers from all over the planet coming together with a shared vision of what a society can and should be.

Of course we fall short of fully achieving this. Especially with blacks, especially in the South. Nevertheless, there's a reason why so many people (of every race) migrate--and want to migrate--here from every corner of the globe. Plus

America is so affluent, and offers so much opportunity to so many, all within the framework of the American Dream, that it should be easy to understand why we smile.

Americans don't misinterpret American smiles. We know it isn't an invitation to share a bed with you, or an expression of undying comradeship. Smiling at you doesn't mean I want to be your BFF. It just signals benign intent and a wish to share the ideals of our culture with you.

That said, the talk of others about wanting to look manly reminds me of a conversation I had with the Jordanian immigrant who was the manager of an auto dealership here in Silicon Valley. He liked to hire homeboys, as most immigrants do. And he said his biggest problem in training them to sell cars in America was in trying to get them to smile. In Arab countries a man who goes around smiling is suspected of being homosexual, or at the very least "unmanly." Seems like that's true of Russians as well.

And an unsmiling public is probably common to contries with a recent history of turmoil and social un-cohesion, and one in which the unifying element is more tribal and less conceptual.



1,520 views • 17 upvotes • Written 17 Aug

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Olga Kuteynikova

Do you really think that smiling to a stranger is a good idea? :)
What would you think if pretty (or even non-pretty:)) girl smile to you for example in bus or at the street? Isn't it a signal that she is interested?
Well, smile in Russia shows that you are going to have a chat with someone, you are interested in a person.
But perhaps smiling to each other and wishing to strangers good day would

make us feel together.

From the other side, non-smiling is some kind of psychological feature: you can't smile when you do not feel yourself happy.

Why do not Russians smile? Obviously, because most of us are not happy, especially people-after-thirty. Look to Russia's literature - Dostoevsky, for example, his books make me feel really sad, and we have to learn Idiot at school.

I'm not sure that we would think that someone smiling is a little nuts:), but you are happy and i'm tired, cold and feeling exhausted of everything. It is just envy:)

And yes all these smiles were placed here to show that we are smiling, when we really want to chat and feel ourselves happy. Have a good day ;)

1,895 views • 18 upvotes • Written 31 Jan, 2011

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Vladimir Schmidthof, Born in Soviet Union, live in Russia for all my life. Married, with kids.

I have a theory based on nothing but my personal experience.

I've been to the U.S., I've been to Western and Eastern Europe as well.

I cannot say that Europeans (German, Finnish, Czech, Austrian, Swiss, Greek) smile more than us Russians.

Americans do.

So I would phrase the question "Why Americans smile that often".

After a week of business trip in States and speaking English all the time I found out that I have an unusual pain at the back of my cheeks, somewhere where lower jaw connects with the rest of the skull. That was because I have good English pronunciation (not my idea, I've been told that by American colleagues) but English (without Heavy Russian accent) requires different face muscles to work. Coincidence that those are same muscles we use to smile. So my wild guess is that smile is deeply connected to the language we speak often.

1,220 views • 16 upvotes • Written 29 Jul

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