

Why Women Smile by Amy Cunningham

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Introduction

A smile is commonly interpreted as evidence of happiness, friendliness, confidence, or satisfaction. People often assume that an individual who smiles is emotionally comfortable, while someone who maintains a neutral expression may be perceived as unfriendly, angry, or unapproachable. Amy Cunningham's essay "Why Women Smile," however, challenges the belief that every smile reflects genuine pleasure. She argues that women frequently smile because social expectations encourage them to appear agreeable, harmless, attractive, and emotionally available, even when their actual feelings are very different.

Originally published in *Lear's* magazine and later reprinted in *The Norton Reader*, Cunningham's essay combines personal reflection, historical observation, humor, psychology, and evolutionary comparison. Her central concern is not that women should never smile. Instead, she questions why women are expected to smile more consistently than men and why a woman's neutral or serious expression is so often treated as a social problem. Cunningham describes many women's smiles as operating on "autopilot," suggesting that repeated social training can turn an expression into a nearly automatic performance (Cunningham, 2004).

Cunningham's argument remains relevant because smiling is not only an expression of emotion. It is also a form of nonverbal communication shaped by gender roles, social position, cultural expectations, and situational demands. Research confirms that women generally smile more than men, but the difference changes according to context, age, culture, occupation, and the social roles people occupy. A major meta-analysis found a moderate gender difference in smiling, while also concluding that the difference was strongly influenced by "rules and roles" rather than being fixed or purely biological (LaFrance et al., 2003).

This essay argues that Cunningham effectively reveals the gendered social pressure hidden behind an apparently harmless facial expression. Her discussion shows that women's smiles may communicate genuine joy, politeness, nervousness, submission, emotional control, professional service, or resistance to conflict. However, her biological and primate comparisons should not be interpreted as proving that women are naturally submissive. Women's greater tendency to smile is better understood as the product of interacting biological capacities, social learning, power relationships, and cultural display rules.

Cunningham's Central Argument

Cunningham begins from an everyday observation: women appear to smile frequently, even when there is no obvious reason for happiness. A woman may smile while greeting a stranger, listening to criticism, responding to an uncomfortable remark, serving a customer, posing for a photograph, or attempting to end an awkward conversation. In these situations, the smile may have little connection to her internal emotional state.

The essay asks readers to reconsider what such expressions mean. Cunningham suggests that society often expects women to look pleasant regardless of whether they feel tired, angry, worried, disappointed, or bored. A woman's face becomes something available for public evaluation. If she does not smile, others may assume that she is hostile, unhappy, arrogant, or unfeminine.

Men are also influenced by emotional expectations, but the expectations are often different. Traditional masculinity allows or even rewards seriousness, emotional restraint, confidence, and dominance. A serious man may be interpreted as focused or authoritative, whereas a serious woman may be accused of being cold or difficult. This unequal interpretation gives smiling a political dimension because it reflects who is expected to provide emotional reassurance to others.

Cunningham therefore treats the smile as both a personal expression and a social obligation. A voluntary smile can communicate delight or affection, but a required smile may conceal a woman's actual response. The problem is not the facial movement itself. The problem arises when women lose the freedom to decide when their emotions should become visible.

A Smile Does Not Always Mean Happiness

Modern research supports Cunningham's argument that smiles are not simple signs of pleasure. Human smiles perform several social functions and can communicate reward, affiliation, embarrassment, appeasement, superiority, politeness, or controlled discomfort. Martin et al. (2017) explain that smiles are multipurpose signals whose forms and meanings vary according to the social challenge being addressed. Some smiles reward another person, some establish friendliness, and others communicate status or dominance.

Researchers also distinguish between enjoyment smiles and smiles produced for other purposes. The expression commonly called a Duchenne smile involves movement around both the mouth and the eyes and is more frequently associated with genuine enjoyment. Other smiles may involve the mouth without the same muscular activity around the eyes. Research by Ekman et al. (1990) found that Duchenne smiles occurred more frequently during enjoyable experiences, while masking smiles were more common when people attempted to conceal negative reactions.

This distinction does not mean that observers can always identify dishonesty simply by looking at

someone's eyes. People differ in facial movement, social skill, culture, and physical ability. It does demonstrate, however, that smiling cannot be reduced to one emotion.

A woman may smile because she is genuinely delighted. She may also smile because she wants to reassure someone, reduce tension, appear professional, avoid provoking anger, or protect herself in an uncertain interaction. The same visible expression can arise from very different internal experiences.

Type or function of smile	Possible meaning	Relationship to Cunningham's argument
Enjoyment smile	Genuine pleasure, amusement, or affection	Shows that some smiles authentically express happiness
Polite smile	Courtesy or acknowledgment	May be used even when strong emotion is absent
Affiliative smile	Friendliness, cooperation, or social connection	Reflects expectations that women should appear approachable
Appeasement smile	Reduction of conflict or perceived threat	May emerge when a person feels socially less powerful
Masking smile	Concealment of anger, anxiety, or disappointment	Supports Cunningham's claim that smiles can hide genuine feelings
Professional smile	Customer service or organizational display rule	Demonstrates how emotional expression can become part of paid work
Dominance smile	Superiority, confidence, or control	Challenges the assumption that all smiles communicate submission

The table demonstrates why the statement "women smile because they are happy" is inadequate. A smile must be interpreted within its interpersonal, emotional, cultural, and institutional context.

Do Women Actually Smile More Than Men?

Cunningham's observation that women smile more frequently than men has considerable empirical support. LaFrance et al. (2003) analyzed 448 effect sizes drawn from 162 research reports. They found a statistically significant tendency for women and adolescent girls to smile more than men and adolescent boys. The average effect size was moderate rather than absolute, meaning that many men smiled frequently and many women did not.

More importantly, the researchers found that the difference depended on social circumstances. Gender differences became larger or smaller depending on culture, age, emotional context, awareness of gender expectations, and the roles occupied by participants. Women did not simply smile more under every condition.

A Yale summary of this research noted that gender differences could become much smaller when women and men occupied similar social and occupational roles. This finding supports Cunningham's social argument because it indicates that smiling behavior changes when expectations and power relationships change.

Women's smiling should therefore not be described as an unchanging female trait. It is a patterned behavior encouraged by social rewards and punishments. Smiling women may be perceived as warm, cooperative, honest, or approachable, while women who do not smile may be judged more negatively. Research on social perception has found that smiling generally improves judgments related to warmth and sociability, although the consequences can vary according to the observer and situation (Krys et al., 2015).

The expectation creates a self-reinforcing cycle. Girls observe women smiling, receive praise for appearing pleasant, and discover that friendliness makes social interaction easier. As adults, they may smile automatically because they have learned that a neutral expression produces criticism or misunderstanding.

Gender Socialization and Emotional Display Rules

Cunningham's argument can be understood through the concept of emotional display rules. Display rules are social expectations governing which emotions people should reveal, suppress, exaggerate, or disguise in particular circumstances.

Children begin learning these rules from families, schools, peer groups, religious communities, media, and other institutions. Girls may be encouraged to express positive emotions, sympathy, sadness, and concern while being discouraged from showing anger or aggression. Boys may be permitted greater anger but discouraged from crying, fear, or visible vulnerability.

Chaplin's (2015) review of gender and emotional expression supports a biopsychosocial interpretation. Gender differences in emotional behavior often emerge gradually and are strongly affected by social context. Children are more likely to display gender-consistent emotions in situations where peers or unfamiliar adults make social expectations particularly noticeable.

This evidence challenges the idea that women smile simply because they possess a naturally happier or more submissive personality. Biological characteristics may influence temperament and emotional response, but social learning determines which expressions are rewarded, tolerated, or punished.

A girl who is repeatedly told to "cheer up," "be nice," or "give us a smile" learns that her face affects how others judge her character. Meanwhile, a boy may learn that seriousness communicates confidence. Over time, these repeated interactions become embodied habits. People may follow gendered display rules without consciously deciding to do so.

Cunningham's phrase "autopilot" is therefore significant. It suggests that social regulation is most effective when it no longer feels like direct control. The woman smiles before consciously considering whether she wants to smile because the expectation has become habitual.

Smiling, Power, and Submission

One of Cunningham's most provocative arguments concerns the relationship between smiling and submission. She refers to primate behavior in which a bared-teeth display can communicate nonaggression, appeasement, or acknowledgment of another animal's status.

Modern evolutionary research provides some support for a relationship between primate bared-teeth displays and human smiling. Studies suggest that primate facial expressions can communicate social intentions such as affiliation, submission, or reduced threat. However, these displays are complex and vary among species, relationships, and contexts. They should not be treated as identical to every human smile.

Cunningham's comparison is rhetorically powerful because it encourages readers to view excessive smiling as a possible signal of reassurance: "I am friendly," "I am not challenging you," or "I will not create conflict." Nevertheless, comparing women directly with submissive monkeys can oversimplify human behavior if interpreted literally.

Women are not biologically programmed to submit to men through smiling. Human beings consciously and unconsciously adapt their facial expressions to manage complicated social situations. A person in a lower-power position may smile to calm a supervisor, customer, police officer, stranger, or physically threatening individual. Men may also use appeasing smiles in unequal encounters.

The gender difference arises because women are more often expected to perform warmth and because some women calculate that friendliness is safer than confrontation. In this sense, smiling can

be a survival strategy rather than evidence of weakness. A woman's smile during an uncomfortable interaction may represent her awareness of risk and her attempt to control the situation.

Power must therefore be considered alongside gender. An employer may smile less than an employee, a professor less than a student, or a customer less than a service worker. Status can influence who is expected to display reassurance and who is permitted to remain emotionally neutral.

Smiling as Emotional Labor

Cunningham's argument is especially relevant to workplaces in which employees are paid to create positive experiences for customers. Flight attendants, nurses, receptionists, sales workers, servers, teachers, care workers, and call-center employees may be expected to remain friendly even when they experience stress, disrespect, or exhaustion.

Hochschild (1983) introduced the concept of emotional labor to describe the management of feelings and expressions as part of paid employment. An employee may be required to produce a publicly acceptable emotional display regardless of what the employee actually feels. Wharton (2009) explains that workplaces establish feeling and display rules that influence how employees regulate emotion during interactions with customers, patients, and colleagues.

Women often carry a disproportionate share of emotional labor because they are heavily represented in service and care occupations and because femininity is culturally associated with warmth, patience, and nurturance. A male employee who remains serious may be regarded as efficient, while a female employee using the same expression may be criticized for lacking friendliness.

Surface acting occurs when a worker changes the outward expression without changing the internal feeling. For example, an employee may smile at a rude customer while privately feeling angry. Deep acting occurs when the worker tries to alter the internal emotion so that the required display feels more genuine.

Repeated conflict between felt and displayed emotion can create emotional dissonance. Research reviewed by Wharton (2009) indicates that sustained performance of emotions inconsistent with one's actual feelings may contribute to distress, self-estrangement, dissatisfaction, and concerns about psychological well-being.

Cunningham's essay anticipates this concern outside formal employment as well. Women may perform unpaid emotional work in families, friendships, schools, and public spaces by smiling to maintain harmony. The social expectation may not appear in a written job description, but it still regulates behavior.

The Cost of Refusing to Smile

Cunningham's argument becomes strongest when one considers what happens to women who do not smile. Society does not merely reward smiling; it may penalize its absence.

A neutral-faced woman may be described as angry, unfriendly, intimidating, arrogant, or emotionally troubled. Equivalent seriousness in a man may be interpreted as authority, concentration, independence, or confidence. Women are therefore placed in a difficult position: they are expected to display warmth, but excessive smiling can also reduce perceptions of seriousness or competence.

Research indicates that smile intensity can increase perceptions of warmth while sometimes decreasing perceptions of competence. Wang et al. (2017) found that broad smiles could make individuals appear warmer but less competent than slight smiles under certain conditions.

This trade-off is particularly important for women in leadership. Gender stereotypes traditionally associate women with warmth and men with agency, decisiveness, and authority. Women leaders may be criticized if they appear too serious, but they may also be underestimated if they appear excessively cheerful or accommodating.

The result is a double bind. A woman must appear approachable but not weak, serious but not cold, confident but not aggressive, and emotionally expressive but not irrational. The pressure to manage these contradictory expectations requires constant self-monitoring.

Cunningham's call for women to smile less can therefore be understood as a demand for expressive freedom. She is not recommending permanent unhappiness. She is arguing that women should be permitted to display concentration, anger, fatigue, skepticism, and neutrality without having their personalities judged negatively.

Cunningham's Use of Rhetorical Strategies

Cunningham strengthens her essay by combining several rhetorical appeals. Her personal voice establishes ethos because she presents herself as a woman who has participated in the smiling behavior she examines. Rather than describing women from a distant academic position, she acknowledges her own habits and questions why she developed them.

Her use of psychological and evolutionary material provides logos. By discussing different types of smiles and comparing human expressions with primate communication, she attempts to show that smiling is more complex than a direct reflection of happiness.

The essay also uses pathos by encouraging female readers to recognize their own experiences. Many women can recall being instructed to smile for photographs, appear pleasant in public, or change a serious expression. Such familiarity makes the argument emotionally persuasive.

Humor is another important strategy. A highly formal attack on smiling could appear exaggerated because smiling is usually regarded as harmless and positive. Cunningham's wit allows her to question a familiar behavior without making the essay excessively severe.

Finally, the essay uses defamiliarization. This rhetorical technique presents an ordinary object or action in an unfamiliar way so readers must reconsider it. By connecting a woman's smile to submission, social training, history, and power, Cunningham transforms a simple facial expression into evidence of wider cultural expectations.

Limitations of Cunningham's Argument

Although Cunningham's essay is persuasive, it should not be interpreted as a universal explanation of women's behavior. Women do not all smile for the same reasons, and men are not free from emotional display rules. Individual personality, age, occupation, culture, disability, social class, race, religion, and interpersonal context all affect expression.

Cross-cultural research indicates that smiling does not carry exactly the same social meaning in every society. In some cultural settings, frequent smiling may indicate friendliness; in others, it may be associated with shallowness, embarrassment, low status, or an attempt to conceal uncertainty.

The essay also risks drawing too sharp a division between genuine and false smiles. A polite smile is not necessarily dishonest. A person may sincerely value courtesy even when the smile does not express intense joy. Social expressions help people cooperate, acknowledge one another, and reduce unnecessary tension.

Furthermore, strategic smiling can be empowering. A woman may consciously use a smile to persuade, encourage, negotiate, reassure, or establish solidarity. Smiling is not always something imposed upon women; it can also be a communication tool they control.

Research since Cunningham's essay has increasingly emphasized that smiles can signal reward, affiliation, and dominance rather than belonging to a simple happiness-versus-submission division (Martin et al., 2017).

Cunningham's argument is therefore most convincing when understood as a critique of compulsion. The problem is not that women smile or benefit from smiling. The problem is that women may be expected to smile regardless of their feelings and judged more severely than men when they choose not to do so.

Women's Success Should Not Be Measured by

Their Smiles

The original discussion referred to successful women in demanding professions as examples of women who smile despite social barriers. Such achievements can demonstrate women's ability to overcome restrictive gender roles, but they do not directly explain Cunningham's argument.

A woman's professional success cannot be measured by the sincerity, frequency, or attractiveness of her smile. An athlete, military officer, scientist, political leader, mountaineer, teacher, or parent does not become successful by appearing cheerful. Success should be assessed through achievement, courage, competence, integrity, persistence, and contribution.

Connecting women's accomplishments too closely to smiling may unintentionally reinforce the expectation Cunningham criticizes. A successful woman does not owe society a pleasant facial expression. She should be free to celebrate with a smile, express frustration, display concentration, or remain neutral.

The greater lesson is that women should not have to make ambition appear harmless. Their confidence, authority, and seriousness should be accepted without requiring constant emotional reassurance for the people around them.

Is Cunningham's Argument Still Relevant?

Although "Why Women Smile" was written decades ago, its argument remains relevant. Gender expectations continue to shape images in advertising, professional settings, social media, and digital technology.

A large audit of AI-generated occupational images found that women were more likely than men to be depicted smiling and tilting their heads downward, especially in occupations already associated with women. The researchers warned that generative systems could reproduce and intensify existing representational stereotypes (Sun et al., 2023).

This evidence suggests that the cultural image of the smiling, accommodating woman has not disappeared. It can be preserved not only through human expectations but also through datasets and technologies trained on historical patterns.

At the same time, modern public discussion has made the expectation more visible. Women increasingly challenge unsolicited commands to smile and criticize the assumption that their faces exist to improve the emotional comfort of strangers. The growing criticism does not prove that smiling is undesirable. It demonstrates a demand for control over one's own expression.

Cunningham's essay remains useful because it teaches readers to investigate apparently natural behavior. It asks whether an expression is freely chosen, socially rewarded, economically required, or

strategically performed.

Personal Response to Cunningham's Argument

I agree with Cunningham's central position that women should not be expected to smile continuously or conceal genuine emotions to make other people comfortable. A smile should be respected as an expression rather than demanded as a duty.

However, I would not conclude that a woman who smiles is necessarily innocent, submissive, frightened, or oppressed. Such an interpretation would replace one stereotype with another. Women smile for many reasons, including joy, confidence, affection, professionalism, politeness, irony, nervousness, and strategic communication.

The more appropriate principle is expressive equality. Women and men should be granted comparable freedom to show happiness, seriousness, anger, concern, concentration, and neutrality. Neither gender should be trapped by narrow emotional rules.

Men also benefit from this freedom. Traditional masculinity may discourage men from smiling warmly, crying, expressing fear, or seeking emotional support. Challenging gendered display rules should therefore broaden emotional possibilities for everyone rather than simply instructing women to become more serious.

Conclusion

Amy Cunningham's "Why Women Smile" offers a perceptive analysis of an everyday expression that is frequently misunderstood. She challenges the assumption that women smile simply because they are naturally happier, more cheerful, or more emotionally expressive than men. Instead, she shows how smiling can become a learned social performance connected to femininity, politeness, submission, employment, and the management of other people's comfort.

Psychological research largely supports the observation that women smile more than men, while also demonstrating that the difference depends heavily on social context. Gender roles, status, culture, occupation, age, and emotional expectations influence when and why people smile. Women's smiling is therefore neither purely biological nor purely voluntary.

Cunningham's primate comparison draws attention to smiling as a possible signal of appeasement or nonaggression, but it should not be interpreted as proof that women are naturally submissive. Human smiles communicate numerous functions, including genuine enjoyment, affiliation, politeness, reward, concealment, and dominance.

The essay also anticipates modern discussions of emotional labor. Women in service, care, and

professional roles are often expected to display warmth regardless of their emotional condition. Constantly separating felt emotion from required expression can become psychologically tiring and may prevent women from communicating anger, fatigue, or disagreement honestly.

At the same time, smiling should not be treated only as a sign of oppression. A voluntary smile can express joy, establish connection, calm conflict, encourage others, and strengthen relationships. The essential issue is autonomy.

Women should not be judged by whether they appear sufficiently pleasant. Their seriousness should not be mistaken for hostility, and their professional competence should not depend on emotional performance. Likewise, women's success should be measured by their actions and achievements rather than by the smiles on their faces.

Cunningham's enduring message is therefore not that women must stop smiling. It is that their smiles should belong to them. A genuine society of equality would allow every person to decide when to smile, when to remain serious, and when to show the full range of human emotion without being restricted by gender.

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