

VISITING SANTA: ANOTHER LOOK¹

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Summary.—An informal enquiry of the facial expressions of children as they queued up to meet Santa Claus during the 2003 Yuletide season showed that about 82% of the 300 children appeared to be indifferent to seeing Santa. As this finding seemed perhaps different from what conventional wisdom would suggest, that most children would be exhilarated or happy to visit with Santa, this study was replicated in 2004.

The same two settings were used as before: two large shopping malls located in the suburb of a large northeastern city (Trinkaus, 2004). Again, the modified six cartoon-face rating scale designed by Whaley and Wong (1987) for health care professionals in judging the pain experienced by children as young as 3 years, was employed.

Whaley & Wong Face Designation	Modified Designation
No hurt	Exhilarated (This is great)
Hurts a little bit	Happy (Not bad at all)
Hurts a little bit more	Indifferent (Whatever you say)
Hurts even more	Hesitant (Not sure about this)
Hurts a whole lot	Saddened (Not my idea of fun)
Hurts worst	Terrified (Want out of here)

As before, at each mall during the period between Thanksgiving day and Christmas a convenience sample of 150 children's faces were observed. Observees were advancing single file with their guardians in a designated line (which was clearly visible to the observer, unobtrusively located a short distance away). Again, no note was made as to the sex, race, or age of the children, nor was there any statistical analysis of the data, for to do so, it was felt, would be to ascribe more "science" to the findings than the methodology could support.

As the previous study (Trinkaus, 2004) suggested that the children's guardians were much more enthusiastic than their charges about visiting Santa, this time note was also made of the guardians' facial expressions.

As with the initial enquiry, the methodological limitations are recognized such as the use of convenience sampling, the subjective judgment and

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TABLE 1
 NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND GUARDIANS CLASSIFIED BY FACIAL EXPRESSION (*ns* = 150)

Facial Expression	Children			Guardians		
	Mall 1	Mall 2	Total	Mall 1	Mall 2	Total
Exhilarated	0	2	2	33	27	60
Happy	9	7	16	100	103	203
Indifferent	106	119	225	9	11	20
Hesitant	30	18	48	8	7	15
Saddened	2	3	5	0	2	2
Terrified	3	1	4	0	0	0
Total	150	150	300	150	150	300

employment of only one observer, the lack of validation of the modified scale, and the problem of replicating this work. Too, the presence of a number of variables not specifically accounted for, such as the influence of parental behavior and of immediate past and pending events, the close proximity of other "attractions" (in both settings a carousel), and the children's expectations are similarly acknowledged. However, it would be reasonable to suggest that the results of this study seem to support last year's finding that a visit to Santa is perhaps not something that always brings smiles to modern-day children's faces.

This time about 75% seemed to be indifferent, versus 82% a year ago, and the approximately 16% hesitant remained the same. It is to be noted, however, that the percentage of the happy children's faces increased from about 1% to approximately 5%. But, the sample size is probably too low, and the number of uncontrollables too high, to suggest any meaning. Concerning the postscripted casual observation of the first enquiry that adults accompanying the children (the guardians) generally appeared to be cheerful, the discovery in this study seems to reinforce this notion (about 68% appeared to be happy and approximately 20% exhilarated). This finding suggests a generation difference as to the worth of a visit to Santa, which seems reasonable within the context of a generally acknowledged proliferation of the many different forces acting on what individuals of different generations consider important in life—their operational value system.

Steiner talks about five principal repositories which influence people's value systems: religious, philosophical, cultural, legal, and professional (Steiner, 1975). Perhaps the one most at play here is cultural: a synthesis of inputs, now freer of the influences of traditional authorities (such as families and churches), emanating from such everyday sources such as television, movies, special interest groups, the press, and the radio. These messages are felt by some, such as Wolfe (2001), to be changing traditional values radically—at least in western nations. Thus, perhaps, children now see Santa as a

symbol of Christmas rather than a player, while guardians continue to fantasize him as a participant.

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