Behind the Mask:
Recognising Genuine and Masked Expressions of Emotion:
The Effect of Therapists’ Training and Experience

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ABSTRACT

Accurately recognising facial expressions of emotion can enhance communication and the development of a therapeutic relationship. When emotions are masked or inhibited, duplicity can be betrayed through evidence of leakage of the underlying emotion occurring in the face. Being able to discern when emotions are masked or concealed may also contribute to therapy outcomes by alerting the therapist to areas requiring further exploration. Despite a large body of research on facial expression of emotion, there is a dearth of research into therapists’ emotion recognition competencies or ability to detect deception. This study sought to answer the following questions: First, is recognition of facial emotional expressions, including masked expressions, enhanced by training? Second, does clinical experience impact on emotion recognition ability? Finally, does training increase the ability to discern authentic from falsified expressions? In Study 1, 43 clinical psychologists were recruited for the study and undertook an emotion recognition and deception detection task. Twenty-two of the participants completed training in emotion recognition using the Subtle Expression Training Tool (SETT; http://www.paulekman.com). In Study 2, a partial replication of Study 1 was conducted with 25 participants, and an updated version of the SETT. Results for recognition of emotion were mixed, with partial support found for the hypothesis that training would enhance recognition ability. Training was effective for improving recognition of single emotion expressions, but had less impact on recognition for masked or leaked expressions, with the exception of sadness. Efficacy of training was also dependent on experience level, with more experienced participants benefiting the most. All participants were able to detect emotional deception at levels above chance prior to training. Following training, those with a high level of experience demonstrated the greatest improvement in deception detection, with half of this group accurately detecting deception at levels significantly above chance \( (M = .74). \)
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