

Featured Folklore - Teeth and Personality

In dental folklore the position and appearance of your teeth can say a lot about you. From good fortune, to the likelihood that you will travel and your ability to carry a tune – all of this and more can be inferred simply by observing your dentition.

In many traditions the positioning of the teeth - and particularly the front teeth - is very important. In the article *Teeth and Superstition*, Kai Huntstadbråten tells us, “Persons with wide spaces between their teeth will travel far and wide in the world. Contrariwise, those with teeth positioned closely together will remain close to home.”¹

In his 1928 book *Folklore of the Teeth*, Leo Kanner cites the following belief - originating in the United States – that asserts:

*If your teeth lie one on the other,
You will always live with your mother.*

Similar beliefs have been recorded in Germany, in Switzerland, and in parts of the United Kingdom.²

It is not only your travel plans that might be affected by the alignment of your teeth however—your personality is fair game too.

Physiognomy, or the theory that a person’s character could be deduced based upon facial characteristics – popularized in the late 18th century by [Johann Kaspar Lavater](#) and others – also noted the importance of the teeth.

Lavater, in his [Essays on Physiognomy](#) (translated into English by Thomas Holcroft in 1789) asserts:

*Whoever leaves his teeth foul and does not attempt to clean them, certainly betrays much of the negligence of his character, which does him no honour.
As are the teeth of man, that is to say, their form, position, and cleanliness (so far as the latter depends upon himself) so is his taste.*⁴

In Hong Kong tradition holds that those with crowded teeth are likely to quarrel with others³, whilst in Norway such individuals are prone to be stingy. And should you find yourself in Italy, beware—folklore maintains that those who are unlucky enough to have ‘teeth that are set close together’ are doomed to suffer a life of disaster.⁵

If you possess teeth that are ‘so far apart that a quarter can be placed between them’ you may be considered luckier however – a Canadian superstition, recorded by Kanner, holds that such individuals are destined to be very rich.⁷

To find out more on the subject of teeth and personality why not try one of the following:

- Kanner L. [Folklore of the Teeth](#). The Macmillan Company, 1928
- Lavater JK. [Essays on Physiognomy](#). London, G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789
- Daniels CL, Stevens CM. [Encyclopaedia of superstitions, folklore, and the occult sciences of the world; a comprehensive library of human belief and practice in the mysteries of life...](#) 1903
- Trumble A. [A Brief History of the Smile](#). Basic Books, 2004

^{1,6} Hunstadbraten K. *Tooth and Toothache in Norwegian Folklore*. Bulletin of the History of Dentistry 1987; 35(1): 31-36

^{2,5} Cora Linn Daniels, C. M. Stevens Encyclopedia of Superstitions, Folklore, and the Occult Sciences of the World.

³ British Dental Journal 2002; (192): 522 – 525. McGrath C, Li KS, Lam CW. Physiognomy and teeth: An ethnographic study among young and middle-aged Hong Kong adults.

⁴ Lavater JK., Holcroft T. *Essays on Physiognomy*. London, G.G.J. and J. Robinson, 1789

^{5,6,7} Kanner L. *Folklore of the teeth*. Macmillan & Co., Ltd., 1935