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Face and Politeness Theories

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Face and Politeness Theories

**Communication Context**

Interpersonal and Intercultural

Questions It Addresses in Our Every Day Lives:

1. Why do we become embarrassed, angry, or defensive when someone points out our mistakes, criticizes our performance, or makes requests for our time?

2. What strategies can I employ to help other people feel supported when they have failed to meet expectations of mine, themselves, or others?

3. Why do we treat people politely and get upset when others are not polite to us?

Theory in a Nutshell

● We present a particular face (image) when interacting with another person, and that face can vary depending upon the situation and relationship.

● We have a positive face (the desire to be seen as competent and desire to have our face accepted) and a negative face (a desire for autonomy and to preserve the status quo).

● Face-threatening acts occur which cause a loss of face (damage our positive face) leading to the use of facework strategies to repair and restore our face.

Visualization of Face Theory

Face → Positive Face → Face-threatening acts → Facework

Face → Negative Face → Face-threatening acts
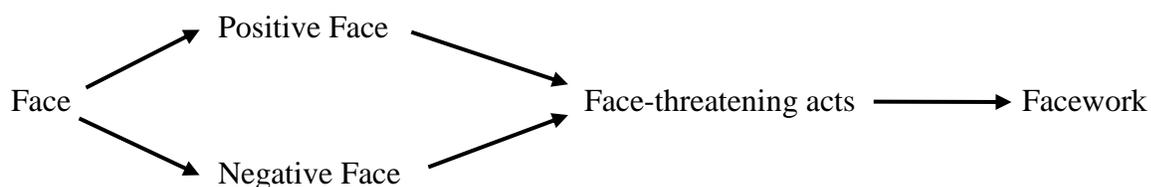
Just as the member of any group is expected to have self-respect, so also he [she] is expected to sustain a standard of considerateness; he [she] is expected to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of others present, and he [she] is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with the others and with their feelings (p. 215). Erving Goffman (1955).

Suppose you were meeting us, Mark and Matt, at an event at your school. As you began to interact with us, what impression would you like us to have of you? The answer to this question reflects what sociologist Erving Goffman defined as a person's *face*. According to Goffman (1955) **face** *is the positive public image you seek to establish in social interactions*. In meeting us, the face or image you want us to observe might be that of an intelligent, inquisitive, polite, and articulate student. Now, suppose you are single and unattached and were attending a party where you meet a potential romantic interest. What impression would you like that person to have of you? What face or image would you hope to establish in that person's mind? Being seen as an inquisitive and articulate student is probably not the image you're going for; your "romantic" face is going to differ from your "articulate student" face.

While Goffman integrated face into his theorizing about human interaction, he did not originate this concept. Face was identified as a significant element of the Chinese culture over a hundred years ago in the writings of two missionaries, Arthur Smith (1894) and John Macgowan (1912). Both include a chapter in their books devoted to the notion of face. Amusingly, while Macgowan found face to be a key component of Chinese culture and behavior, he seemed to fail to recognize that face was just as prevalent in his own culture and behaviors. However, In deference to Macgowan, one significant difference we discuss later is that cultures vary in the

level of importance they place on saving or protecting another person's face with China's level being very high.

Sociolinguists, Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson used Goffman's face theory as a foundation for explaining human interactions that revolved around being polite. In developing politeness theory they expanded and added to face theory by arguing that we have two faces; one based on a desire for approval and acceptance by others (positive face), and the other based on a desire to proceed without being impeded upon (negative face). So how does this relate to being polite? Think about why you tell someone, "Thank you" after they have done a favor for you. By saying "Thank you," you confirm the person's positive face—the desire to be seen as a kind person.

Much of the application of face by communication scholars is based upon the scholarship of Brown and Levinson. For our purposes in this chapter, we will combine the material on face from several scholars (primarily Goffman, and Brown and Levinson) in presenting an overall theory of face. For the most part we will not provide extensive coverage of the actual politeness theory. Politeness theory has been criticized for not really being as universally applicable as claimed because of limited validity in non-western cultures. In essence, the way politeness in managed in Japan or Thailand does not match that of the United States or United Kingdom.

THEORY ELEMENTS

Face

Some definitions of face focus on the social context, some on the linguistic, and some on the interpersonal. Despite the variation on focus, there are some commonalities among the definitions. First is the notion that face is socially or interactively based; that is, face exists in response to the presence of others and in interactions with others. Second, face is a specific

image we present to another person. We have a desire to be seen in a certain way by certain people. Third, the image we present is affected by the requirements of the situation or context. In the example that started this chapter, the professional context of interacting with your authors evoked a different face from you than that presented to a potential romantic partner. Fourth, our level of consciousness and intent about the face we present varies but becomes particularly acute when something occurs that undermines people believing our face is genuine (a face-threat). Finally, our face is primarily displayed through behaviors—the way we communicate and interact.

Erving Goffman's work serves as the foundation for most contemporary face theory, so we'll begin with his definition. Like George Herbert Mead, Goffman, a sociologist, focuses on the interaction between individuals and the social world. So his definition emphasizes the way individuals fit society and its institutions--how a person sees him or herself contributing to a given social context. Goffman (1967) defined **face** as *"the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact* (p. 213)." This definition makes more sense when we take it apart a bit. Underlying "positive social value" is the assumption that people want to be seen as having value to others. People lay "claim" to that value by presenting themselves in certain ways to others; for example, a teacher wants to claim an image of an effective educator while a student might claim the image of an "A" student. Goffman explains that a "line" is the pattern of verbal and nonverbal messages (like lines in a play) that people use to express and evaluate situations that is perceived by others as a reflection of the image people claim. People then form impressions of the other person (a vision of the person's face) on the basis of those lines. So, a teacher lectures (the teacher's "line") to the students who see the lecturing as appropriate to someone with the "face" of a teacher.

Domenici and Littlejohn (2006) explain the physical face we present to others acts as a metaphor for a more conceptual face, sense of self, or identity that we present to others. While similar to Goffman's notion of social value, Domenici and Littlejohn emphasize the values reflected in the original Chinese use of face when they define face as a "*desire to present oneself with dignity and honor* (p. 10)." Dignity and honor are also part of the foundation of politeness theory in the sense that we honor others by being polite and respectful.

Brown and Levinson (1978) conceptualize face as something that we want or desire from others. They define face as "*the want to be unimpeded and the want to be approved of in certain respects* (p. 63)." They argue that when people interact they recognize each other's desire to have their faces supported and generally provide such confirmation. Approval is reflected in the way that other people respond to us—showing respect and honor. The importance of respect, of supporting a person's face, is the theme of some hip-hop and rap songs about not dissing someone, such as a couple of songs both called "Don't Diss Me."

A couple more straightforward definitions of face are presented by Craig, Tracy, and Spisak (1986): "*the self-image they present to others* (p. 440)" and Cupach and Metts (1994): *The conception of self that each person displays in particular interactions with others* (p. 3)." Both definitions reflect the application often incorporated in communication scholarship that emphases an interaction of faces and people's attempts to help each other maintain their faces. Cupach and Metts emphasize that when we present our self-conception, we are seeking confirmation of that conception.

Positive and Negative Face (Fellowship, Competence, Autonomy Face) Brown and Levinson's definition of face reflects their view that face actually has two components: positive face and negative face. They define positive face as "the want of every member that his [her]

wants be desirable to at least some others (1987, p. 62)." Our wants include everything from the values we want to maintain (love, good education, loyalty), to the things we want to do (go to the movies, go home, or study). These wants are elements of our face that are present when we interact with others. So, if you want to play the role of leader on a group project, you hope that others will support your positive face—your "want." While negative face sounds like it should be just the opposite of positive face, it isn't. Negative face is "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others (p. 62)." Another way to think of negative face is that we each want to do what we want, and we want other people to let us do it (okay, maybe that's not much clearer). If are sitting in the library studying, your negative face is that you be left alone to study. If someone comes over and starts a conversation, they are interfering in your effort to maintain that want for privacy--your negative face.

Communication scholars Tae-Seop Kim and John Bowers (1991)) do Brown and Levinson one better and argue that face reflects three wants. Kim and Bowers also provide alternative labels for the face types which are intuitively more understandable. **Fellowship face** *is the want to be included* which inherently reflects a desire for acceptance by others. If a group at work is going to lunch, you want to be invited along since this demonstrates that others accept and respect you. **Competence face** *is a want to have one's abilities respected by others*; in essence, we want people to value what we can do. For example, if you see yourself as a good student, you want instructors to acknowledge that, usually by giving you good praise, positive feedback on papers, and good grades. Fellowship and competence faces are types of positive face in that they both represent a desire to be seen by others in a positive way. Recognize that you can have one type and not the other—seen as competent but not included in the group, or included in the group without acknowledging your abilities. **Autonomy face** *is a want to not be imposed on*

and is a type of negative face. However, autonomy face is narrower than negative face and omits the notion that we also have a want for things to remain unchanged--to maintain our status quo. Instead of the threat of losing a relationship giving you more autonomy and thus being considered positive, the loss might be an undesirable change that actually threatens your negative face—your status quo.

Face-Threatening Act (Losing Face)

Goffman (1955) recognized that in our interactions with others there are times when we fail in our attempts to take a particular "line" or present a particular face. Goffman used such phrases as "in the wrong face," "to be out of face," "shamefaced," and "threats to face" to describe situations where the face a person is attempting to maintain is challenged or undermined in some way. Suppose one aspect of the face you enact with friends is someone who is funny. However, after telling a funny story, one of your friends says, "You're not really funny, you know." Your friend's comment challenges your image (face) as a funny person; one for which you expected support. How hurt would you be by the friend's comment? Goffman identified three levels of responsibility for a person's threatening another person's face: unintentional, the maliciously or spitefully intentional, and the incidental (where the face threat is a by-product of people's actions and is not done with malice or spite). Each type of threat varies in how threatening it is perceived and in terms of what strategies people use to restore their face. You might view your friend's comment about not being funny as intentional and malicious and be particularly upset.

One way of knowing people's faces have been threatened is by their emotional reactions. Face threats usually produce feelings of embarrassment, shame, humiliation, agitation, confusion, defensiveness, or chagrin. In contrast to such feelings, Goffman contends those who

are able to maintain their face in light of challenges are demonstrating poise. He defines **poise** as "*the capacity to suppress and conceal any tendency to become shamefaced during encounters with others* (p. 215)." After being told you're not funny, could you keep your cool and remained poised, or would you tell your friend off?

Think of a time were you have faced threats and remained poised? What was it that challenged your face? How were you able to maintain your poise? Can you recall the circumstances surrounding someone who has been described as "poised?" How did others react to the person?

Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory deals extensively with face-threatening acts, which they define as "those acts that by their very nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or speaker (p. 65)." Face-threatening acts can be toward our positive face and/or negative face, and caused by acts we engage in ourselves or the acts of others toward us. Brown and Levinson created an extensive list of various communication acts that can cause such face threat (see Table 10.1). For example, if a friend asks you to help her move to a new apartment next Saturday, she is threatening your negative face (autonomy) because you will have to give up whatever you might have planned. If you say, "No, I'm sorry. I'm busy Saturday," you have threatened her negative face (interfered with the actions she wanted to take-moving), and you might have threatened your own positive face if she sees you as not being a very good friend (if you had a face of being a good friend).

Table 10.1   Examples of Face-Threatening Acts*

	Actions by others that threaten our face	**Actions we take that threaten our own face**
Threatens Positive Face	Complaints and insults	Apologies and confessions
	Criticisms or Disapproval	Accepting a compliment
	Disagreeing	Misunderstanding/Requesting clarification
	Asking for clarification	Unintended emotional action (laugh)
	Evaluations	Unintended physical action (burp)

Threatens	Orders and requests	Accepting an offer
Negative Face	Advice and suggestions	Accepting thanks
	Threats and warnings	Making a promise or offer
	Reminders	Behavior that threatens a relationship
	Calling in a debt	Do an unrequested favor

*Some examples from Brown and Levinson (1987)

Use the examples in Table 10.1 to identify some recent instances where your face was threatened. What was your response? Were you able to maintain or restore your face? What kind of factors influence the degree to which any given act was threatening to you (such as who the person was, where it occurred, or how important it was to your face)? In which acts did you engage that threatened another person's face? How did they respond?

Recognize that despite the list of typical sources of face-threat, there are several variables which affect the degree of threat and even whether a given act is a threat. If you see yourself as clumsy (that's a face you even present), tripping on a sidewalk crack might not be a face-threatening act to you—it doesn't challenge the face you're presenting. However, a person with a face that is graceful, coordinated, and agile might be very embarrassed by tripping—a threat to their positive face. Factors that influence the degree of threat include how directly your face is challenged, the relationship you have with the person who threatens your face (for example, roles, power differences, level of attraction, or level of dependence), the importance of creating or maintaining a particular face, the culture, and the demands and expectations associated with the situation. How we and our partners manage threats to face reflects the process labeled facework.

Applying Theory to Research—Face-Threatening Acts and Communication Apprehensive Instructors.

Student responses to their college instructors can be face-threatening acts. Some instructors feel particularly anxious about speaking (communication apprehension) and thus face-threatening acts could have a significant impact on their classroom behavior. Elizabeth Baiocchi-Wagner (2011) conducted a qualitative study where she interviewed fifteen college instructors who had identified themselves as being highly communication apprehensive in the classroom. Instructors were asked to discuss a negative experience in the classroom. In analyzing their responses, Baiocchi-Wagner identified face-threatening acts that fit each of the face types listed by Lim and Bower: competence, fellowship, and autonomy.

All the instructors reported instances where students either intentionally or unintentionally threatened their competence face by questioning the instructor's expertise in class. For example, a young math instructor felt put down and embarrassed when a top student pointed out errors in the math problem the instructor was working on the board. Face was not just threatened by student behavior but also by the instructors themselves. An international instructor's struggle with some English words threatened her competence face. Other instructors' threatened their own faces when they felt they inadequately explained a concept.

You might be surprised to find that challenging a course policy, changing the course policy to accommodate students, and providing make-up exams are threats to the autonomy face of instructors. Each of these involved imposing some restriction or change on the instructor, thus creating a threat. Finally, the desire to be accepted reflected in the fellowship face was threatened when instructors would try to engage students in small talk before or after class and students would be unresponsive. Such a response reflects a rejection of the instructor which led one instructor to show up immediately as class was to begin in order to avoid the potential for such

rejection. One of the major strategies instructors used to manage face-threat was to be well-prepared for the class and thus avoid instances that might be face-threatening.

To what degree have your behaviors toward your instructors been potentially face-threatening? How might you address your concerns as a student while also protecting the face of your teachers?

Baiocchi-Wagner, E. (2011). ''Facing threats'': Understanding communication apprehensive instructors' face loss and face restoration in the classroom. *Communication Quarterly*, 59, 221–238.

Facework (maintaining face; restoring face; face-saving)

Goffman (1955) refers to facework as "to give face" and attributes it to the Chinese notion of helping people take on the given face they desire. He describes facework as "the actions taken by a person to make whatever he [she] is doing consistent with face (p. 216)." Through facework we engage in a variety of actions to help us maintain the face we have presented. Such efforts are taken to counteract threats to the face since face-threatening acts chip away at the face we are attempting to sustain. If you want to be seen as a reliable friend, yet are late to pick up a friend for dinner, you need to engage in face-saving strategies to sustain the face of reliability. Goffman sees facework as involving both attempts to maintain our own face while also helping our partners maintain theirs.

Lim and Bowers (1991) placed face theory directly into the communication context. They noted that despite what politeness theory predicts, there are times where threatening our own or another person's face is inevitable. As instructors, we recognize that every time we randomly call on a student to answer a question, we are threatening that student's negative or autonomy face. For Lim and Bowers, "facework refers to the way in which people mitigate or address these face threats (p. 421)."

Drawing from their experience as consultants with a particular focus on conflict, Kathy Domenici and Stephen Littlejohn (2006) approach facework more broadly than other scholars by exploring facework not only within relationships, but also in groups and organizations. They define facework as "a set of coordinated practices in which communicators build, maintain, protect, or threaten personal dignity, honor, and respect (pp. 10-11)." They observe that the aim of facework can be to help you or another person maintain face, but we can also aim our facework toward the relationship. By supporting another person's face, we help to foster or enhance a given relationship. Finally, our aim in facework with an individual can be the group, community, or organization (system). In class, we might reprimand a student for texting during class. That negative facework is intended to alter the student's behavior but it also is aimed at affecting the entire class.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Face theory was not really developed as a formal theory but has evolved into one. While Goffman spurred interest in the concept of face, particularly with his seminal work entitled, *On Face-Work* in 1955, he didn't present it as a theory nor did he further develop the concept in his later writings. While not using the term "face", many of Goffman's works revolve around how people present themselves to others. In his book, The *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman uses theater as a metaphor for discussing social behavior. Instead of face, Goffman writes about performances in which people act a certain way when on stage and act another way when backstage. He observes that after making an embarrassing mistake (face loss), actors depend upon the audience's help to re-establish the performance. This observation parallels the notions of face-threatening acts and facework. As mentioned earlier, Brown and Levinson used the work of Goffman as a foundation for exploring people's politeness behavior, and many of

their concepts can be considered an extension of face theory. In this section, we focus on culling the major principles that related to face both from the work of Goffman and from Brown and Levinson.

Principle 1: The faces people take are contextually bound (the situation, the culture or society, other participants) and produce a ritual process of orderly but constrained interaction. You enact different faces depending upon the situation (the task, your role, the location, cultural expectations, etc.) and the relationship (Tracy, 1990). Your faces in class, at work, and with family and friends are different. While there are likely overlaps (you want everyone to see you as intelligent or hardworking), each has unique qualities associated with the given relationship. Once you present a particular face, for example, being a good student, you are somewhat obligated to maintain that face in subsequent encounters. To some degree, your face constrains you because you are compelled to continue with the face you have enacted. Goffman (1955) claimed the surest way to avoid threats is to avoid situations in which the threat might occur. But in so doing, you constrain your own behavior; you are not free to do as you want but are instead restricted by your face and the situation.

Culture has a significant effect on the faces we enact and the constraints placed on our behavior. Our faces are created in accordance to cultural expectations (though we can chose to rebel which threatens both our face and those we rebel against). When you take on the face of a "lady" or "gentleman" in the United States, you are expected to act in a particular your behavior is constrained by what the culture dictates as appropriate for such faces. The expectations of behavior create a ritual process by which orderly interactions are created.

Suppose you wanted to borrow a pen from somebody. Your conversation would probably go something like this:

You: "Could I please borrow your pen for a minute?"

Other: "Sure, here you are."

You: "Thanks, I really appreciate it."

Other: "You're welcome, no problem."

Why do you say "Please" and "Thank you"? Why does the other say, "You're welcome"? Politeness theory and face theory offer one explanation. This exchange reflects a ritual you and your partner have learned and feel obligated to follow because of the faces you present. You both accept supporting each other's face through facework. While this is an example of a highly ritualistic interaction, our interactions are composed of rituals which we follow by the very nature of taking on a face. The rituals consist of members presenting their faces and other participants supporting those faces.

When a face is threatened, the ritual is thrown out of balance and needs to be corrected. To correct the situation, Goffman sees four phases: challenge, offering, acceptance, and thanks. When a person (the offender) engages in behavior that threatens face, that misconduct is challenged by the partner. Complaining that your friend is late to pick you up challenges the friend's face. Some offering is made by the offender to offset the face threat and re-establish balance. Your friend apologizes for being late. The partner then decides whether to accept the offering, and if so, then faces and balance are restored. You tell your friend you accept the apology. Finally, the offender says "Thanks" as the final step to restoring balance. Another set of terms have been generated to describe what is called a "failure event." A failure even (a person failing to meet the expectation of another) might elicit a reproach by the victim (challenge),

which evokes an account (response to the reproach, offering), which is then evaluated by the reproacher for its acceptability (Beebe, Beebe, Redmond, 2014).

Think about the times you avoided a certain situation because it threatened your face (for example, avoiding singing along with others because you were afraid of how your voice sounded). How did you manage the conflict between protecting your face and being constrained? What were the consequences of participating in a situation in which you knew your face would be threatened or even damaged?

Principle 2: We depend upon other people to accept and validate our face, which is called facework. While we might enact a given face, we are dependent upon others to accept and confirm that face. Our face is socially situated; that is, we only have face in the context of our interactions and relationship with others. Generally, both partners engage in facework whereby they mutually act toward the other in ways that are intended to support each other's face. In a classroom, a teacher stands in front and lectures to the students, but the students must accept what Goffman refers to as the "line" and the face the instructor is enacting. Similarly, the teacher acts in ways that supports the students' faces. But what happens when we fail to provide such facework? Substitute teachers often encounter students who do not accept their "teacher faces" and therefore reject their ensuing "lines" (e.g. interrupt, talk amongst themselves while the substitute is trying to lecture). If you've been in such a class, do you remember how the substitute responded? Some get angry and defensive and try to exert control in order to save their face (having power) but which in turn threatens the students' negative faces (their autonomy). Others ignore the students and in that way try to ignore the threat to their face. Still, others enact a "baby sitter" face instead of a teacher face and thus are not threatened by threats to a teacher face. Obviously, both students and teacher are failing to support or validate the other's face.

Politeness theory emphasizes balancing the need for clear communication (in pursuit of your goals) against the need to protect both your face and the face of the other through facework (O'Keefe & Shepherd, 1987). By asking for something which is inherently face threatening, we do so politely by engaging in clear communication while boosting the face of the other person.

Principle 3: Numerous strategies are utilized in facework, when managing face-threatening acts, in repairing or restoring face, and by offenders responding to challenges. Perhaps you were a student who felt sorry for the substitute teacher and tried to help the teacher maintain his or her face by thanking the substitute at the end of class for being there. Such behavior acts to restore the positive, competence face of the teacher. Sometimes however we are faced with a conflict where saving our face might mean the loss of the other person's face, or vice versa. Goffman (1955) noted that "In trying to save the face of others, the person must choose a tack that will not lead to loss of his own; in trying to save his own face, he must consider the loss of face that his action may entail for others (p. 217)." As you read through the strategies listed here consider the degree to which each partner's face is threatened by the action.

Brown and Levinson (1987) argue that there are three considerations we make when it comes to threatening another person's face as we might do in presenting a challenge or reproach. First, is the degree to which we feel a need to communicate the failure or misconduct; second, the degree of urgency or need for efficiency; and third, the degree to which we want to protect the face of the other person. As we weigh these three factors, we decide among four general options for handling the issue. We'll use the example of asking a friend to help you move into your new apartment (a threat to negative/autonomy face). One, we can choose to "**not do the face-threatening act**" by not raising the issue. Here, you don't even bother asking for help to

move, but just do it yourself. Two, we can raise the issue knowing we'll threaten the other person's face but do it indirectly **"off record"** by making hints, joking around about it, etc. Off-record approaches seek to minimize the degree to which the face is threatened but still communicate the issue. You mention to your friend that you're moving into a new apartment on Saturday and aren't sure how you can do it all yourself. Hopefully, your friend will offer without you directly asking. Third, we can go **"on-record with redress"** which involves directly raising the issue/threatening the face, but doing so with messages that minimize or restore face. You ask your friend to help you move, expressing how grateful you'd be and what a great friend he or she is (boosting positive face). Fourth, we can directly raise the issue/threaten face but without making an effort to offset the face threat/loss by using "**on-record without redress.**" You tell your friend you need his or her help moving on Saturday, period. The following are some specific strategies that were identified by Goffman and others that we use to restore or save another person's threatened face or to restore or save our own face.

Strategies people use to manage threats to other people's faces:

Discretion: Discretion involves simply ignoring those things "which might implicitly or explicitly contradict and embarrass the positive claims made by others (Goffman, 1955, p. 218)." Rather than commenting on people's behaviors that contradict the face they're presenting, we keep our mouth shut. You're at a nice restaurant having dinner with friends when one of your friends burps. In being discrete, you simply continue the conversation ignoring the burp.

Circumlocutions and deceptions: Your friend is getting ready for a big date and asks your opinion about the clothes he or she is wearing. You think the clothes make your friend look like a little kid but don't want to threaten his or her face so you reply, "That's a good looking outfit. It makes you look young and spirited." Making an ambiguous and indirect statement such

as this is an example of circumlocution and perhaps deception. We lie to friends to avoid hurting their feelings—to avoid threatening their face.

Joking: Goffman believed that we might deliver a threatening message in a joking manner and thus help to reduce face threat. We can also joke about the threat, which allows the other person to laugh too, and show they're a good sport. You can probably recall times where you've laughed along with others after you've incurred some face-loss. You trip on the sidewalk, but rather than simply laughing at you, your friend laughs and says "Like they say in gymnastics, 'you nailed the landing.'" You laugh at this and reply, "Yeah, that should definitely get me tens." The use of humor in this way tends to reduce the level of face loss.

Explanation: Explanation can be used to diffuse or pre-empt a potentially face-threatening behavior. For instance, students sometimes come to us before class to let us know they have to leave early and explain why. Had they not, we might interpret their departures as negative reactions to something we said or to our teaching, thus causing us loss of face. The challenge to this strategy is recognizing what you say or do might be misinterpreted as a face threat by the other person. Not all of us are that mindful.

Approbation: Approbation is another term for praise and approval and is the term used by Lim and Bowers (1991) to describe one way we address specific threats to a person's competence face (positive face). Approbation as a strategy, involves praising a person's general abilities and recalling her or his particular successes to minimize blame or offset specific inabilities or failures. As teachers, we sometimes use this strategy when writing comments on a weak paper from a good student. "You've done really well on the exams and other papers; not sure what happened here, but I know you're a good student."

Solidarity: When people's fellowship faces are threatened, we can offset face loss by expressing solidarity with them. Solidarity includes reinforcing their acceptance in a relationship, group, or organization, emphasizing commonalities; showing understanding, appreciation, and empathy; being cooperative; and reaffirming the friendship (Lim & Bowers, 1991). Perhaps you have an international friend who at times feels out of place (threat to the fellowship face) when hanging out with you and your friends. By using the solidarity strategy, you might convey how much you like your friend and identify things your friend has in common with the group.

Tact: When you threaten a person's autonomy face (negative face) by making a request or imposing on him or her you can employ tact. Tact involves an effort to minimize the face loss of other people while maximizing their sense of freedom and autonomy. Knowing it's long past the time when your roommate was supposed to clean the kitchen, you apply a tactful strategy by saying, "Hey, how about you and I work together on getting the kitchen cleaned tonight?" Such a statement conveys the failure of your roommate to meet a responsibility but minimizes the loss of autonomy by sharing the workload. As with many strategies, this strategy involves some loss of your own face in order to reduce the threat to the other person. Sometimes, we are unwilling to accept this option.

Strategies people use to manage threats to their own faces (Offenders offerings/accounts to challenges/reproaches):

Accepting and correcting: For this strategy, we take on responsibility for the threatening event and commit to correcting it. While we lose face by admitting to a behavior that causes us to lose some face, we regain face by our admission and plan to do something about it. Thus, our action helps to restore and repair the face we recognize that we have lost.

Ignoring and denying: Acting as though nothing is wrong and as though our face has not been threated when it has might be one of the more common strategies we use. When we make a mistake or do something embarrassing, we might continue maintaining the same face. At times when riding my bike through campus, I have taken a spill. Students in the area hurry over and ask if I'm okay. I usually get up right away, say I'm alright and ride away almost as though my spill was intentional (part of my acrobatic face). After a block or two I check my injuries and wince at my skinned hands, but I've protected my face of being a competent bike rider.

Similar to ignoring, we can also deny that a given failure that would cause us a loss of face has occurred when challenged by someone else. When a failure is pointed out that would cause us to lose face, we might claim it wasn't really a failure, or it wasn't our failure. We might simply deny we did something that causes us face loss ("I'm not late," or "I didn't say I'd do the dishes") or we might indicate it wasn't our fault and instead blame someone else ("I'm not late, you're early," or "John said he'd do the dishes last night, not me").

Diminishing: Goffman sees a variety of ways in which people work to make the failure less significant or insignificant. Among the ways the face threat can be diminished are by claiming the face-threat or failure was: an unintentional act, a meaningless event, a joke and not to be taken seriously, not really him or herself when it happened (thus not reflective of the person's claimed face), or unavoidable because of external circumstances ("Heavy traffic made me late"). The use of these strategies can help restore face or at least reduce the level of face loss.

Apology and/or compensation: When being out of face results in some harm or imposition on the other person, offering an apology and/or compensation is a way of reducing the loss of face. You have a face of being on-time so when you are late to pick up a friend, you

apologize and offer to pay for dinner. Your remorse helps restore your face in the eyes of your friend.

THEORY EVOLUTION, AMENDMENT, AND CRITICISM

As we've mentioned, Goffman didn't present his discussion of face as a theory, but rather, presented various concepts and their relationships without actually organizing them into a coherent body. As a result, there really are not any specific amendments or revisions of "a theory" to be identified. However, many scholars have expanded on Goffman's ideas and used them as the foundation for many research projects across a variety of contexts, such as Brown and Levinson's study of politeness. Such applications often result in some slight change and/or further development of the theory. For example, when applied interculturally, face theory is used to explore differences in the ways cultures manage face. Such an application has led to the development of another theory that is presented in Chapter 30, Face Negotiation Theory. Research on a wide variety of communication issues has examined the role of face and facework. For example, studies have examined the relationship between face and social support, face and nonverbal communication, and face within the context of romantic relationships, post-divorce relationships, conflict, negotiation, television panel discussions, appraisal interviews, teacher-student interactions, family communication, and superior-subordinate meetings.

The broad scope to which face theory has been applied reflects one of the values associated with good theories, however its breadth has also has been identified as one of its weaknesses, being equated with a lack of parsimony (compactness). Metts and Cupach (2008) see Goffman's presentation of face theory as being too indirect and lacking conciseness. They note his failure to be economical in his use of words and explanations.

Brown and Levinson (1987) discuss their theory in terms of a "Model Person" endowed with rationality and face. In acting rationally, the Model Person identifies goals and rationally develops the means to achieve those goals all within the context of maintaining face. Of course the question is, "How rational are humans in their interactions?" By using a Model Person, they eliminate the need to account for that part of humans that acts impulsively and irrationally. They have created a theory based on an ideal person, but of course, how close is the ideal to the way people really are? Politeness theory, in particular, has been criticized because it implies that humans would consider the entirety of strategies before selecting the one to use, or for that matter, that we would only apply one at a time (Weiss, 2004). How quickly do humans make a choice about how to present a face-threatening message? Given the number of strategies that are available for managing face-threatening acts, it seems unlikely that we would have time to sort through all of them before acting.

The results of a study on face and politeness on compliance gaining requests conducted by communication scholars, Robert Craig, Karen Tracy, and Frances Spisak (1986), led them to conclude that politeness theory needed to be revised. They created six tenets based upon their research findings. For example, they posit that when considering facework strategies, speakers (reproachers): take into account *both* their own face and that of the recipient, attend to *both* the positive and negative face sometimes in the same message, and might not have cooperation as their overriding goal. Noted communication scholar, Barbara O'Keefe (1991) and her colleagues suggest their research results also indicate a need to amend politeness theory. Their research has shown that people avoid face-threatening messages (reproach) and still accomplish their goals by using integration to manage the issue. Integration involves both partners seeking to accomplish their goals while also seeking to accomplish the goals of each other. Integration avoids face-

threatening messages by altering the situation to meet goals of the speaker rather than letting the situation dictate the communication.

Behind the Theory—Erving Goffman

If you've ever been concerned about changing your direction while in college, Erving Goffman provides an example of how such changes can lead to great things. Goffman was born and raised in Canada and began his college studies in chemistry. Before completing the degree he went to work for the National Film Board. He returned to school in Toronto and got his B.A. in sociology and anthropology, and then went to the University of Chicago for his M.A. and Ph. D. To collect data for his dissertation, he spent two years on a Scottish island posing as an American interested in agricultural techniques while collecting ethnographic data about the people and culture of the island. After getting his Ph.D. he received a grant to research a mental hospital. Under the guise of the assistant to the athletic director he observed the workings of this institution. His observations served as the foundation for his book, *Asylums*. His ability to observe and develop theoretic insights can be found in his personal experiences as well. His experience dealing with his first wife's mental health problems that resulted in her suicide is reflected in an essay he wrote entitled, "The Insanity of Place."

Goffman was a faculty member at several universities including Berkley, Harvard, and the University of Pennsylvania. He prided himself in his stock market investments and a strong interest in gambling. He frequently visited Nevada to gamble and even trained and worked as a blackjack dealer. He was promoted to pit boss and used the observations he gained there as the foundation for a 121 page essay, "Where the Action Is," which analyzes people taking all kinds of chances that could be easily avoided.

Goffman passions and experiences provided the data for his writing, He took what he observed in those experiences, engaged in extensive analyses, and produced significant insights. (Much of the material for this review is drawn from Fine & Manning, 2003).

RELATED THEORIES

Face Management Theory. Social psychologist Thomas Holtgraves (1992) built upon politeness theory in developing a more comprehensive theory about what affects face-threatening acts or messages. As with Brown and Levinson, his concern was primarily related to how face was reflected in the actual language and messages that people exchanged. He focused on sequences of messages and turn-taking, particularly when managing face-threatening acts. His theory has five major propositions. First, people address face concerns whenever we engage in face-threatening acts. Second, the greater the threat to face (as a function of power, distance versus intimacy, imposition, etcetera), the more the threatening messages (reproach) addresses face concerns. Third, the recipient's face is supported only when the speaker's (reproacher's) face is not a major concern. Fourth, when people are particularly concerned about their face, they are more sensitive to indirect face threats. Fifth, people might differ in how face-threatening an act is, which in turn, affects the degree to which their messages reflect concern for face. As with Brown and Levinson's theory, Holtgraves' propositions are not applicable across all cultures and tend to be most applicable to western cultures (Ting-Toomey & Cocroft, 1994). For example, contrary to the fourth proposition, some cultures actually find direct requests or demands to be more polite (less face-threatening) than indirect (Ting-Toomey & Cocroft, 1994). Nonetheless, face management theory increases our awareness of some of the factors that can influence both how we present face-threatening messages and how we react to them.

Face-Negotiation Theory: The fact that different cultures manage face differently is one factor that led to the development of a theory that is sensitive to such differences--face-negotiation theory. This theory was developed by intercultural communication scholar, Stella Ting-Toomey (1985, 1988, 2005). A foundation of this theory is how cultures differ in terms of

their individualistic orientation (focus on the individual, such as personal achievements) versus collectivistic orientation (focus on the family or group through pride in the group's achievements). In addition, Ting-Toomey draws from conflict theory in developing a theory that examines how conflict management styles, cultural orientation, and face relate. Given the significant communication orientation of this theory, we present face-negotiation theory in greater detail in Chapter 30 in the section addressing cultural theories.

Identity Management Theory: Cupach and Imahori (1993) developed a theory that connects culture, competence, and identity. Similar to face theory, they focus on how we must manage each other's identity when we interact. One premise of identity management theory is that competence means being able to manage both the relational and cultural identities of the interactants. A second defining premise is that "face is the communicative reflection of people's relational and cultural identities, and thus effective identity management requires competent facework" (Imahori & Cupach, 2005, p. 196). This means that when we interact with others, our identity is reflected in the face we display, which includes a cultural component. In developing their propositions, Cupach and Imahori detail how reactions to our cultural identity during interactions affect face and produce face-threats. For example, being treated because of a stereotype of your culture or having your culture ignored would threaten your face. The theory also addresses issues of face that are confronted in the development of intercultural relationships.

APPLYING FACE THEORY TO EVERY DAY COMMUNICATION

Once you get the hang of what face theory is all about, you'll probably find that it is very useful in explaining why you and those around you behave the way each does, particularly with how you respond in situations where the face you present is threatened. You should also gain an

appreciation for the need to monitor the facework you provide for others as you interact. For example, a friend sends you a text message asking for a response but you choose to ignore it. From a face perspective, how do you think your friend is likely to feel? Face theory would predict that both the positive face (confirming the friend's value) and negative face (waiting to hear back from you) would be threatened. Such a threat might lead your friend to feel disappointed, angry, depressed, or lonely. Now that you have studied face theory, you should understand why a person would react in a negative way to your failure to return the text.

See how many events you can recall in the last 24 hours in which your face was threatened. Did someone call you while you were watching TV? Did your roommate fail to do the dishes as agreed to? Did an instructor keep lecturing beyond the time class was supposed to end? Did you hold a door open for someone and he or she proceeded through without even saying "Thank you?" You might be amazed at how often your face is threatened during the day, but generally with a minimum of disruption. Some threats can be severe, however and cause us to respond in an aggressive manner. Of the events you recall, which one evoked the strongest emotional reaction—anger, embarrassment, guilt?

Now think about what you did or said in the last 24 hours that would be considered a threat to another person's face. Did you make a request to anyone? Did you interfere with another person's goals or actions? Did you arrive late to class, leave during class, or leave early? Did you approach someone who was doing something else and begin a conversation with him or her? Again, your threats will very in terms of how threatening they were to the other person. Did any of your face-threats evoke a strong emotional reaction? Why or why not?

Your responses to the above questions illustrate how applicable face theory is to your life. You should find that it explains a lot of your different reactions to other people's behavior as well as explaining other people's reactions to your behavior.

THEORY SUMMARY

- People claim a positive social value (face) by presenting themselves in certain ways to others, for which they adopt a pattern of verbal and nonverbal messages (their "line").

Theory Elements

- Face has been defined in a variety of ways including the positive public image we seek to establish in social interactions, presenting a self that is worthy of dignity and honor, a desire to be approved and be unimpeded, and an image of ourselves we present to others.

- Positive face is a desire to have our wants be desirable by others, while negative face is a desire that our actions won't be obstructed by others.

- Positive face can be further divided into competence face (having our abilities respected) and fellowship face (being included). Negative face has also been labeled our autonomy face.

- Face-threatening acts are situations where the face a person is attempting to maintain is challenged or undermined in some way.

- Face threats usually produce feelings of embarrassment, shame, humiliation, agitation, confusion, defensiveness, or chagrin.

- Through facework, we engage in a variety of actions to help us maintain the face we have presented. Such efforts are taken to counteract threats to the face, since face-threatening acts chip away at the face we are attempting to preserve.

Guiding Principles

- Principle 1: The faces people take are contextually bound (the situation, the culture or society, other participants) and produce a ritual process of orderly but constrained interaction.

- Principle 2: We depend upon other people to accept and validate our face through a process called facework.

- Principle 3: Numerous strategies are utilized in facework. We have strategies for managing face-threatening acts and repairing or restoring face.

- Options when threatening another person's face include: not doing anything, being indirect (off-record), being direct but trying to offset face loss (on-record with redress), or being direct without concern for face loss (on-record without redress).

- Strategies people use to manage threats to other people's faces include: discretion, circumlocutions and deceptions, joking, explanation, solidarity, and tact.

- Strategies (offerings/accounts) people use to manage threats to their faces from challenges or reproaches include accepting and correcting, ignoring and denying, diminishing, and apology and/or compensation.

Theory Evolution, Amendment, and Criticism

- Goffman never really presented a coherent theory, so there really aren't any specific amendments. However, scholars use Goffman's ideas as the foundation for theory and research across a variety of contexts.

- The breadth, indirectness, and lack of parsimony (compactness) and conciseness have been identified as weaknesses of face theory.

- Politeness theory has been criticized for painting people as highly strategic and ignoring impulsiveness, not incorporating people's consideration of the impact of face-threatening messages to both their own and the other person's face, and being too culturally biased.

Related Theories

- Face Management Theory focuses on the sequences of messages and turn-taking, particularly when managing face-threatening acts.

- Face-negotiation theory considers the intersection of culture (individualistic versus collectivistic orientations), conflict management styles, and face.

- In identity management theory, competence is defined as the ability to manage both the relational and cultural identities of the interactants. Our communication with others involves faces linked to relational and cultural identities.

Applying Face Theory to Every Day Communication

- Face theory provides you with an explanation for why you and those around you behave the way they do, particularly with how we respond in situations where the face we present is threatened.

- You should also gain an appreciation for the need to monitor the facework you provide for others as you interact.

- Consider how your face has been recently threatened and what face threats evoked the strongest emotional reaction from you. Also consider how your behaviors and messages might have threatened other people's faces.

FOR REVIEW

- **Key Terms**

Face	Positive face
Negative face	Competence face
Fellowship face	Autonomy face
Face-threatening act (FTA)	Poise
Facework	Off-record FTA
On-record with redress FTA	On-record without redress FTA
Discretion	Circumlocution and deception
Joking	Explanation
Approbation	Solidarity
Tact	Accepting and correcting
Ignoring and denying	Diminishing
Apology and/or compensation	Face management theory
Face negotiation theory	Identity management theory

1. Define face and explain its role in our interactions with others.

2. Explain the relationships among positive and negative face, and fellowship, competence, and autonomy face.

3. Provide an example of a face-threatening act people might create that threatens their own positive face. Provide an example of a face-threatening act that a person might enact that threatens another person's negative face.

4. What does facework entail?

5. What does it mean that people's faces are contextually bound?

6. What are the four options for presenting a face-threatening message to another person?

7. Describe two strategies that people can use to help manage threats to other people's faces.

8. Describe two strategies a person can use to manage threats to his or her own face.

9. Explain one of the criticisms made about face theory or politeness theory.

10. Briefly describe one of the three theories that are related to face and politeness theories.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. While face theory is presented in this chapter as it relates to interpersonal interactions and relationships, it can easily be applied to other communication contexts and situations as well. . For example, when a U.S. company decides to relocate its corporate headquarters to another country, this might threaten their face if the company has presented a "face" of a patriotic, community supporting, and employee sensitive organization. The company's action also threatens the face of the community in which it is based: the positive face (you're not good enough for us anymore) and negative face (changing the economy of the local community).In

groups of four or five, see what other human enterprises you can identify where the information

on face, positive and negative face, and/or face-threatening acts is applicable

2. Using the list of face-threatening acts in Table 10.1, work in groups to see how quickly you

can come up with an example of each one as experienced by the members of your group. Which

ones were the most difficult to identify? Why? Which were the easiest? Why? Brainstorm other

examples where your positive (fellowship or competence) face was threatened and where your

negative (autonomy) face was threatened.

3. For this activity you are to consider how we engage in facework to help others save or restore

face. Identify an examples of a face-threatening messages/act that you received that was

presented in such a way as to minimize your face loss. Which strategy was used? Now identify

an example where the face-threatening message/act created a significant face loss. How might

that message have been presented in order to minimize your face loss (besides not delivering it)?

Which, if any of the strategies presented in the chapter does this reflect?

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