Conflict Facework Theory

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FACEWORK/FACE NEGOTIATION THEORY

The meaning of *face* is generally conceptualized as how we want others to see us and treat us and how we actually treat others in association with their social self-conception expectations. In everyday interactions, individuals are constantly making conscious or unconscious choices concerning face-saving and face-honoring issues across interpersonal, workplace, and international contexts. While *face* is about a claimed sense of interactional identity in a particular situation*, facework* is about verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors that protect/save self, other, or mutual face.

Learning to manage antagonistic intercultural facework competently can bring about multiple perspectives in a conflicting relationship. Intercultural facework competence is a necessary facet of general intercultural communication competence. This entry describes the development of the conflict face-negotiation theory and its core assumptions and conditions, outlines the key concepts and accompanying research evidence, and ends with a discussion of intercultural facework competence and its relevance to the broader topic of intercultural competence.

Conflict Face-Negotiation Theory: Core Assumptions and Conditions

The researching of face and facework can be found in a wide range of disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, linguistics, management, international diplomacy, and human communication studies, among others. The concept of face has been used to explain

linguistic politeness rituals, apology acts, embarrassment situations, requesting behaviors, and conflict interactions.

The conflict Face Negotiation Theory (FNT), developed by Stella Ting-Toomey in 1988 and up to the present, explains the culture-based, individual-based, and situational-based factors that shape communicators' tendencies in approaching conflicts. The formal version of the theory became available--with five core assumptions and 12 theoretical propositions--stating the relationship between individualism-collectivism and different facework/conflict communication styles in 1988. A second rendition of the conflict FNT with seven assumptions and 32 propositions was published in 1998 especially with an extension on the importance of investigating conflict facework competence. Based on the results of several large cross-cultural conflict data sets, a third version of the FNT appeared in 2005, and contained an updated 24 propositions.

The seven core assumptions of the FNT are as follows: (1) people in all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in all communication situations; (2) the concept of face is especially problematic in emotionally-threatening or identity vulnerable situations when the situated identities of the communicators are called into question; (3) the cultural value spectrums of individualism-collectivism and small/large power distance shape facework concerns and styles; (4) individualism and collectivism value patterns shape members' preferences for self-oriented face concern versus other-oriented or mutual-oriented concern; (5) small and large power distance value patterns shape members' preferences for horizontal-based facework versus vertical-based facework; (6) the value dimensions, in conjunction with individual, relational, and situational factors influence the use of particular facework behaviors in particular cultural scenes; and (7) intercultural facework competence refers to the optimal integration of knowledge,

mindfulness, and communication skills in managing vulnerable identity-based conflict situations appropriately, effectively, and adaptively.

It seems that when an individual's face image is being threatened in a conflict situation, she or he would likely experience identity-based frustration, emotional vulnerability, anger, hurt, to even vengeance. The threats to face can be on a group membership level or an individual level. In the 2005 FNT version, the following conditions were posited concerning the valence direction of an intercultural *face threatening process (FTP)*: First, the more important the culturally appropriate facework rule is violated, the more severe the perceived FTP. Second, the larger the cultural distance between the conflict parties, the more mistrust or misunderstanding cumulate in the FTP. Third, the more important the perceived conflict topic or imposition of the conflict demand, as interpreted from distinctive cultural angles, the more severe the perceived FTP. Fourth, the more power the conflict initiator has over the conflict recipient, the more severe the perceived FTP by the recipient. Fifth, the more harm or hurtful the FTP produces, the more time and effort is needed to repair the FTP Self-face concern becomes incrementally more salient if several of these conditions are present in a face-threatening process. For example, individuals are likely to move toward self-face saving and ingroup face-saving emphasis as they perceive the escalation of the various face-threatening conditions directed at them or their salient ingroups. Cultural worldview perspectives, individual personality tendencies, and situational pressures frame the underlying interpretations of what count as a severe intercultural "face-threatening" interaction episode.

Face Concerns: Key Concepts and Research Evidence

Face Concerns, Cultural Membership, and Personality Tendency

Self-face concern is the protective concern for one's own identity image when one's own face is threatened in the conflict episode. *Other-face concern* is the concern for accommodating the other conflict party's identity image in the conflict situation. *Mutual-face concern* is the concern for both parties' images and the image of the relationship. Whether we choose to engage in self-face protection or mutual-face protection often depends on our ingrained cultural socialization process, individual trait tendencies, and embedded situational factors.

More specifically, in a direct empirical test of the theory by John Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey in 2003, the research program tested the underlying assumption of the conflict FNT that face is an explanatory mechanism for cultural membership's influence on conflict behavior. A questionnaire was administered to 768 participants in four national cultures: China, Germany, Japan, and the U.S. in their respective languages asking them to recall and describe a recent interpersonal conflict. The major results of the study are as follows: First, cultural individualism-collectivism had direct effects on conflict styles, as well as mediated effects through self-construal and face concerns. Second, *self-face concern* was associated positively with dominating style and *other-face concern* was associated positively with avoiding and integrating styles. Third, German respondents reported the frequent use of direct-confrontational facework strategies; Japanese reported the use of different pretending and accommodating strategies and minimized the severity of the conflict situation; Chinese engaged in a variety of avoiding, accommodating, passive aggressive, and third-party appeals' tactics; and U.S. Americans reported the use of upfront expression of feelings and remaining calm as conflict facework tactics. Within

the pluralistic U.S. sample, multiethnic research by Ting-Toomey and her team in 2000 has also uncovered distinctive conflict interaction styles in relationship to particular ethnic identity salience issues.

The manner in which individuals conceive of their self-images, independent or interdependent, should also have a profound influence on the expectancies of what constitute appropriate and effective responses in diverse facework situations. Both dimensions of self also exist within each individual, regardless of cultural membership identity. Oetzel and Ting-Toomey in 2003 found that independent self-construal is associated positively with self-face concern and the use of dominating/competing conflict strategies. Interdependent self-construal, on the other hand, is associated positively with other-face concern and the use of avoiding and integrating conflict tactics. It would appear that independent self-construal fosters the use of upfront and low-context demanding interaction responses, while interdependent self-construal emphasizes circumspective and high-context yielding interaction patterns.

Situational Appraisal Factors

Two other possible factors that moderate the activation of an independent versus an interdependent self are situational role appraisal and ingroup/outgroup distance factors. Situational role appraisal factors can include the role relationship between the conflict participants to the perceived goals of the facework negotiation process. To illustrate, Rebecca Merkin in 2006 has integrated small/large power distance value dimension to the individualism-collectivism value dimension in explaining face-threatening response messages and conflict styles in multiple cultures. She found that high-status individuals from large power distance cultures tend to use both direct and indirect facework strategies to deal with face-threatening situations--depending on whether they were delivering positive or negative messages. Thus, an

accurate assessment of the culture-based role relationship such as workplace status role and gender role issues can be critical in promoting competent versus incompetent conflict management outcome.

Furthermore, many relational distance factors are important in competent facework negotiation. For example, the broad-based "ingroup" category in the Japanese language can be further refined into "inner-intimate ingroup circle" and "familiar ingroup circle." Likewise, the broad-based "outgroup" category can be further fine-tuned into "familiar outgroup circle" and "peripheral outgroup circle." In the archetypical form, proper facework rituals can be suspended in the "inner-intimate" category or the "peripheral outgroup" category. Instead, authentic heart-to-heart talks can exist in the "inner-intimate" category and indifferent/patronizing facework tactics can permeate the "peripheral outgroup" category. Finally, the most update version of FNT in 2014 connects the understanding of intercultural facework in four social ecological contexts: macro-, exo-, meso-, and micro-contexts.

Facework Communication Competence

A competent facework negotiator would need to increase his or her awareness concerning self's and other's cultural and individual facework conditioning process. An optimal degree of facework competence emphasizes the integration of culture-sensitive knowledge, mindfulness, and adaptive communication skills. C*ulture-sensitive knowledge* is considered as the most important component that underscores the other components of facework competence. Without culture-sensitive knowledge, conflict parties cannot learn to uncover the implicit "ethnocentric lenses" they use to evaluate behaviors in an intercultural conflict situation. Without knowledge, negotiators cannot reframe their interpretation of a conflict situation accurately from the other's cultural frame of reference.

The *mindfulness* competence component means attending to one's internal assumptions, cognitions, and emotions and, at the same time, becoming attuned to the other's conflict assumptions, cognitions, and emotions. To be mindful of intercultural differences, individuals have to learn to see the unfamiliar behavior from a multiple-layered, 360 degree differentiating angle. Mindfulness can be practiced through a deep state of mindful listening with an uncluttered mind.

To cultivate competent facework practice, the intentional practice of *communication skills* such as de-centering skills, face validation, empathetic resonance, artful reframing, productive power balancing, adaptive code-switching, dialogue bridging, and common ground seeking skills would be useful. Adaptive communication skills involve the criteria of perceived appropriateness and effectiveness. "Appropriateness" refers to the degree to which the exchanged behaviors are regarded as proper and match the expectations generated by the insiders of the culture. "Effectiveness" refers to the degree to which communicators achieve mutually shared meaning and integrative goal-related outcomes. Culturally intelligent communicators can use adaptive communication skills to manage the conflict process appropriately and integrate divergent interaction goals effectively.

In the applied context of intercultural conflict mediation, for example, an intercultural mediator has acted appropriately when both cultural disputants view that the mediator has communicated skillfully and that both conflict parties feel included in the mediation session. Concurrently, the mediator also has moved the conflict parties forward productively and helped them to reach an attainable, mutual-interest outcome. To behave appropriately in a mediation session, competent mediators need to have the relevant value knowledge patterns of the larger cultures of both conflict parties. They also need to apply culture-sensitive situational norms in

understanding the holistic conflict story. To be perceived as effective mediators, the intercultural mediators need to have linguistic, verbal, and nonverbal elastic skills to confront, to conjure, and to move the intercultural dialogue process forward. More important, appropriateness and effectiveness criteria are positively interdependent. When the mediator uses a culture-sensitive approach to mediate the mediation session, the "good faith" respectful behaviors can induce cooperative and effective outcome.

In mediating conflicts with Asian cultural members, for example, mediators may want to heed the following guidelines: (1) Asian disputants may emphasize a strong benevolent conflict facework approach in entering a mediation session; (2) they may expect that the mediator is there to serve as a benevolent, authoritative figure and who is there to give them the solution to a conflict problem; (3) Asian disputants are oftentimes face-sensitive in disclosing private information--they may not feel comfortable engaging in direct conflict storytelling and self-disclosure unless some emotional ties or trust have been established; (4) they may not see the distinct separation between substantive conflict issue and relational conflict issue—they may tend to see both data sets as an integrative whole; (5) they may not feel comfortable with the free-wheeling brainstorming techniques especially under time pressure; (6) they may need to claim "face victory" in front of their own ingroups.

To address the above issues, culturally-responsive mediators must learn to "*give face*" or "honor and uplift" the face images of the Asian disputants via the following strategies. First, they need to spend more time in the "introduction" stage of the mediation to clearly define the meaning of mediation, the mediator's role, and to emphasize the confidentiality of the process. Second, they need to use more patience in discussing the ground rules that govern the mediation process. They need to tolerate silence and hesitations and engage in more high-context probing questions and

clarification questions. They may want to engage in more metaphorical and analogical probes in inviting the Asian disputants to open up their deeply-guarded emotions. Third, they need to encourage the Western disputants to learn to listen and not to interrupt. They need to use a stronger coaching, facilitation technique to explain what does "brainstorming" mean in the mediation context and give some concrete examples. They need to emphasize that there is no right or wrong answer in the initial brainstorming stage and that regardless of rank or age, all disputants should feel free to bring forth their creative ideas without evaluative judgments. They need to emphasize both instrumental/task harmony motivation and value/belief harmony motivation. They can persuade the Asian disputants via the conjoint harmony motivation approach. The culturally-responsive mediators, for example, can emphasize that indeed, when the mediation agreement is signed, the Asian disputants and their families can finally enjoy some peaceful tranquil moments after a successful mediation session and that the conflict instrumental/task resolution may entice improved neighborly relationship in the long run.

On the other hand, competent intercultural mediators must also learn to "*validate the face*" or social self-images of the Western disputants via the following strategies. First, they need to spend more time in the "introduction" stage to educate the Western disputants about the importance of displaying cultural sensitivity to all conflict parties in the mediation session. They can also address the possibility that individuals in the room may have different facework approaches and conflict style preferences. They can also emphasize that indeed their role is neutral, impartial, and objective so that they can match the expectancies of disputants who subscribe to a strong "impartial" or "status-achievement" conflict approach.   Second, mediators should make sure to serve as well-balanced traffic conductors in balancing the talk times between the Western individualists and reticent Asian collectivists. They should also make sure that the Western disputants understand why

some Asian disputants, once they start talking, they spend so much time in "contexting" their conflict story and not get to the point head-on because of their high-context communication tendencies. Third, they need to role-model adaptive communication styles so that both the Asian and Western disputants can observe first-hand how to engage in appropriate and respectful culture-sensitive dialogue. They may also want to team up with other intercultural experts and conduct co-mediation sessions when there are strong linguistic and deep-rooted cultural animosities exist among the cultural group members.

Intercultural facework competence is one of the key facets of intercultural communication competence. While general intercultural competence focuses on the development of open-minded attitudes, culture-sensitive knowledge, and appropriate and effective interaction skills, intercultural facework competence takes into account the keys of emotional and identity threats that affect the well-beings of the two intercultural conflict parties or membership systems. Facework competence emphasizes the mindful capacity of the conflict negotiators in managing emotional frustrations non-reactively and transforming ingrained conflict habits flexibly. A respectful, mutual-face sensitive lens would likely cultivate productive conflict openings, entries, passages, and closures. When both conflict parties from divergent cultures are committed to work hard in developing a "third ear" to listen mindfully and empathetically in the conflict situation—they are more likely to move toward a transformational facework path and a mutual-attuning face-saving and face-honoring satisfying outcome.

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See also Conflict Management; Conflict Styles; Intercultural Competence; Intercultural Conflict Transformation; Intergroup Dialogues; International Negotiation

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