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Fight and flight: A multilevel analysis of facework strategies in intercultural face-threatening acts

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates facework strategies of managing face-threatening acts in intercultural interactions where communicators' cultural backgrounds are different from each other. Based on a pre-study with U.S. ($n = 89$) and Chinese ($n = 76$) college students, four scenarios featuring intercultural face-threatening acts were developed, where a Chinese student communicated politely and appropriately according to the Chinese culture, but the exact same act was considered otherwise in U.S. culture. In the main study, U.S. college students ($N = 217$) were given these scenarios and asked to report the general level of face needs, perceived face threats, and facework strategies in each scenario. Multilevel analyses (i.e., Hierarchical Linear Modeling) were employed to parse out the different levels of influence in order to understand both separate and joint impacts of situational face threats and individual face needs on facework strategies. Results showed that: 1) intercultural communicators use both mitigating (i.e., fleeing) and aggravating (i.e., fighting) facework strategies, and a slight preference is given to mitigating strategies; 2) facework strategies are more sensitive to particular situational conditions than to individual dispositions; and 3) individuals' value for others' face moderates the relationship between situational conditions and facework strategies. The current study provides empirical evidence of challenges in establishing meaningful intercultural relationships by identifying the multiple levels of impact on facework strategies in intercultural communication. Further discussion and implications of the findings are also included.

Introduction

Many social interactions contain risks to the desired social impressions of interactants. When threats occur, people tend to employ strategies to remedy the damage. The concept of face is closely related to this communicative process of managing one's impression. Goffman (1967) defines 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. 5). Any verbal or nonverbal act that runs contrary to one's desired face needs is a face-threatening act, or FTA (Brown and Levinson, 1987). The series of actions taken to achieve face needs are referred to as facework (Goffman, 1967). In this paper, the specific tactics one employs to manage FTAs are described as facework strategies.

Previous scholars show that facework strategies, which serve to manage desired social impressions, are influenced by either individuals' dispositions (Oetzel and Ting-Toomey, 2003) or particular situational conditions (Carson and Cupach, 2000). However, few studies have considered the two sources of influence in combination or explored possible interaction effects between the two. One

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goal of the current study is to fill this gap by examining how individual and situational factors would jointly affect individuals' facework strategies of FTAs.

In addition, the current study focuses on *intercultural* FTAs, in which a perfectly appropriate and polite message or behavior in one culture is considered inappropriate and even offensive in another. Cultural differences are more likely to turn friendly daily interactions into FTAs (Brislin, 1993), and repeated occurrence of such FTAs can obstruct trusting intercultural relationships from developing. Therefore, understanding the intricate dynamics of facework strategies in intercultural FTAs will serve as a cognitive basis in forming meaningful intercultural relationships in the long term. Because of this, facework will be addressed first.

Facework

Goffman (1967) assumes that all individuals want to be in the “right” face, so they would be motivated to engage strategies to manage their face when they are under attack. Metts (1997) explains that facework is “a variety of communicative devices available to interactants for preventing face loss (both their own and others), restoring face if lost, and facilitating the maintenance of poise in the advent of disrupted interactions” (p. 374). Studies have found that people use strategies such as topic avoidance and withdrawal (e.g., Richman and Leary, 2009), justification (e.g., Vaid, Choi, Chen, & Friedman, 2008), apology (e.g., Lee and Park, 2011), excuse (e.g., Manusov, Kellas, & Trees, 2004), humor (e.g., Sharkey and Stafford, 1990), denial (e.g., Hodgins, Liebeskind, & Schwartz, 1996), and retaliation or aggression (e.g., Hodgins & Liebeskind, 2003) to address damages to one's desired face needs.

To better understand the vast variety of facework strategies, McLaughlin, Cody, and O'Hara (1983) array major remedial tactics, namely concession, justification, excuse, and refusal, on a continuum from mitigating to aggravating. Mitigating strategies attempt to reduce social damage by appeasing the offense, whereas aggravating strategies tend to escalate threats to the hearer (McLaughlin et al., 1983). Informative as it is, the framework suffers a few limitations. First, the four taxonomies are assumed to be offender-centered, which means that social actors causing FTAs (i.e., offenders) initiate the abovementioned tactics. However, victims of FTAs can initiate facework strategies as well. For example, following an offensive comment, when victims pretend nothing wrong has happened, collective efforts can be viewed as facework strategies to prevent further attention to the FTA that has already occurred (Miller, 1996).

Second, McLaughlin et al. (1983) assume the valence of facework strategies is shared similarly between victims and perpetrators, giving little attention to differing interpretations of the strategies. For example, the researchers claim that the offenders' silence and withholding explanations are considered aggravating because offenders' failure to provide explanations when expected implies their denial of responsibility (McLaughlin et al., 1983). However, this assertion might not hold if offenders' silence results from the fact that they do not realize they have caused any FTAs. If this is the case, a victim can adopt silence for the purpose of letting the offense pass without bringing further attention to it, which as a facework strategy would be considered mitigating.

Finally, McLaughlin et al.'s (1983) framework does not consider the possibility that the outcome of facework strategies does not always match the intended function. In particular, an intentionally mitigating strategy could aggravate the face threat in actuality and vice versa. The offense might be escalated when a victim views the offender's apology lacking in genuine remorse, despite the offender's attempt to remedy the damage after an unintended offense. Alternatively, if the offender denies the offense and offers a persuasive account that somehow changes the victim's perspective of the situation, it might put an end to the FTA. This means that presumed mitigating strategies might not necessarily alleviate FTAs; moreover, aggravating strategies do not always escalate. Empirically, mitigating strategies such as non-confrontation and avoidance can be associated with relational dissatisfaction, while aggravating strategies such as confrontation can lead to enhancement of relational stability (Caughlin & Golish, 2002).

The previously mentioned limitations challenge the assumption that mitigating and aggravating strategies are on the opposite ends of a single conceptual dimension. Therefore, this study will treat mitigating and aggravating strategies as separate types of facework strategies, independent from each other.

Facework in intercultural communication

Facework strategies have been examined mostly in intracultural communication, where communicators share the same cultural backgrounds. The impact of culture is considered in face-related research, but face and facework strategies have been studied primarily for similarities and differences across various national cultures (e.g., Amarasinghe, 2012; Kim, Guan, & Park, 2012; Lee & Park, 2011; Neuliep & Johnson, 2016). Very few studies have focused on facework strategies in *intercultural* situations where communicators have dissimilar cultural backgrounds, particularly from a multilevel approach.

Communicating with someone from a different cultural background has a high potential to threaten interactants' desired face as a result of communicators' dissimilar cognitive assumptions, behavioral patterns, and emotional displays (Armstrong & Kaplowitz, 2001; Lee, Park, Imai, & Dolan, 2012). Brislin (1993) coined the phrase “well-meaning clashes” (p. 83) in intercultural communication, referring to a perfectly appropriate and polite message or act in one culture that is considered inappropriate and even offensive in another. For example, in Chinese culture it is acceptable to comment on an acquaintance's appearance out of care and concern (e.g., “You don't look well. Are you ill?”). However, such a comment might be considered intrusive and inappropriate in U.S. culture. Discrepancies of socio-cultural norms that govern communication between interactants can easily turn a friendly conversation into an FTA (Qin, 2014).

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