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Facework in Syria and the United States: A cross-cultural comparison

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ABSTRACT

“The first rule when communicating with people from the Arab world is not to let them lose face” said J. Al-Omari. Face or one’s social identity is cultural. A face threat is a situation which threatens to create a loss of face. When experiencing face-threats people guard their face with facework – behavioral actions enacted to protect one’s face. Since facework varies across cultures, this study analyzed how cultural collectivism, power distance, masculinity, and uncertainty avoidance influence direct, indirect, competitive, cooperative, hostile, and ritualistic facework in Syria and the United States, employing a MANCOVA design with gender as the covariate. Significant findings ($n = 336$) showed that: (a) US Americans reported using more direct, competitive, and hostile facework strategies than Syrians while (b) Syrians reported using more indirect, cooperative and ritualistic facework strategies than US Americans (c) US American facework strategies corresponded to individualistic, weak power distance, masculine, and low uncertainty avoidance cultural dimensions while Syrian facework corresponded to collectivistic, high-power distance, moderately masculine, and high uncertainty avoidance and (d) VSM 94 results showed Syria to be more individualistic than Hofstede’s original rankings.

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1. Introduction

On May 3, 2003, Colin Powell directly addressed Syria and stated that the days of the cozy deals and of winking and nodding at Syrian support for certain groups that are security threats to the United States were over. He then presented Syria with a list of U.S. direct demands that was nothing short of breathtaking (Timmerman, 2003). The direct language used by the US during this confrontation was face threatening and preceded a break in relations between the US and Syria.

Recently, after a four-year break, the Obama administration decided to send an ambassador to Damascus. This is a noteworthy development because it shows that the US recognizes Syria’s regional importance (Searle, 2009) and is, in effect *giving face* to the Syrians. In fact, Presidential spokesman Robert Gibbs said that President Obama’s decision was aimed at fulfilling his promise to show more US engagement in the Arab world (Hurst, 2009). This gesture was reciprocated by Syria’s leader, who sent a July 4th message praising President Obama and invited him to visit Syria (Ghattas, 2009). It is clear that recent events highlight the importance of the relationship between the US and Syria.

In order to establish mutually positive relationships with the Arab world, however, understanding and sensitivity to the concept of *face* or personal dignity in Arab culture is essential (Harris, Moran, & Moran, 2004) because the loss of face could cause communication to break down completely (Gross & Stone, 1964). *Facework* – actions taken to maintain or gain

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face – is used to prevent oneself from losing face. Facework is carried out in all negotiations between countries when a possible *face-threatening act* – messages that challenge the image we want to project – arises. However, the type of facework strategies employed during interactions varies by culture (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 2005).

For example, US Americans regard honest speaking positively. This is evidenced by the legendary story of George Washington cutting down the cherry-tree and admitting it. Most Arabs hearing this story, however, would regard anyone admitting their guilt as compromising their integrity (or face) (Naffsinger, 1964). The values and rationales that underlie people's reactions are an aspect of national character, a factor of importance in estimating the likely courses of action in dealing face to face with people from different cultures (Hofstede, 1980; Naffsinger, 1964). Understanding the concept of facework across cultures could help define areas of potential communication mishaps and give insight into stated and unstated attitudes present underneath the surface when communication is taking place between the US and Syria. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of culture on facework used in response to face threats in Syria and the US in order to increase understanding and improve future communication between our cultures. This will be accomplished by analyzing facework via Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions.

1.1. Examining facework using cultural dimensions

Understanding Hofstede's (2001) cross-national differences helps prevent intercultural miscommunication (Meeuwesen, van den Brink-Muinen, & Hofstede, 2009) in a more important way than understanding socio-political disagreements because fundamental cultural differences can influence people's understanding of another. In particular, Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions explain the shared views individuals acquire by growing up in a particular country. These dimensions include individualism–collectivism, power distance, masculinity/femininity, and uncertainty avoidance.

Hofstede's (2001) theory of cultural dimensions has been the most widely used in analyses of phenomena pertaining to different cultures (e.g., Arrindale et al., 2003; Vishwanath, 2003). Despite some criticism (e.g., Baskerville, 2003; Goodstein, 1981; McSweeney, 2002; Spector, Cooper, & Sparks, 2001), Hofstede's model has been validated in numerous replication studies (e.g., Helmreich & Merritt, 1998; Hoppe, 1991; Merkin, 2006a; Shackleton & Ali, 1990; Smith, Dugan, & Trompenaars, 1996; Smith et al., 2005; Vishwanath, 2003). Moreover, Hofstede's cultural indices have been utilized in hundreds of studies exploring the effects of culture in numerous areas (Taras et al., 2010). The large number and the noteworthy consistency of research methodology across these studies justify using Hofstede's framework for studying cross-cultural facework.

This article is divided into sections on the basis of the effects of Hofstede's specific cultural dimensions and facework communication that tends to result from being a member of a particular culture. The particular facework strategies that make up the hypotheses of this paper were decided upon on the basis of Hofstede's (1980) assertions in *Culture's Consequences*. Overall, it is argued that in the context of a potential face-threat, cultural factors will play a major part in determining the facework that people in the US and Syria choose to manage their face.

1.1.1. Individualism–collectivism and power distance as predictors of facework

One's culture affects one's conception of self (Chang & Holt, 1994; Morisaki & Gudykunst, 1994). Losing face is painful because face is an expression of one's inner self. For this reason, the self is the starting point in the conceptualization people hold of their face. The self, one's *inner* identity, is the lens through which people perceive their world and organize their behavior (Swann, 2005). One's self is reflected in one's face, which is one's social identity acted out in a dynamic self-regulating interactive environment.

A number of researchers (de Mooij, 1998; Hofstede, 2001; Inkeles & Levinson, 1997) point out that cultural conceptions of the self include the relationship between the individual and society, which is reflective of individualistic and collectivistic values. These cultural conceptions are carried out behaviorally through facework strategies. For example, cultural members who are individualistic tend to use more direct facework strategies while cultural members who are more collectivistic tend to use more indirect facework strategies (Cocroft & Ting-Toomey, 1994; Cocroft, 1992; Ting-Toomey, 1988). Direct communication is frank and clear-cut while indirect communication involves hints, compliance, oblique suggestions, or ambiguous message strategies (Gao, 1998; Holtgraves, 1997; Lin, 1997). Ting-Toomey (2005) posits that face is a universal concept, while the specific meanings of face may vary across cultures. Thus, facework reflects cultural influences on the inner self.

Ting-Toomey (2005) pointed out that power distance should also be considered as a separate cultural dimension when explaining facework; but power distance and collectivism are also correlated. Specifically, individuals from high-power distance cultures tend to be more collectivistic and individuals from low-power-distance cultures tend to be more individualistic (Hofstede, 1991). While individualism–collectivism refers to how individuals identify with their group, power-distance relates to differences in equality perceptions between people.

Hofstede (1980) ranked Syria as a highly collective culture. The identity of people from collectivistic cultures is interconnected with their social groups, otherwise known as their ingroups (Triandis, 1987). In general, members of collective cultures tend to communicate differently with their ingroups than with their outgroups (Hofstede, 2001; Triandis, 1987). Ingroups are "groups of interdependent people who interact over a substantial period of time, and who can be identified by others as group members" (Triandis, 1987, p. 266); and outgroups consist of everybody else. Social relationships in collective cultures tend to be predetermined by those defined as part of one's ingroup. Within collective ingroups, there is a tacit understanding about the inclusiveness of ingroup relationships that provides ingroup members with mutual support

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