



Face

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What is it?

Face is the positive social value a person claims during a particular encounter. This is supported by verbal and nonverbal actions participants take to express their view of themselves and others in a particular context. Thus, face is socially shared, and part of ritual sets of expectations through which participants display a willingness to uphold their interactions with others.

Face is intimately connected to self and identity. The self is a core identity that is present in all interactions; however, multiple identities may emerge in different contexts. People's responses signal their interpretations and how they mean to be understood. These ritual exchanges support meaningful interactions among participants and are a condition of interaction.

Face is enacted differently in different cultures. Face may apply to groups as well as individuals, and emotions and feelings are attached to face. As such, face is a cooperative activity in which one supports her own face (demeanor) as well as that of others (deference).

Who uses the concept?

Scholars utilize this concept in understanding interpersonal, group and intercultural communication. Face is particularly useful in understanding how conflict and misunderstanding may occur, especially when face is violated or not honored. Counselors and others working in therapeutic settings may also find face a valuable tool in helping clients improve communication skills.

Fit with intercultural dialogue?

Face is arguably a cultural universal: all societies rely on ritual forms of communication to maintain social practices and cultural cohesiveness. However, how face is enacted is culturally variable. Different cultures need to understand face requirements for interaction, and honor the human dignity of all participants. This is a complex task requiring much thought and effort, but essential if we as human beings are able to peaceably co-exist.

What work remains?

The conflation of politeness and face needs clarification. Face is a complex, multifaceted concept that extends beyond face viewed primarily as politeness. Scholars also need to examine cultural differences in honoring face.

Resources

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