

Losing Face in Chinese and American Culture: Precursors and Consequences

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Abstract prepared for the Second International Conference on Multicultural Discourses, 13-15th April 2007, Institute of Discourse and Cultural Studies, & Department of Applied Psychology, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, China.

Face concerns arise in any encounter where one's credibility as a social actor has been challenged during the flow of interpersonal exchanges in a given social setting. When one perceives that his or her face has been lost, the negative emotions of shame and anger will be aroused, the intentions to retaliate, to restore one's face and to re-negotiate one's relationships with the other parties will be generated, and corresponding behaviors will be mobilized. Depending on the responses of the other parties in the interaction, one's at-risk relationship may deteriorate further.

People have long believed that Chinese are more sensitive to face issues than are Westerners. A series of studies involving interpersonal harm doing tested predictions about the processes associated with face loss, as well as its outcome among Hong Kong Chinese and Americans in order to understand whether face loss sets in motion universal or cultural-specific processes. In terms of precursors, results showed that the relative power of the perpetrator vis-à-vis the target had an equally strong impact on face loss in both cultures. However, the linkage between the degree of norm violation associated with the harm and consequent face loss was stronger for Hong Kong Chinese than that for Americans. In terms of consequences, face loss provoked both anger and shame, which in turn predicted avoidance responses and relationship deterioration equally in both cultural groups. In terms of triggering intentions, greater face loss resulted in greater motivation to retaliate for Chinese but not for Americans, who, like their Chinese counterparts, are equally motivated to repair the damaged relationship. Although most processes surrounding face loss seem pan-cultural, norm violation has greater implications for face loss in Chinese society and generates greater retaliatory responding as a way to restore interpersonal order. In this way, Chinese actors cooperate to prevent loss of face during social encounters to a greater extent than Westerners.