

Face Negotiation Theory

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Communication Theory

April 29, 2024

Stella Ting-Toomey's Face-Negotiation Theory is a theory that describes different ways that people handle conflict, especially referring to saving face, and the cultures that represent the likelihood of how you handle these situations. Over time this theory has changed and developed to be shaped into the strong theory that is applicable to today. This essay will serve as an explanation to further detail towards different aspects of what face negotiation really is, the evolution of where these different ideas and conclusions have come from, and the impact that this theory can have on every person that encounters it with insights from scholarly sources.

The *original theory* paper comes from Ting-Toomey started from a place of trying to understand the concept of face concerns. Ting-Toomey states, "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." This aligns with her definition that is stated in "A First Look at Communication Theory" when the book says "Ting-Toomey defines *face* as 'the projected image of one's self in a relational situation.'" The book describes how each person has different concerns whenever a conflict situation arises and the reactions of how each person responds is likely linked heavily to their face concern. Through the understanding of what face concern is, we are in turn able to categorize people by their actions and by the level of concern they have for themselves or others around them.

To further describe the different ways to categorize "face," Ting-Toomey identifies face concerns as being correlated with culture. To simplify, Ting-Toomey puts different cultures into two different categories. One, as a collectivist culture and the other as an individualism culture. According to "A First Look at Communication Theory" individuals from collectivist cultures are

more concerned with preserving face for themselves and others while maintaining harmony with each person they encounter negotiation with. On the other hand, individuals from individualistic cultures prioritize autonomy and self-face concerns over the concerns for others. The cultural differences represented may not have final say on how a person chooses to act but it is important to understand that it influences the way individuals handle conflicts and manage face-saving behaviors in interpersonal communication.

The categories of collectivist and individualist cultures for Face Negotiation come from an article from Harry C. Triandis that's called *Collectivistic/individualistic culture*. In this article we see Triandis explore the exact definitions of the desires of these different cultures along with the cultural patterns that shape life events. In this article we see the explanations of cross-cultural differences in behaviors like crime rates, divorce rates, self-esteem and overall well being. Because of the strong detail and proof of living patterns from collectivistic and individualistic cultures Ting-Toomey is able to attach these definitions with confidence into her theory to further explain cultural motivations of face concerns.

Continuing to expand on the responses of those in negotiation, a big part of Ting Toomey's theory has to do with the conflict management styles that people use based on their face concerns. The conflict management styles have changed over time and through testing. Originally, Ting-Toomey thought that the chart of how people would handle conflict would be a simple chart with 5 separate conflict management styles. These styles included avoiding, obliging, compromising, dominating, and integration. Even though all of these conflict management styles did stay around for the final version of this theory, Ting-Toomey found that it was actually not that simple to only place all conflict styles into these 5 categories alone. The findings of more conflict styles for the theory come from a piece of research called *Revision and*

test of the theory by John Oetzel and Ting-Toomey. Through a thorough process of research and testing such as questionnaires some of the most important findings suggest that conflict management styles such as giving in, pretending, and third party help were strongly correlated with others faced concerns. “Other-face was a strong predictor of pretending and giving in. Further, the other-face predicted the third party but the self-face was also a predictor.” Many of the new management styles that Ting-Toomey had to adapt to for her theory came from this research project. Furthermore, apologizing, private discussion, and remaining calm were also found to be indicators or results of higher value to other-faced priority versus self.

Through the research of John Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey, self faced corners were fairly obvious and consistent in the findings. However, according to *A First look at Communication Theory* “Other researchers have had a problem creating survey items that distinguish between other-face and mutual-face, so perhaps this is a measurement glitch rather than a flaw in the theory.” The difference in mutual-face and other-face conflict management styles may be muddy, but this may be an area that the theory can continue to grow in and do more extensive research to find exact differences.

To continue into the research that John Oetzel and Stella Ting-Toomey were conducting they also conducted a follow up cross cultural study about apologizing. The findings and essay that they wrote was called *Making Up or Getting Even: The Effects of Face Concerns, Self-Construal, and Apology on Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Revenge in the United States and China*. This research model tested different hypotheses about how apologizing for getting back at people played into their findings or self or others faced concerns. Through a research study of “ 327 college students: 151 from a medium-sized university in the Northeastern United States (48 males, 101 females, 2 unidentified) and 176 from a large university in Central China

(43 males and 133 females)” they found that “results indicated that in both cultures, transgression victims’ independent self-construal and self-face concern were negatively associated, whereas their interdependent self-construals and other-face concerns were positively associated, with forgiveness, and offender apology was positively associated with forgiveness.” The findings of this study are somewhat easy for us to understand as Americans because of the toughness of apologizing especially when you think that you are right. It is hard to bite your tongue and apologize for any situation because that can signal that you are in the wrong and the other person is in the right. However, this is not just an American culture idea and even in other faced cultures such as China the results were the same. As long as the person is the one to apologize they are likely favoring other faced concerns.

The extensive research and testing about apologizing led to a place on Stella Ting-Toomey’s research results in a four-culture study model that put apologizing high on the others faced concern with very little for self face. The research from John Oetzel and Ting-Toomey also led to their prediction that forgiveness has a positive effect on reconciliation in both the United States and China. Their line of thinking was that apology would lead to forgiveness and forgiveness would lead to reconciliation. They did in fact find that apology almost always had a positive effect of forgiveness in both cultures. However, “the cultural difference is that a much greater proportion of people in China have an interdependent self construal that leads to other-face or mutual-face concerns.” The problem in this research finding is that other faced cultures are more likely to reconcile after forgiveness verses in a place like the United States that is more self faced concerned even after apologizing reconciliation was not always likely to happen.

Not only were the findings consistent within conflict management styles, but in the research conducted John Oetzel and Ting-Toomey titled *An analysis of the relationships among face concerns and facework behaviors in perceived conflict situations* found that the cultures that shared similar values did in fact produce similar outcomes. Thus, proving that Face-Negotiation has validity because culture can be a predictor of how people interact with negotiation and how they handle conflict. “There were many differences, but these differences occurred in statistical relationships that were not consistent with pan-cultural empirical data testing the hypotheses: avoiding facework and other-face; integrating facework and mutual or other-face; and defending-self-face: aggression – mutual-face (-), and express – other-face (-).” The high consistency of similar data proves that this theory has validity and the different findings of conflict management need to be implemented.

One of the important aspects about Stella Ting-Toomey’s theory comes from who she is as a theorist as the book *A First Look at Communication Theory* says, “most of the hypotheses have proved right, and she adjusts the theory when the research fails to support the others. That makes for a good theory.” One of the critiques of the theory however comes from more of a place of questioning the research. Many of the participants in each research model were college age and young adult students who were incentivized to take the survey. The problem with this is that many times young adults are more self-faced concerned about themselves because of their preparation for what they want to do in life. If you were to conduct research from many people who are older with families they might have a different perspective on how much they care for others than themselves.

The vulnerability of the theory lies in the fact that facework is a personal choice that has other influences beyond culture. Motivation and where a person is at in life may be the leading

cause towards how someone handles conflict. Stella Ting-Toomey recognizes this critique and the first look book states that “given the complex nature of culture, she has made the choice to sacrifice simplicity for validity, which makes the theory tougher to grasp.” Instead of making the theory more simple and straightforward Ting-Toomey dives deep into research for every aspect of the theory and offers the best reasoning for her findings that she can.

Overall, I knew that Stella Ting-Toomey’s theory of Face-Negotiation was not a simple one to comprehend and has taken turns and expanded over the years after different hypotheses. However, I did not know about how complex each part of her theory really is. The tough thing about all the research that is put in is that her hypothesis did not always come out as correct and the need for further research and breaking down of what her findings really mean can be a long and hard process, especially if it does not end up moving the theory forward in a way that Ting-Toomey might have wanted. Even though no theory is perfect I have a higher respect for every theory in general after this project and paper because each theory, especially this one, is backed by so much more work than you would think. This theory has evolved over many, many years and I have a trust that what Ting-Toomey chooses to share is the best version of her findings. Going forward I must remember that even when a theory may sound simple on the outside there are many complex components of gruing research that allow for the theory to be as clean as it is. Face-Negotiation theory gives us great insight into the idea that cultures can play a big impact and influence on how we choose to handle conflict and the ways that we want to portray ourselves and others. Knowing these different aspects of the theory and ways to handle conflict will change my perspective on others and how I choose to respond through negotiation for the rest of my life.

Sources:

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