

# Theories of identity and the analysis of face

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## Abstract

This paper explores the insights that theories of identity can offer for the conceptualisation and analysis of face. It argues that linguists will benefit from taking a multidisciplinary approach, and that by drawing on theory and research in other disciplines, especially in social psychology, they will gain a clearer and deeper understanding of face. The paper starts by examining selected theories of identity, focusing in particular on [Simon's \(2004\)](#) self-respect model of identity and [Brewer and Gardner's \(1996\)](#) theory of levels of identity. Key features from these theories are then applied to the conceptualisation and analysis of face. With the help of authentic examples, the paper demonstrates how inclusion of these multiple perspectives can offer a richer and more comprehensive understanding of face and the frameworks needed for analysing it.

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## 1. Introduction

Discussions of face invariably refer to the concept of self. For example, [Goffman \(1967:5\)](#) defines face with reference to 'image of self', and [Brown and Levinson \(1987:61\)](#) refer to it in terms of 'public self-image'. [Ting-Toomey \(1994:3\)](#) argues that face is an 'identity-boundary issue', and [Scollon and Scollon \(1995:34–36\)](#) discuss face in terms of the 'interpersonal identity of individuals in communication' and the 'self as a communicative identity'. Debates have occurred on a range of issues, such as the extent to which face is an individual or relational phenomenon, whether it is a public or private phenomenon, and whether it is a situation-specific or context-independent phenomenon.

A thread that runs through all of these concerns is the issue of identity. Surprisingly, however, there has been very little explicit consideration of the interrelationship between the two concepts. For example, to what extent are identity and face similar or different? How may theories of

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identity inform our understanding of face, and how may they aid our analyses of face? This paper takes up the challenge of exploring these questions. It focuses particularly (but not exclusively) on social psychological theories of identity, and maintains that these theories can offer very useful insights for both the conceptualisation and the analysis of face. Tracy (1990) touched on some of these issues many years ago, but there has been little follow-up discussion since then.

## 2. Theories of Identity

There are a number of different social psychological theories of identity and they reflect a variety of different approaches to the issue. *Identity Theory* (Stryker, 1987) takes a sociological approach; *Social Identity Theory (SIT) of Intergroup Relations* (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) and *Self-Categorization Theory (SCT)* (Turner et al., 1987) both take a psychological approach; and in North America, identity has traditionally been studied in terms of the social cognition of the self (e.g. Linville, 1985). (For an overview of these different approaches and theories, see Simon, 2004.) Recently, a number of researchers (e.g. Abrams and Hogg, 1999) have sought to integrate the various perspectives, realising that to a large extent they reflect different levels of explanation rather than inherently contradictory conceptualisations. Simon's (2004) *Self-Aspect Model of Identity* is one such integrated approach, and this section is based to a large extent on his work. Work by self-presentation theorists such as Schlenker (1980) and Leary (1996) is also relevant to the study of face, but for reasons of space, it is only dealt with in passing in this article.

First, though, we need to ask what identity is. Simon (2004) starts his book by warning that identity may be an analytic fiction and that the search for its essence as a 'thing' may be a misleading endeavour that diverts our efforts from a more promising process-oriented course. Nevertheless, he maintains that if it is taken as a shorthand expression or placeholder for social psychological processes revolving around self-definition or self-interpretation, including the variable but systematic instantiations thereof, the notion of identity will serve the function of a powerful conceptual tool. Campbell (2000:67) offer a useful definition of the self, which can be paraphrased as:

“The self-concept is a multi-faceted, dynamic construal that contains beliefs about one's attributes as well as episodic and semantic memories about the self. It operates as a schema, controlling the processing of self-relevant information.”

Simon's (2004) 'Self-Aspect Model of Identity' proposes that a person's self-concept comprises beliefs about that person's own attributes or self-characteristics. These can be huge in number, and include elements such as:

- Personality traits (e.g. shy)
- Abilities (e.g. poor dancer)
- Physical features (e.g. curly hair, slim)
- Behavioural characteristics (e.g. usually gets up early)
- Ideologies (Christian, democrat)
- Social roles (e.g. project manager)
- Language affiliation(s) (e.g. English, Chinese)
- Group memberships (e.g. female, academic, Christian)

People may differ in the degree to which they differentiate their various attributes (i.e. the number of different facets that an individual spontaneously uses in thinking about the self) and

Table 1  
Ways in which self-aspects can be perceived & evaluated

Criteria	Evaluative Judgements
Valence	Negative $\longleftrightarrow$ Neutral $\longleftrightarrow$ Positive
Centrality	Core $\longleftrightarrow$ Peripheral
Currency	Past $\longleftrightarrow$ Present $\longleftrightarrow$ Future
Actuality	Actual $\longleftrightarrow$ Ideal

the degree to which they are integrated (i.e. the extent to which the various facets are interrelated). Nevertheless, they (consciously or sub-consciously) perceive and evaluate their self-aspects in a number of different ways, as shown in Table 1.

Valence refers to the degree of attraction or aversion that an individual feels towards a given self-aspect. For all of us, we evaluate certain aspects of ourselves positively, we dislike other aspects, and we are neutral about yet other aspects. Centrality refers to the extent to which a given self-aspect is crucial to, or defining of, our sense of who we are; some elements are core whilst others are more peripheral. Currency refers to time judgements regarding self-aspects. We judge some attributes as applying to what we used to be like; we judge others as reflecting what we are currently like, and we anticipate that yet other attributes will apply to us in the future. Actuality refers to the distinction between ideal and actual characteristics. Some attributes reflect what we are like in reality; others reflect what we are striving to be like or what we think we ought to be like.

Psychological theories of identity typically distinguish between personal (individual) and social (group or collective) identities. Individual identity refers to self-definition as a unique individual, whereas collective identity refers to self-definition as a group member. Superficially it may seem that certain characteristics have more ‘collective potential’ than others (e.g. a person’s sex, ethnicity, religion, etc.), but as Simon (2004) explains, in reality it depends how people experience a given self-aspect. For example, in many circumstances religious denomination may be just one feature of a person’s individual identity, yet in other situations it may be the feature that construes his/her collective identity; similarly, a person’s medical condition (e.g. a sufferer from heart disease or breast cancer) may be just one aspect of his/her individual identity, yet it may also be the basis of one of that person’s collective identities (e.g. a breast cancer sufferer).

Brewer and Gardner (1996:84) argue that three different levels of self-representation need to be distinguished: the individual level, the interpersonal level and the group level. At the individual level, there is the ‘personal self’, which represents the differentiated, individuated concept of self; at the interpersonal level, there is the ‘relational self’, which represents the self-concept derived from connections and role relationships with significant others; and at the group level, there is the ‘collective self’, which represents the self-concept derived from significant group memberships. Hecht (1993), Hecht et al. (2005), who is a communication studies theorist, also distinguishes personal, relational and collective perspectives on identity. For example, he and his colleagues (Hecht et al., 2005:263) explain the relational perspective on identity as follows:

“An individual identifies him- or herself through his or her relationships with others, such as marital partners, coworkers, and friends (e.g. I am a husband, accountant, friend). Social roles are particularly important in shaping this aspect of identity. [In addition] a relationship itself is a unit of identity. Thus, a couple as a unit, for instance, can establish an identity.”

This threefold perspective, individual, relational and collective, is one that I build on later in the article.

Simon (2004) makes the very important point that all self-aspects, no matter whether they are construed in terms of individual, relational or collective identities, are both cognitive and social in nature. On the one hand, people form cognitive representations of who they are that are relatively stable and enduring. On the other hand, they also construct and negotiate their identities through social interaction. They not only enact elements of their personal, relational and collective selves through the process of social interaction, but they also negotiate and construct them, with the result that identities develop and emerge through interaction. This dual perspective, cognitive and interactional, is another important distinction that I develop in this article.

In relation to the interactional perspective, Schlenker and Pontari (2000) argue that people's self-presentation concerns (i.e. their concerns about the identity characteristics they wish to convey) can operate in foreground or background modes, but are never absent. Like computer anti-virus programs, they may run unobtrusively for much of the time, but the moment a problem arises, they capture the user's attention. This is a useful analogy for considering face.

What, then, are the functions of identity? Simon (2004:66–67) identifies a number of functions, three of which are particularly pertinent for the study of face:

- Identity helps to provide people with a sense of belonging (through their relational and collective self-aspects) and with a sense of distinctiveness (through their individual self-aspects).
- Identity helps people 'locate' themselves in their social worlds. By helping to define where they belong and where they do not belong in relation to others, it helps to anchor them in their social worlds, giving them a sense of 'place'.
- The many facets of identity help provide people with self-respect and self-esteem. People's positive evaluations of their own self-aspects help build their self-esteem. However, self-respect and self-esteem do not result simply from independent reflection; the respectful recognition of relevant others also plays a crucial role.

These functions of identity suggest interconnections with the notion of face, so I turn to these in the next section.

### 3. Face and identity

This section explores the similarities, differences and interconnections between the concepts of face and identity.

#### 3.1. *Face, identity and social interaction*

According to Goffman (1967:7), face is something that is "diffusely located in the flow of events" of an interaction, and it becomes manifest only when people make appraisals of these events. Similarly, Lim (1994:210) argues that this social element, which involves claims on the evaluations of others, is a defining feature of the phenomenon of face.

"... face is not what one thinks of oneself, but what one thinks others should think of one's worth. Since the claim of face is about one's image held by others, one cannot claim face

unilaterally without regard to the other's perspective. . . . The claim for face is the claim that the other should acknowledge, whether explicitly or implicitly, that one possesses the claimed virtues. . . . Face, in this sense, is different from such psychological concepts as self-esteem, self-concept, ego, and pride, which can be claimed without regard to the other's perspective."

Several authors (e.g. Imahori and Cupach, 2005:196; Arundale, 2005) have argued that it is this intrinsic social element that differentiates face from identity; for example, Arundale (2005) argues:

"Face . . . is not equivalent with identity. Both relationships and identity arise and are sustained in communication, but a relationship, and hence face, is a dyadic phenomenon, whereas identity is an individual (and much broader) phenomenon."

In other words, these authors seem to differentiate identity and face in terms of individuality versus relationship; in other words, they treat identity as situated within an individual and they treat face as a relational phenomenon. Certainly, face entails making claims about one's attributes that in turn entail the appraisal of others, so in this sense the notion of face cannot be divorced from social interaction. This is one way in which face differs from the notion of identity. However, as argued in the previous section, many social psychologists, as well as some communication studies theorists (e.g. Hecht, 1993; Hecht et al., 2005), would regard identity as incorporating not only individual construals of the self but also relational and collective construals. As I argue in section 4, this multi-level perspective on self-representation can be usefully applied to the analysis of face in interaction.

### 3.2. Identity, face and self-attributes

A second aspect of face that Goffman (1967:5) mentions is the notion of social attributes: "Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes." In this sense, Goffman's conceptualisation of face and the psychological conceptualisations of identity described in the previous section are very similar: they both entail claims to a range of attributes. Yet linguists have tended to overlook this point, perhaps because of the dominating influence of Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) dual division of face into positive face and negative face. Tracy (1990:215) argued many years ago that face theorists would do well to take more seriously the greater range of identity claims that social psychologists refer to and that challenge Brown and Levinson's framework, yet little attention has been paid to this since then. I follow up on this in section 4.

### 3.3. Identity, face, valence and affect

Goffman (1967:5), in his classic definition of face, points out that people only make face claims in relation to positively valued social attributes:

"The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact."

Face is not associated with negative attributes, except in so far as we claim NOT to possess them. In this respect, there is a clear distinction between face and identity. A person's identity attributes include negatively and neutrally evaluated characteristics, as well as positive ones, whilst the attributes associated with face are only positive ones.

Having said that, though, people may vary in how they evaluate a given attribute, and hence in the face claims they make. There is variation between people, and also variation across contexts. For example, many secondary school children in England feel they will lose face among their peers if they appear to be too clever and/or studious, because they value the attribute “cool” more highly than clever or hardworking. So in classroom contexts ‘clever’ pupils often make face claims that they believe their peers will value positively; in more private teacher–student interactions, however, they may make face claims to competence, diligence, and so on.

This raises another point: face is associated with affective sensitivity. Goffman (1967), Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) and many other face theorists all agree that face is a vulnerable phenomenon, and hence associated with emotional reactions. Goffman (1967:6) explains it as follows:

“If the encounter sustains an image of him that he has long taken for granted, he probably will have few feelings about the matter. If events establish a face for him that is better than he might have expected, he is likely to ‘feel good’; if his ordinary expectations are not fulfilled, one expects that he will ‘feel bad’ or ‘feel hurt’.”

This description is very congruent with Schlenker and Pontari’s (2000) claim that self-presentation operates in foreground and background modes. When everything is going smoothly, we may barely be aware of our face sensitivities (they are operating in background mode), yet as soon as people appraise our face claims in an unexpected way (either positively or negatively) our attention is captured because we are affectively sensitive to those evaluations.

The notion of affective sensitivity suggests another slight difference between face and identity (but not the narrower concept of self-presentation). Although we evaluate our identity attributes positively, negatively or neutrally (perhaps differently in different contexts), we are not necessarily affectively sensitive about them. If we are, then this suggests that we are simultaneously making face claims in relation to them.

### *3.4. Identity and face reconsidered*

I propose that in cognitive terms, face and identity are similar in that both relate to the notion of ‘self’-image (including individual, relational and collective construals of self), and both comprise multiple self-aspects or attributes. However, face is only associated with attributes that are affectively sensitive to the claimant. It is associated with positively evaluated attributes that the claimant wants others to acknowledge (explicitly or implicitly), and with negatively evaluated attributes that the claimant wants others NOT to ascribe to him/her.

Furthermore, I propose that interactionally, face threat/loss/gain will only be perceived when there is a mismatch between an attribute claimed (or denied, in the case of negatively evaluated traits) and an attribute perceived as being ascribed by others. Contrary to Goffman’s claim that face is associated with ‘approved social attributes’, I propose that the attributes that are affectively sensitive will vary dynamically in interaction, and will not always conform to the socially sanctioned ones (or non-sanctioned ones, in the case of negatively evaluated traits). In fact, it is possible that people will choose to contest one or more approved attributes, and to claim other attributes that are more important to them in that particular context.

## **4. Face in interaction**

As I argued above, face entails claims on the evaluations of others, and so it needs to be analysed as an interactional phenomenon. In line with Arundale (2005), I use the term

‘interaction’ in its ‘ordinary’ sense to mean real-time verbal exchanges (i.e. not the conjoint, non-summative outcome of two or more factors or discursal utterances). In this section, I explore face in interaction from three perspectives: (a) the multiple positive attributes that people may claim; (b) the types of analytic frames needed to analyse such claims, and (c) the dynamic, real-time unfolding of face claims and appraisals.

#### 4.1. Face and attributes

In this section, I present a number of examples that demonstrate the importance of considering the range of different attributes that can become face-sensitive in particular interactions. Let us start by considering an authentic example.

##### Example 1:

A British lady, in her early 50s, helped a young Hungarian student with weak English to find his way across London to catch the right train to Luton Airport. On reaching the train, the following interchange took place:

Hungarian student: *Thank you very much. You are a very kind old lady.*

British lady: *No problem. I was catching this train anyway.*

Author’s personal experience

This interchange was one that I personally experienced. In Brown and Levinson’s (1987:102) terms, the Hungarian young man was addressing my positive face needs by “conveying X is admirable”. However, such a blanket analysis misses the complexity of face claims and appraisals that I experienced. Outwardly I responded to the young man’s ‘compliment’ with a routine type of reply, but inwardly I reacted with mixed emotions. I was pleased that he evaluated me as very kind, and this maintained or even boosted my face; on the other hand, I regard myself as ‘middle-aged’ rather than ‘old’, and so this threatened my face. In other words, this mixture of face-enhancement and face-threat resulted from the two different personal attributes (kindness and elderliness) that he ascribed to me, and from my evaluative judgements in relation to these qualities (positive valence for kindness, negative valence for elderliness). Of course, it is quite possible that for this Hungarian student, ‘old lady’ had neutral or even positive connotations, and certainly he seemed completely unaware of any face-threat in his ‘compliment’. But for me, ‘old lady’ had negative connotations and I rejected its actuality, so the threat to my face lay in the mismatch between the attribute I was claiming (middle-aged) and the attribute he labelled me with (old).

Now let us consider a second authentic example.

##### Example 2:

A group of Chinese businessmen, at the end of a visit to a British company with which they had been doing business, got embroiled in a protracted argument with their British hosts over money. One of the Chinese became concerned about the impression they were conveying, and said privately to the others: *One thing is that we should not let people say we are stingy; secondly, we should not give the impression of being too weak; thirdly, we should negotiate in a friendly manner.* (Spencer-Oatey, 2005:115)

In this example, the speaker identified three traits that were face sensitive: stingy, weak and friendly. He evaluated the first two traits negatively and the third one positively, and so he argued

that he and his Chinese colleagues should maintain face, as a group, by avoiding the two negative attributions and by achieving the positive one. The potential threat to face in this example thus lies in the possible mismatch between the positively valued attributes that the speaker was claiming (not stingy, not weak, friendly) and the negatively valued attributes that he feared might be ascribed by others (stingy, weak, unfriendly).

From these two examples, we can see that [Brown and Levinson's \(1978/1987\)](#) general distinction between positive and negative face is no help in unpacking the complex face claims that people make in real-life situations, and which others need to be sensitive to if they are to address people's face concerns in suitable ways.

#### 4.2. *Face and analytic frames*

Building on [Brewer and Gardner's \(1996\)](#) three-level perspective on self-representation, I propose in this section that it can be useful to analyse face in this way.

In Example 1, the most salient frame for analysis is an individual one, in that the face-sensitive aspects concerned my individual, personal qualities. However, Example 2 illustrates the need for a collective frame, because the speaker was concerned about the face of the delegation. In other words, it was the face of the group rather than the face of each of the individuals that was primarily at stake.

The next example illustrates the need for yet another analytic perspective. It involves the same group of Chinese businessmen as in Example 2. During their initial meeting with their British hosts, the British chairman gave them a welcome speech but failed to invite them to give a return speech (see [Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2004:207](#)). In a follow-up interview, the head of the Chinese delegation, Sun, commented as follows:

##### Example 3: Interview extract

Sun: *According to our home customs and protocol, speech is delivered on the basis of reciprocity. He has made his speech and I am expected to say something. . . . In fact, I was reluctant to speak, and I had nothing to say. But I had to, to say a few words. Right for the occasion, right? But he had finished his speech, and he didn't give me the opportunity, and they each introduced themselves, wasn't this clearly implied that they do look down upon us Chinese.*

Note: Italics indicates English translation of the original Chinese

This example illustrates the need for both relational and collective analytic frames. The relational element of face emerges in this example in two ways: the lack of reciprocity, and the perception of status difference in a context that entailed equality. In other words, relational attributes were at stake: the relative status of the business partners, and the rights and obligations associated with their relationship. The collective element of face emerges through the phrase 'us Chinese'. The offence was taken as applying not to the delegation as individuals, but rather to them as Chinese nationals.

[Brown and Levinson's \(1987\)](#) face model of politeness focuses on individual face sensitivities, and hence (in the terms of this paper) proposes an individual analytic frame. This, of course, is important. Nevertheless, as Examples 2 and 3 indicate, it is an incomplete analytic perspective; it needs to be supplemented by relational and collective perspectives.

What, though, does the term 'relational' refer to? [Locher and Watts \(2005:10\)](#) define relational work as "the 'work' individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others". [Arundale \(2005\)](#)

uses the term ‘relational’ to index “the dyadic phenomena of relating as they emerge dynamically in person-to-person communication”. Holmes and Schnurr (2005:124–125), on the other hand, cite Fletcher’s (1999:84) concept of ‘relational practice’:

“Relational practice is a way of working that reflects a relational logic of effectiveness and requires a number of relational skills such as empathy, mutuality, reciprocity, and a sensitivity to emotional contexts.”

Holmes and Schnurr maintain that in the workplace relational practice has three crucial components: it is oriented to the face needs of others, it serves to advance the primary objectives of the workplace, and its practices are regarded as dispensable, irrelevant or peripheral.

My use of the term ‘relational’ refers to the relationship between the participants (e.g. distance–closeness, equality–inequality, perceptions of role rights and obligations), and the ways in which this relationship is managed or negotiated. I thus take it to be narrower in scope than rapport, which I define as (dis)harmony or smoothness–turbulence in relationships. Of course, rapport is partly dependent on relational (mis)management, but the latter is not the only factor that can influence it; for example, people’s transactional ‘wants’ and the ways they are handled can also affect the rapport between the interlocutors (Spencer-Oatey, 2005). My interpretation of rapport is thus close to Holmes and Schnurr’s concept of ‘relational practice’, but since this meaning is significantly different from that of ‘relational’, as used by Locher and Watts (2005) and Arundale (2005), I use the term ‘rapport’ for the former and ‘relational’ for the latter.

#### 4.3. *The dynamic unfolding of face issues*

A third analytic focus of face in interaction is the real-time unfolding of face issues. This concerns not only the range of strategies (linguistic and non-linguistic) that are used by the participants to (mis)manage face, but also the dynamic unfolding of interactions. People’s claims to face with regard to individual attributes, relational associations and collective affiliations, as well as their anticipations of the face claims that others may make in these regards, can all vary dynamically in an ongoing interaction.

Example 4 illustrates how identity positioning and face concerns can take unexpected turns. It is an extract from the Chinese–British business meeting that Example 3 comments upon. (See Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2004, for details of the research procedure.) The meeting started with the chairman, Jack, focusing on the business relationship between the British and Chinese companies. He claimed the relationship was both an important one and a good one, and he explained that the purpose of the introductions was for them to get to know each other and learn about each other’s interests. He expressed his company’s hope that the delegation would have a useful, enjoyable and informative visit, and emphasised that all the British staff would do everything they could to meet the visitors’ needs. He thus positioned his company and its staff as committed to the business relationship, and as interpersonally caring and considerate towards the delegation (i.e. both relational and collective analytic frames are needed for analysing his face claims).

Having made these introductory remarks, the Chairman asked the British staff and Chinese visitors to introduce themselves in turn. The British did so, but when he asked the Chinese to introduce themselves, there was an unexpected turn to the events. The delegation leader consulted his colleagues in Chinese as to what he should do, and the others asked him to introduce each of them of behalf of everybody. So after quite a noticeable pause, the delegation leader started to give a return speech. At this point, however, the interpreter (speaking only in Chinese)

interrupted him and insisted that he simply introduce himself, not give a speech. After some confusion as to what this entailed, he and the other delegation members all introduced themselves in turn. This can be seen in Example 4.

- Example 4: (Welcome Meeting, just after the British participants have finished introducing themselves. Int = Interpreter)
- Jack: could could I now ask if if the members (.) could each introduce themselves so that we can learn (.) um (.) who they are and what their interests are.
- Int: [interprets into Chinese]
- Sun: [turns to colleagues and discusses with them and the interpreter in Chinese]
- Sun: *we each introduce ourselves*
- Shen: *it's best if you do it on our behalf*  
10.14.06
- Sun: [reading from a script] *first of all, to [X] Company=*
- Int: *=no no. he said first introduce yourselves (.) I am [surname] from [name] Company*
- Sun: *I am [surname] from Company [name]*
- Int: [interprets into English]
- Chen: *say what you do*
- Sun: *I'm involved in design*
- Xu: *give your full name (.) full name (.) full name (.) say you're a design engineer*
- Sun: *design engineer*
- Int: [interprets into English]
- Ma: *I am the director of the [product] Department of Company [name]*
- Int: [interprets into English] [Chinese delegation members continue to introduce themselves.]

Note: Italics indicates English translation of the original Chinese

The Chinese visitors were extremely offended by this, and in the post-event interview debated whether it was the interpreter's 'fault' or whether the British were also to blame. They concluded that since the interpreter was working for the British, he must have known what they wanted and that this therefore must have been a deliberate attempt by the British to claim their superiority. The Chinese visitors were thus extremely offended, and perceived a major threat to their face. In fact, they were so insulted by the way in which the interaction spontaneously and dynamically developed (in combination with other misunderstandings) that they cancelled all the training sessions that had been arranged for them. (For more details, see [Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2003, 2004](#).) However, when the British chairman found out what had happened (in his post-event interview), he was appalled that the interpreter had interrupted, saying he would have been more than happy for them to give a return speech. He just did not want to put them under any pressure to do so.

Clearly, an interactional analysis such as this, that describes the dynamic unfolding of participants' various face claims and face-relevant interpretations, is useful and interesting. To what extent, though, is such an analysis sufficient? I suggest that analysing face only in interaction is comparable to studying just one side of a coin. I maintain that face, like identity, is both social (interactional) and cognitive in nature ([Simon, 2004](#); see section 2 above). By this I mean that there are cognitive underpinnings that influence (but do not determine) how face unfolds in interaction, and that considering these will inform and enrich an interactional analysis.

For instance, in relation to Example 4, it is important to know (as evidenced by their post-event comments) that the Chinese visitors were not used to introducing themselves and were expecting the delegation leader both to handle all the introductions and to give a return speech. Their acceptance of business meetings conventions, as well as their belief in hierarchical differentiation (cf. Pan, 2000) significantly influenced how they interpreted and reacted to the British chairman's behaviour. So it is to the cognitive underpinnings of face that I turn in the next section.

## 5. Cognitive underpinnings of face

Schlenker and Pontari (2000:204), in their discussion of self-presentation, suggest that both values and expectations influence the self-images that people try to present to others. In this section I follow up on each of these cognitive underpinnings, arguing that each of them can affect people's face claims and face sensitivities.

### 5.1. Face and values

As I explained above, and in line with Goffman's (1967:5) classic definition of face (cited in section 3.3 above), face is associated with value judgements. Might it be possible, therefore, to gain insights into the cognitive underpinnings of face by turning to work in social psychology on social values? This section explores this possibility.

The social psychologist, Shalom Schwartz (e.g. Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2001) has developed a universal framework of value constructs that has been empirically validated in over 63 different cultural groups. He asked people to rate the importance of a large number of different values (e.g. obedience, loyalty, honesty, success, freedom) as guiding principles in their lives, and then carried out a smallest space analysis on the ratings (a technique for representing intercorrelations in multidimensional space). He found that 10 different value constructs emerged in the vast majority of countries/cultures, and that these values have a structured relationship (see Fig. 1). Table 2 explains the meanings of the value constructs, and lists illustrative value items that are associated with each of them.

Schwartz's framework is potentially useful in two respects. Firstly, people's evaluative judgements of their own attributes (especially in terms of valence, centrality and actuality) could be influenced by the relative importance of their various personal value constructs. This in turn could influence which attributes are more face sensitive for them than others, and the degree to which they are face sensitive. Let us now reconsider some of the earlier examples. In Example 1, the Hungarian young man attributed two qualities to me (the British lady): kindness and age. Kindness is associated with the value construct 'Benevolence', and this is a value that is very important to me ideologically, so this attribution was supportive of my face. However, what value is associated with the attribute 'elderly'? Different people may evaluate it differently, and there may also be cultural differences. For me, it is associated with diminishing attractiveness and failing faculties, and thus is negatively associated with value construct 'Achievement'. So to be labelled 'old' was face-threatening to me. However, the young man gave the impression of expressing sincere gratitude through the compliment, and so maybe to him it was associated with status and hence with the value construct 'Power'. If that was the case, he would have assumed it to be supportive of my face.

In Example 2, the Chinese businessman identified three attributes that he felt they should display in their conflict negotiations with the British: that they should be friendly, not stingy, and not weak. Friendliness and generosity (lack of stinginess) are both associated with the value

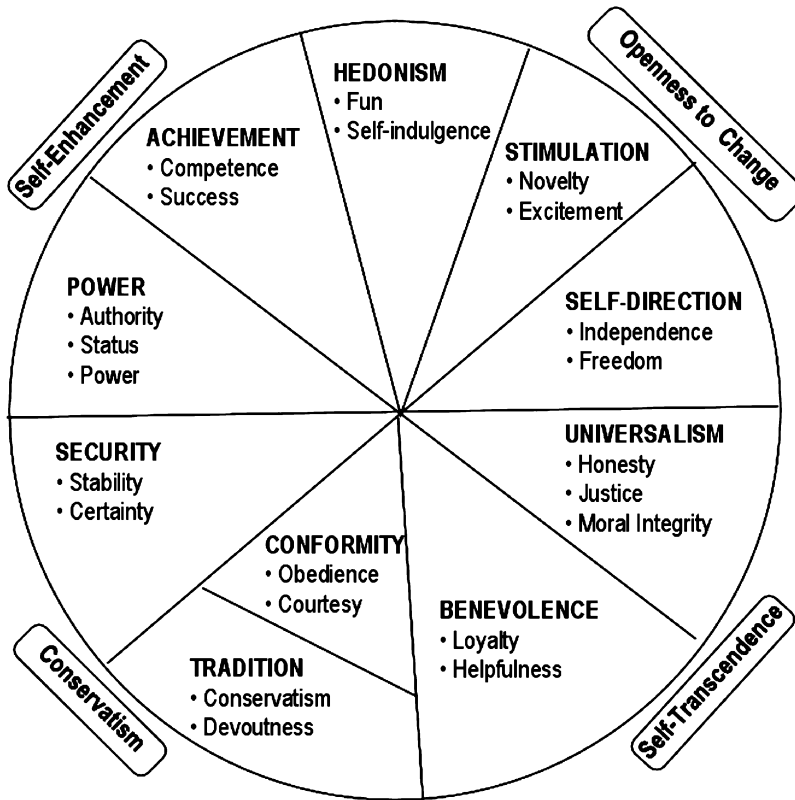


Fig. 1. Schwartz's value constructs and their structured relationship (based on Schwartz, 1992:44).

construct 'Benevolence'; strength (lack of weakness) is associated with the value construct 'Power'. So if the businessmen are unable to maintain face in relation to all three attributes, the value construct that they hold less highly in this context ('Power' or 'Benevolence') will presumably influence which face claim(s) they will sacrifice.

Secondly, Schwartz's framework is useful for considering Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) dual distinction between positive and negative face, and the associated debate regarding the cultural variation/universalism of this distinction. In Brown and Levinson's model, negative face refers to a person's want to be unimpeded by others, the desire to be free to act as s/he chooses and not be imposed upon; and positive face refers to a person's want to be appreciated and approved of by selected others, in terms of personality, desires, behaviour, values and so on. In other words, negative face represents a desire for autonomy, and positive face represents a desire for approval. Many people have challenged this dual conceptualisation, arguing that it is Western biased; for example, Matsumoto (1988) maintains that Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) have over-emphasised the notion of individual freedom and autonomy, and have ignored the interpersonal or social perspective on face. Schwartz's specification of values provides a useful conceptual framework for considering these arguments.

The concerns that Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) label as negative face (*viz.* a person's want to be unimpeded by others, the desire to be free to act as s/he chooses and not be imposed upon) in fact are a reflection of the value construct 'Self-direction', and could also include the

Table 2  
Schwartz's value constructs and their associated qualities (based on Schwartz and Bardi, 2001:270)

Value construct	Explanation	Illustrative component values
Power	Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources	Social power, authority, wealth, preservation of public image
Achievement	Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards	Success, competence, ambition
Hedonism	Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself	Pleasure, self-indulgence, enjoyment of life
Stimulation	Excitement, novelty and challenge in life	Variety, daring, excitement
Self-direction	Independent thought and action-choosing, creating, exploring	Freedom, independent, curiosity, creativity
Universalism	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of all people and for nature	Equality, harmony, justice, care for the environment, broadmindedness
Benevolence	Preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact	Helpfulness, loyalty, responsibility, forgiveness, honesty
Tradition	Respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide the self	Humility, respect for tradition, devoutness
Conformity	Restraint of actions, inclinations and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms	Obedience, self-discipline, proper behaviour, respect for elders
Security	Safety, harmony and stability of society, relationships, and of self	Health and security for the family and the nation

value constructs of 'Hedonism' and 'Stimulation' insofar as they are self-seeking. The concerns that Brown and Levinson label as positive face (*viz.* a person's want for his/her self-image to be appreciated and approved of by interactants), are potentially a reflection of all the other value constructs. Positive face is most frequently associated with qualities such as competence and status (linked with Schwartz's value constructs of 'Achievement' and 'Power'), but as we have seen in earlier sections, people make face claims in relation to a wide range of attributes. For instance, Example 1 illustrates a face claim regarding kindness (linked with Schwartz's value constructs of 'Benevolence'), and on other occasions some people may wish, for example, to claim face around the attribute 'obedient' or 'devout' (linked respectively with Schwartz's value constructs of 'Conformity' and 'Tradition').

Schwartz's framework can thus help unpack the range of values underlying the wide variety of attributes that people may be face sensitive to, and thereby offer partial reasons for people's sensitivities. In addition, the greater proportion of potential 'positive face values' to 'negative face values' suggested by Schwartz's data, as well as the variation that occurs across societies in the relative importance that societies as a whole attach to the self-direction construct (Schwartz and Bardi, 2001), could explain why some linguists have argued that negative face is less important in their societies than Brown and Levinson (1978/1987) conceptualised it to be.

### 5.2. Face and sociality rights—obligations

People's face claims and face sensitivities are not only based on their personally held values. Other factors can play a role too. In this section, I explore how they can be underpinned by people's conceptions of sociality rights—obligations.

On a number of occasions, I have drawn a distinction between face and sociality rights—obligations and have argued that the two are conceptually distinct (e.g. Spencer-Oatey, 2000, 2002, 2005). However, in those same publications I have also pointed out that the two can be connected. Suppose, for example, a friend tries to force us to do something or ignores our request for help (infringing, respectively, our sense of personal entitlement to freedom and to association), we may simply feel irritated or annoyed. Sometimes, however, such treatment may go a step further and make us feel as though we have lost credibility or have been personally devalued in some way, and we feel a sense of face threat and/or loss. In this case, our face claims and face sensitivities are closely bound up with our sense of sociality rights and obligations.

As Spencer-Oatey (2005) explains, many behavioural conventions, rituals and norms develop prescriptive and proscriptive overtones. These then influence our expectations about behavioural responsibilities so that failure to fulfil these expectations may be perceived as a ‘negatively eventful’ occurrence, and the result may be face threat and/or face loss. This is what happened in Examples 3 and 4. The Chinese visitors were expecting to be invited to give a return speech, and when they were not, they experienced this omission as face-threatening. The key to understanding (and anticipating) such face threat/loss is to be aware of the participants’ behavioural conventions and expectations associated with this kind of communicative activity.

People’s behavioural expectations, and the sociality rights—obligations associated with them, derive from a range of sources. In Examples 3 and 4, they derive from certain conventions of a given communicative activity (speech giving in international meetings). Example 5 illustrates another source: people’s conceptualisations of a given role relationship. (For other sources, see Spencer-Oatey, 2005:98–100.) This example, which revolves round different interpretations of friendship, involves the same Chinese visitors described in Examples 3 and 4.

When the Chinese visitors arrived, the Sales Manager for China (Tim) was away on an overseas trip. Having experienced the ‘insults’ described in Example 3 and 4 above (along with various other problems; see Spencer-Oatey and Xing, 2004), the delegation members wanted to meet Tim as soon as possible. One of them (Mr. Xu) had met Tim on one previous occasion in China and they thus believed that as a group they had a ‘personal’ relationship with him. They knew when he was due to arrive back in England, and expected to meet him the following day. When there was no sign of him by lunchtime, they started repeatedly asking for his telephone number, and in a follow-up interview that evening, they commented as follows:

Example 5: Interview extract

- Xu: *Tim hasn’t shown up yet, right? He should have already come back yesterday. . . .*
- Shen: *He should have been back yesterday, yesterday. Today today he didn’t show up. This morning he should have taken us out. We mentioned it to him [the interpreter]. . . .*
- Lin: *Does Tim live in London?*
- Researcher: *I don’t know where he lives.*
- Chen: *In London. London is very close to here, isn’t it? . . . Thirty-odd miles, in fact very close. Your old friends from China are here, and as a matter of fact your major market, right? So on this occasion can’t you come and meet them?*
- Shen: *And he knew that Mr. Xu, senior engineer, was coming.*

Note: Italics indicates English translation of the original Chinese

From the Chinese visitors' point of view, Tim had failed in his relational obligation, and this may well have been face threatening to them. They were claiming mutual friendship, but when Tim did not turn up, this claim was challenged. From Tim's point of view, they were not his 'friends', as he had only met one of them briefly in a business context; he had been away from his family for a long trip, and his first relational responsibility was towards his wife and children. He did not anticipate that his behaviour would be face-threatening to the visitors, and when their reaction was explained to him in a post-event interview, he simply rejected their interpretation.

The key to understanding (and anticipating) the face threat/loss in this situation is to be aware of the participants' conceptions of what it means to 'be a friend'. In other words, important insights into why people experience certain occurrences as face threatening can be gained by considering their underlying conceptions of sociality rights—obligations. Such considerations may also help us anticipate people's face sensitivities and thereby help us to manage them more effectively.

## 6. Two outstanding questions

Finally, I briefly consider two outstanding questions:

- To what extent is face always an interactional phenomenon?
- What kind of data is needed for research into face?

In the paper so far, I have implied that face sensitivities emerge in interpersonal interaction, and especially in face-to-face contexts. Yet Ho (1994:274) argues that the Chinese conception of face is not restricted to situational encounters:

According to the Chinese conception, face may be defined in terms of the more enduring, publicly perceived attributes that function to locate a person's position in his/her social network. Thus defined, a person's face is largely consistent over time and across situations, unless there is a significant change in public perceptions of his/her conduct, performance, or social status.

In line with that, I suggested in a previous paper (Spencer-Oatey, 2005:102) that we should distinguish between situation-specific face (which I labelled 'identity face') and Ho's pan-situational concept of face (which I labelled 'respectability face'). However, is there really such a clear distinction between the two? Suppose participants are not interacting face-to-face, but asynchronously online in a discussion forum? Graham's paper in this volume indicates that face concerns are equally important in this interactional context. And what about newspaper reporting? Suppose a newspaper publishes a story that describes a particular person in negative terms. Does that person lose face through this public dissemination of the information, even though the exact recipients of the information may be unknown personally and even unidentifiable? In many cultures, it would be argued that the person does lose face. If, therefore, we argue that face is always interactionally constituted, it will be necessary to interpret the concept 'interaction' very broadly, so that it includes not only synchronous, face-to-face interaction, but also asynchronous communication and general public awareness.

A second question raised by this paper is the type of data that is needed for research into face. If face is something that people claim for themselves, and if face-threat or face-enhancement occurs when there is a mismatch between an attribute claimed (or denied, in the case of negatively evaluated traits) and an attribute perceived as being ascribed by others, then to what

extent is discourse data sufficient for research purposes? To what extent is it necessary to obtain people's evaluative reactions? Sometimes, of course, it is possible to access these reactions through subsequent discourse, or more subtly through vocalic quality and/or non-verbal behaviour (e.g. Locher and Watts, 2005; Culpeper, 2005). But in other cases, such signals are limited or missing, and I suggest that post-event comments can then be both important and enlightening (cf. Culpeper, 2005:67). It could be argued, of course, that such post-event comments may be unreliable reconstructions, or may themselves be enactments of face with the researcher. Whilst this could be true, I nevertheless maintain that face issues are always subjective perceptions, and thus can never be judged in true/false terms. I believe that post-event comments can be useful for two reasons: they help identify people's face sensitivities and evaluative reactions, and they can provide insights into the cognitive underpinnings of their reactions. So for these reasons I contend that they are both a worthwhile and necessary type of data to collect.

## 7. Concluding comments

Face is a complex phenomenon that needs to be studied from multiple perspectives. Theories of identity suggest that face has a number of characteristics that need to be held in dialectic balance:

- face is a multi-faceted phenomenon, yet it can also be a unitary concept
- face has cognitive foundations and yet it is also socially constituted in interaction
- face 'belongs' to individuals and to collectives, and yet it also applies to interpersonal relations

Analyses of face thus need to take all of these elements into consideration. Authors who argue that face should be studied from a relational point of view (e.g. Arundale, 2005; Locher and Watts, 2005) are correct in emphasising the importance of this element. However, insights from identity theories demonstrate that an exclusive focus on this perspective will be too narrow. Multiple perspectives, which incorporate (and are not restricted to) the various elements included in this article, are all needed for a rich understanding.

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