The Role of Face Concerns and Facework in Managing Communication Conflict among Arabs and Malaysians

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This study investigates the associations between face concerns and facework in managing intercultural conflict among Arabs and Malaysians. A questionnaire was administered to 149 participants at the Universiti Utara Malaysia. The findings of the current study revealed that face concerns have a moderate and negative relationship with intercultural conflict. Meanwhile, facework has a very weak relationship with intercultural conflict. Additionally, this study demonstrates that Arabs and Malaysians have significant differences of facework and face concerns in managing intercultural conflict situations. The implications of the findings reported in this study is that face concerns and facework are critical for improving conflict management. The study contributes by providing useful insights in managing intercultural communication, negotiation, and conflict across cultures, especially among Arabs and Malaysians.

Key words: Face Concern, Facework, Intercultural Conflict

Introduction

Conflict will always and is likely to continue to exist in all human relationships (Raduan, Suppiah, Uli, & Othman, 2007; Baranova, 2010). Conflict situations have become an aspect of our everyday life and are insurmountable in any communicative situations (Deardorff, 2009; Österberg & Lorentsson 2010). Therefore, conflict situations, being a general social phenomenon, could happen anywhere and at anytime (Pondy, 1967; Österberg & Lorentsson, 2010). Meanwhile, facial expressions are among the popular communication strategies which
play a crucial role in managing communication conflicts. Facial expressions mirror one’s feelings and reactions to the situations at hand. Hence, face expressions play essential roles in every social interaction. Meanwhile, as essential as facial expressions are in every communicative situation, they raise several concerns ranging from misinterpretation to the misconception of expressions, including faceworks and face concerns. For instance, some of the most popular facial expressions include blushing, which is often related to an embarrassing situation in some cultures and is a symbol of happiness in some other cultures. As such, the interpretation of facial expressions, especially across different cultures, might be tasking and confusing during conflict situations (B. Gudykunst, 2005, Ting-Toomey 2003). Therefore, managing the interpretation of facial expressions becomes imperative during conflicts and is even more critical when people across cultures are involved in communicative situations (B. Gudykunst, 2005).

Another challenge with facial expressions is that often people are concerned about showing negative feelings or impressions, such as blame or shame by maintaining a straight-face or a face with no expression — a situation otherwise known as the “save face” culture. People do this mostly in a communicative situation to preserve their respect, dignity, honour and reputation in the view of others. Also, ultimately to achieve self-satisfaction, maintain dignity and to manage conflict situations correctly.

Communication theorists believe that an individual’s culture modulates facial expression management, especially during conflict. In other words, the collectivism and individualism cultural dimensions are considered to have direct and indirect effects on how individuals behave and communicate (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Hence, an individual’s facial works and concerns during conflicts are determined by their cultural orientations. According to Stella Ting and Toomey (2003), cultural orientations are of two types: namely, the individualism and the collectivism. In other words, the value systems of both individualism and collectivism serve as a foreground frame in explaining why individuals differ in their facial expressions and face concerns during conflicts (B. Gudykunst, 2005). For instance, individuals from the individualism culture tend to be concerned about themselves and maintain their expressions regardless of whether their opponent is using an offensive and aggressive strategy during conflict situations. In contrast, individuals from the collectivism culture tend to make their feelings and expressions subservient to other’s emotions during a conflict situation. Thus, the save face culture of hiding one’s feelings and expressions are a commonplace practice among individuals from the collectivism culture (Tjosvold, Hui, Ding, & Hu, 2003).

Additionally, the differences in expressions and reactions during conflict situations are also believed to exist among people who are categorised within the same cultural orientation. For instance, the Arabs are collectivistic in culture and Malaysians are naturally individualistic
Thus, the former is very sensitive, protective and particular of their dignity and honour. Hence, they typically do not want to “lose face” in every conflict which often leads them to be confrontational and aggressive during conflict communication (Merkin, 2006). Meanwhile, the later are naturally docile, less-confrontational and often prefer to hide their feelings and “save face” during conflicts.

Meanwhile, according to the face negotiation theory, it provides a sound explanatory framework for explaining differences and similarities in face and facework during a conflict (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). However, the theory is still under development, thereby, Ting-Toomey recommended that researchers should improve the understanding of the theory across cultures and intercultural communications (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008; Griffin, 2012).

Communication researchers are increasingly interested in discerning the role of different cultural orientations in communicative situations and social interactions across cultures (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003) by focusing on how people from different cultures communicate and understand each other (Dutta, 2008; Vijaya & Tiwari, 2010), as well as how conflict is managed correctly across cultures (Chitakornkijsil, 2009; Arasaratnam & Doerfel, 2005). However, the number of studies on facial expression management during conflict among individuals from different national cultures is limited in the literature.

Therefore, the current research focuses on different types of facial expressions in managing conflicts among Arabs and Malays. Although both Arab and Malay cultures are categorised under the collectivism orientation, there are apparent cultural differences between Arabs and Malaysians. Such differences are believed to lead to different facial reactions and expressions between Arabs and Malaysians during conflict situations or any social interactions. As such, the current study aims to unearth the role of facial works and concerns in conflict management between Arabs and Malaysians. Therefore, the broad objective of this paper is to examine the association between facework and face concerns on intercultural conflict situations among Arabs and Malaysians.

**Literature Review**

**The Concept of Face**

The face is the central explanatory mechanism for different styles of conflict management and facework across cultures (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008). According to previous researchers (Ho, 1976; Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008; Nam, 1998; Garcia, 2008; Zheng, 1994), the concept of the face originated from the Chinese culture. Hu (1944) was the earliest researcher who presented the concept of the face. The term is a literal translation of the Chinese *lien* and *Min-Tzu*. On the one hand, Mien-Tzu stands for a kind of prestige and
also refers to the social status achieved through the successful attainment of life’s goals. On the other hand, Lien represents the confidence of society in the integrity of the ego's moral character. Lien is both a social sanction for enforcing ethical standards and an internalised sanction. Once people lose lien, it is impossible for them to function correctly in society. Otherwise, it is referring to the moral character of an individual (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008; Nam, 1998). Recently (1994), in the same context, Morisaki and Gudykunst developed two types of social face in the Japanese culture; Mentsu and Taimen. Mentsu is similar to the concept of Mien-Tzu in the Chinese culture, while Taimen refers to the appearance one presents to others (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008).

Furthermore, Goffman (1955; 1956; 1959; 1967) conceptualised the face as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself during a particular contact". In the same context, he used the term, "face" to describe the social identity that individuals desire to establish in front of other people. Given this, there are two different types of interpretation of face. Face, on one hand is how an individual perceives his or herself (self-face) and on the other hand, the face is how others observe an individual (other-face) (Goffman1955; 1959; 1967; Shen, 2008; Guan, 2008; Wong, 2007).

In the same vein, Brown and Levinson (1987) defined face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself/herself". Further, they argued that there are two types of face: (1) the negative face, the underlying claim to autonomy and rights to non-distraction or the desire to remain autonomous and unimpeded by others; and (2) the positive face, the primary claim to competence or the desire to feel included, approved of, and appreciated by sure others (Nam, 1998; Shen, 2008; Guan, 2008). In simple words, face refers to one’s self-image in the presence of others. It involves feelings of respect, honour, status, connection, loyalty, and other similar values. In other words, face means feeling good about yourself in whatever ways your culture prescribes (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005).

Face refers to a claimed sense of favourable social self-worth that a person wants others to have of her or him. It is a vulnerable identity-based resource because it can be enhanced or threatened in any uncertain social situation (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Face represents an individual’s claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Furthermore, the face is negotiated in conflict, in most cases covertly, as people concentrate on more substantive and ‘surface’ issues. The face is associated with respect, honour, status, reputation, credibility, competence, family/network connection, loyalty, trust, relational indebtedness, and obligation issues. The face is simultaneously effective (e.g., feelings of shame and pride) (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008), thus, it is tied to the emotional significance and estimated calculations that we attach to our social self-worth and the social self-worth of others (B. Gudykunst, 2005).
Facework

The face is essential to individuals in overall interaction situations; it is a “sacred thing” as Goffman stated, especially when involved in a conflict situation where everybody tries to protect, maintain, and save his or her face by using ways or communication strategies and behaviours to do so. Those strategies and behaviours are known as facework (Baranova, 2010). Goffman (1955; 1956; 1959) interpreted the facework as a “subtle style of the interpersonal encounter, found in all societies, calculated to avoid personal embarrassment or loss of poise and to maintain for others an impression of self-respect” (Ho, 1976). Further, he defines facework as actions taken by people to make whatever they are doing consistent with a face (Merkin, 2006; Guan, 2008). Moreover, Goffman (1967) stated that the term "facework" signified the communicative actions individuals take to establish, maintain, and restore the desired face of their own or other people's. In addition, he indicated that there are two basic kinds of facework: avoidance or preventive process and corrective or restorative process.

In the avoidance process, individuals exercise communicative behaviours to prevent aggressive face acts from occurring. For instance, the individuals might use communicative actions such as keeping away from face-threatening topics, shifting the subject of conversation when there is a potential for face-threatening moves. Secondly, the corrective process occurs after the face-threatening, wherein individuals are engaged in the corrective process to repair their damaged face. In the corrective process, individuals can exercise communicative behaviours to restore face and re-engage everyday interactions after an individual's face loss. In situations where the face is lost or being threatened, individuals tend to defend or protect themselves by repairing the problematic conditions and saving face (Shen, 2008; Guan, 2008; B.Gudykunst, 2005).

Brown and Levinson (1987) used the terms negative and positive politeness instead of the facework term to describe strategies used to improve or restore face loss. Whereby, they listed some communicative statements that roughly lead to achieve the same outcomes as the facework’s functions, when they generated five conversational strategies that individuals might enact when interacting with other people:

(1) The "bald on-record" strategy, which involves the unelaborated messages used to express an individual's desired goal directly.

(2) The "positive politeness" strategy, which involves the messages used to express an individual's appreciation and positive reception of the other person as well as to display the affiliation with the person.

(3) The "negative politeness” avoidance strategy, which involves the messages used to offer respect to the other person's autonomy.
(4) The "going off record" strategy, which involves the ambiguous messages used to express an individual's desired goal indirectly.

(5) The decision not to engage in the face-threatening acts, which includes the messages that avoid offending the other person at all (Shen, 2008; Garcia, 2008).

On top of that, more recently several researchers have proposed that facework is a set of coordinated practices in which communicators build, maintain, protect, or threaten personal dignity, honour, and respect (Domenici & Littlejohn, 2006). Also, Cupach and Metts (1994) listed a set of strategies to prevent and restore face threat and loss (B. Gudykunst, 2005). However, ultimately such a proposition leads to the same meaning or the same functions to maintain, save, prevent or restore face threat or loss. Also, many other researchers have studied the facework, whereby they linked to complimenting, compliance-gaining, requesting, embarrassment, apology, shaming, decision-making and conflict behaviour (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). The present study will link facework and face concerns to conflict behaviour by adopting the face negotiation theory to do so.

According to Stella Ting-Toomey, facework refers to a set of communicative behaviours that people use to regulate their social dignity and to support or challenge the other’s social dignity (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Facework refers to the communicative strategies individuals use to enact self-face or to uphold, support or challenge another person’s face (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008). As well as in their reviewing of facework strategies, Ting-Toomey and Cole (1990) stated that facework refers to specific verbal and non-verbal messages that help to maintain and restore face loss and to uphold and honour face gain (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; B. Gudykunst, 2005).

Based on empirical research that has been completed previously by Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Yokochi, Matsumoto, and Takai (2000, 2001), they identified the following 13 different types of facework behaviour or strategies during conflict: (1) aggression, (2) apologise, (3) avoid, (4) compromise, (5) consider the other, (6) defend self, (7) express feelings, (8) give in, (9) involve a third party, (10) pretend, (11) private discussion, (12) remain calm, and (13) talk about the problem (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Then they categorised these strategies into three well known and accepted underlying categories: integrating, avoiding, and dominating. This three-category model is based on conflict style literature; therefore, we can note here that the conflict style is a closely related concept to facework. Later, we will clarify the difference between the two concepts (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008; Garcia, 2008; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Baranova, 2010). From the 13 different types of facework behaviour or strategies which are stated above, the current study utilises only 11 facework strategies organised by the three underlying categories.
The avoiding facework strategies are given in, pretend, and third-party. The dominating facework strategies are aggression, defend, and express emotion. The integrating facework strategies are apologise, private discussion, remaining calm, problem solve, and respect (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008). In the same context and for more clarity, here is a brief description of these 11 categories including the following:

(1) Giving in — accommodating the other’s wishes.
(2) Pretending — that the conflict does not exist.
(3) Third party — seeking an outside party to help resolve the dispute.
(4) Defending — standing up for one’s opinions and persuading others to accept their views.
(5) Expression of one’s feelings or emotions.
(6) Direct or passive aggression.
(7) Apologising for behaviour.
(8) Private discussion — avoiding a public confrontation.
(9) Remaining calm during the conflict.
(10) Problem solve — behaviours used to join perspectives of the parties.
(11) Respect — consider the other; listening to the other person to demonstrate compliance for him/her (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008).

**Face Concern**

Face concerns or the locus of face denotes a communicator’s locus of interest in a conflict situation. It is the starting point for understanding face and facework since it determines an individual’s interest and direction of the subsequent messages and can drive the affective, behavioural, and cognitive dimensions. The locus of the face has three aspects which are:

(1) Self-face refers to the protective concern for one’s image when one’s face is threatened in a conflict situation.
(2) Other-face is the concern of consideration for the other conflict party’s image in a conflict situation.
(3) Mutual-face is the concern for both parties’ images and/or the image of the relationship.

Face concern is the cognitive feature of face supported by facework hence, the behavioural component of the face (Oetzel, Garcia, & Ting-Toomey, 2008; Garcia, 2008; B.Gudykunst, 2005; Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998).

Face concern depends on culture, whether it is collectivism or individualism. According to Ting-Toomey, the individuals from the collectivistic culture are more likely to be concerned about the other-face and mutual-face, whereas the individuals from the individualism culture are contrarily concerned about the self-face (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998; Oetzel & Ting-
Toomey, 2003; B. Gudykunst, 2005). In turn, face concerns influence the use of various facework and conflict strategies in intergroup and interpersonal encounters (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003).

**Methodology**

This study employs a quantitative research method. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among graduate students of the Universiti Utara Malaysia. Therefore, a questionnaire format was utilised to gather the data of this study. To measure the understudied variables, the scales developed by Ting-Toomey, Oetzel, and Garcia’s instrument (2008) were adopted. The respondents of the survey consisted of 149 students from two unequal groups (Arabs and Malaysians). Fifty-seven respondents are Arab students from eight different countries including Algeria, Soudan, Libya, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine. Meanwhile, the Malaysian respondents cut across the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia; namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Table 1 shows the demography distribution of the study respondents.

**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>51.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 18–25</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>41.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 26–30</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 31–35</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 36–40</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 41–45</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Arabic Group</strong></td>
<td>57</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Malaysian Group</strong></td>
<td>92</td>
<td>61.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Educational Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>49.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Findings

Before examining the relationships between facework, face concerns and conflicts in the context of intercultural communications, the descriptive statistics was effectuated. The results show the facework and face concerns during the intercultural conflict among respondents of this study. Facework has a mean of 2.66 and a standard deviation of 0.44 (M = 2.66, SD = 0.44). The lowest mean value is 1.57, and the highest value is 4.53. Face concerns have a mean value of 1.99 and a standard deviation of 0.67 (M = 1.99, SD = 0.67) and the lowest mean value is 1.00 and the highest value is 3.96. The intercultural conflict has a mean value of 2.12 and a standard deviation of 0.31 (M = 2.12, SD = 0.31) and the lowest mean value is 1.50 and the highest value is 2.75.

Also, on average, the respondents in this study tend to focus more on facework compared to face concerns during an intercultural conflict.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Face concerns</strong></td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.4090</td>
<td>.67775</td>
<td>.08977</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malaysian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.7340</td>
<td>.53657</td>
<td>.05594</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facework</strong></td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.8444</td>
<td>.47109</td>
<td>.06240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malaysian</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.5466</td>
<td>.38340</td>
<td>.03997</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pearson Correlation Analysis

To establish the relationships between facework, face concerns and intercultural conflicts among Malaysians and Arabs, the below Pearson matrix correlation shows the correlations between the independent and dependent variables (face concerns, facework and intercultural conflict). Table 3 presents that face concerns and intercultural conflict and the result shown reveals a moderate negative, and significant statistical correlation (r = -0.296, p < 0.01). Likewise, the result showed a very weak relationship, with no statistical significance (r = 0.065, p > 0.01) between facework and intercultural conflict.
Table 3: Pearson correlations matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Intercultural conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Face concerns</strong></td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facework</strong></td>
<td>Pearson Correlation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The difference between facework, face concern and intercultural conflicts among Malaysians and Arabs

To determine the difference between face concerns, facework and cross-cultural conflicts among Arabs and Malaysians, the independent samples t-test was established. Table 4 shows the difference between the means for the two groups (Arabs and Malaysians). The results presented in Table 4 indicated that there is a significant difference between the two groups (Arabs and Malaysians) regarding choosing face concerns and using facework during an intercultural conflict ($t = 6.738, p < .05$). As for the face concerns, the result demonstrated that there is a significant difference between the facework of Malaysians and Arabs during intercultural conflicts ($t = 4.217, p < .05$).

Table 4: Independent Samples t-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>t</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Face concerns</strong></td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Facework</strong></td>
<td>Equal variances assumed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The purpose of the current study was to investigate face concerns and facework during intercultural conflicts among Arabs and Malaysians in Malaysia. The significant findings of the present study are discussed in this section. This study found that face concerns are moderately and negatively related to the intercultural conflict. Meanwhile, facework had a
very weak relationship with intercultural conflict. The result supports prior findings and provides empirical evidence for the assumptions of the face negotiation theory (Gudykunst, 2005).

In other words, this current study demonstrates that both facework and face concerns play a significant role in managing the intercultural conflicts for both Arabs and Malaysians. The findings reported in this study imply that both Malaysians and Arabs pay attention to both facework and face concern during their interactions. Thus, a constructive intercultural communication environment can be built through proper management of facework and face concerns during cross-cultural communication and conflict situations between Arabs and Malaysians. Interpretatively, when an individual has a thorough understanding of the differences between the facework and the face concerns between Malaysians and Arabs, he/she would have the ability to turn the destructive conflict to constructive conflict. In other words, having facework and face concerns competencies leads to intercultural conflict management competence, and eventually to intercultural communication competence. Additionally, facework and face concerns competencies have a vital role in the whole of cross-cultural communication aspects, especially the intercultural conflict episode. Thus, facework and face concerns competencies are an essential aspect of cultural knowledge for effective management of the cross-cultural communication environment.

**Conclusion**

Conclusively, the current study provides an understanding of the complex nature of face concerns and facework during conflict situations and intercultural communication, especially among Malaysians and Arabs. Also, this study demonstrates the importance of face concerns and the necessity of facework for managing cross-cultural conflict management. Hence, this study affirms that the facework competence is critical for effective, appropriate and satisfactory cross-cultural interactions.
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