

Iranian Women's Negative Face in the Construction of Their Identity

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Abstract

A main feature of recent scholarly work on language is its focus on identity, or the self, as a social construct, or more particularly as a discursive product (Fairclough, 1992; Ivanic, 1998). One way of viewing the self as a social construct is through the notion 'face', i.e. "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself (sic) by the line others assume he (sic) has taken during a particular contact" (Goffman, 1967: 5).

Building upon Goffman's notion of 'face' as a social construct and the Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and particularly their claim to universality of 'face', the present study is an endeavour to investigate the ways in which Iranian women's identity, or 'face' wants, affect their linguistic interaction with the members of the opposite sex.

This study was conducted in a case study format and the data thus obtained were analysed using QSR.NUDIST software. The subjects were seven women working at Iranian governmental offices whose daily interactions with their male and female customers were observed over a two week period. Eleven follow up interviews were conducted with the participants. The results indicate that Iranian women show a systematic awareness of the significance of their face wants in constructing their identity as 'Iranian women'. Nevertheless, this negative face is

not entirely socially motivated and is not likely to be explicable in accord with Brown and Levinson's politeness theory which is often postulated to be universal.

Key Words: Politeness theory; language and identity; social construction of identity.

1. Introduction

A recurrent theme in the recent research on sociology and applied linguistics has been the characterization of the self as a social construct which is realized only in our interactions with the other (Schiffrin, Tannen, & Ehernberger, 2001: 102). The concepts 'other' or 'otherness', and 'the self as a social construct' seem to assume a particular relation between the society and the individual in which, the former dominates and determines the latter. As an anthropologist whose ideas might be relevant to the present study, Durkheim (1915), believes that individuals do not determine common life, but they are produced by it. Durkheim further argues that the concept of the individual self is a relatively recent and superficial arrival in human history. As Harland puts it, Durkheim bases his explanation upon common life rather than upon individuals so as to view society as something much more than the aggregate of its members. He argues for the existence of 'collective representations' which are quite different in kind to the individual representations generated by individual men.

The socially-oriented positions like those of Durkheim and the idea of the self as a social construct, have been reflected in Goffman's influential works (1959, 1967, 1972) on 'face' and 'face-work'. According to Goffman, "...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" (emphasis added). He (1959) further defines 'face' as a person's "most personal possession and the centre of his security and pleasure", which, however, "is only on loan to him from *society*" and "it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it" (emphasis added) (Goffman, 1972: 322). There is

another sense in which Durkheim's ideas have become significant to Goffman, in his formulation of the concept of *face*. This is where he has discussed notions of *positive* and *negative religious rites*. Aron (1967) mentions three types of rites categorised by Durkheim: negative rites, positive rites and piacular rites. Negative rites are those which prohibit people from engaging in certain practices which are considered as unreligious, and positive rites are those which followers of a religion perform as religious practices. Piacular rites are religious practices performed on sad occasions. Aron believes:

These rites, whether negative, positive, or piacular, all have a major function of a social order. Their aim is to uphold the community, to renew the sense of belonging to the group, to maintain belief and faith (1967: 64).

Durkheim's ideas, through Goffman's work on face, have inspired a great deal of scholarly work in discourse analysis and pragmatics. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory (1987) which serves as a theoretical tool in this study, is one of the most-widely read works in the literature. The starting point for Brown and Levinson (1987) is a theory of politeness which describes the strategies people use to be polite towards one another and maintain face. To do so, they distinguish between two types of face, positive and negative. To them, negative face is the "want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others", and positive face is "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some other" (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999: 322).

In spite of similarity of concepts on both sides, Goffman's notion of face is very much a social one, situating the nucleus of the concept in the social interactions among members of a community. Brown and Levinson's adaptation of the concept though is very much an individual one, placing it among the "wants" of an individual.

It can be argued that although Brown and Levinson's model is criticised on the grounds that it narrows down the concept of face by making it an individual phenomenon, it is still a very social model

as an individual's wants can only be appreciated in relation to other's wants.

Brown and Levinson's work, however, has been criticised on the grounds that its claims to universality do not hold across cultures (Bargiela Chiappini, 2003; Koutlaki, 2002). Koutlaki's work in this area is quite relevant. Her work is mainly concerned with the concept of "ta-arof" in Persian, which she uses to identify "shaxsiat" (pride) and "ehteram" (honour) as two main elements of the Iranian concept of politeness. She observes that the Iranian concept of politeness is not totally explicable in the framework of politeness theory, mainly because "ta-arof" –or excessive offer and rejection of it—do not often constitute threats to the face of the addressee and speaker; quite the reverse, they are often taken as face enhancing strategies by Iranians.

Brown and Levinson's model has also been criticised on the grounds that it presents "an overly pessimistic, rather paranoid view of human social interaction" (Schmidt, 1980:104). This view is largely based on the observation that Brown and Levinson's model mainly focuses on FTA's (Face Threatening Acts), as if in any verbal communication, interactants might damage each other's face. The model then describes a set of strategies that interactants use in order to mitigate their utterances to avoid these threats.

The Brown and Levinson model has also inspired work in impoliteness. Culpeper, Bousfield, & Wichmann (2003) studied interactions between traffic wardens and car owners and observed that, contrary to Brown and Levinson's ideal world where people usually try to maintain the face of their interlocutors, they actually use certain strategies to attack their face. They further argue that there is need for a comprehensive theory of politeness in which both politeness and impoliteness are included.

In addition to the above discussion regarding politeness theory, *gender* is the second key concept which so far has proved to be more problematic than face and other related terms. In another respect, it has been the subject of so many studies in a variety of disciplines like linguistics, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis,

criticism, and philosophy. Citing all relevant studies in the literature is not possible. We can here refer to the admirable writings of Crawford (1995, 2000, 2002), particularly her research on gender and humour in the social context. She approaches gender from the social interactionists (e.g. Deaux & LaFrance, 1998) and social constructionists positions (e.g. Kessler & McKenna, 1978) who present gender as a social construct. They "view 'gender' as a social construct or a system of meaning that organizes interactions and governs access to power and resources." (Crawford, 2002: 4). Gender, to these socially-oriented theories is treated not as a fixed, static, or essential attribute of individuals, but as a social construct that is dependent on context and situation.

She opposes the approach of the socially oriented theories to that of the essentialists who treat gender as a fixed static attribute of individuals, and minimize or overlook the importance of situation and context on communication strategies. They also view gender as a fundamental, essential part of the individual. Some examples of essentialist claims are the belief that "women as a group lack a sense of humour...women speak in particular ways because they are women." (Crawford, 2002: 4). What Crawford attempts to argue with regard to the relation of gender and humour is that, "women and men use humour in same-gender and mixed gender settings as one of the tools of gender construction. Through it and other means, they constitute themselves as masculine men and feminine women..." (2002: 15).

Our treatment of gender in a social context, in relation to face, shares insight with the research studies mentioned above, in that we consider 'gender as a social construct'. Though, it should be stressed that our corpus is merely limited to a workplace and the result may not be generalizable to other social contexts. It should also be noted that we do not aim at finding a difference between women and men's speech. What we will try to explore is how participants treat gender in transsexual talks.

In our treatment of face, we have focused on gender, as it might be a radically different notion in the Iranian community. If proved

to be so, it can plausibly be used as a clue to the culture-specific nature of face as was first depicted by Goffman. In addition, studying face in relation to context can contribute a great deal to illuminate the otherwise vague notion of gender in the Persian speaking community.

Taking the interactionist model as our point of departure, it is thus expectable that different societies conceptualize gender differently. Our main focus is on how gender might be realized in a non-western society which apart from the relations of power, heavily depends on tradition and religion. This culture-specific understanding of gender could have implications for redefining the concept.

Our main concern is not to deconstruct or closely analyse gender, for it certainly deserves independent studies which primarily aim at defining or deciphering the feminine or masculine talk. We are more interested to locate the very decisive space within which gender, by its very absence, so immensely affects anyone's social identity in the small community of this research. Accordingly referring to 'gender' in this study is a tool to unpack and re-examine 'face'; a notion that the existing literature on politeness tends to present as a black box (Latour & Woolgar, 1979), which should be taken more or less for granted. This re-examination and unpacking, we hope, will lead to the argument that unlike the European conceptualization of the term, the feminine 'face' and generally speaking any one's face in a non-western religious society like Iran is defined more than anything by the omission of any talk about or any reference to the biological gender. Due to religious teachings as well as traditions, sex differentiation, should not be addressed at workplace. Studying gender at workplace where the institutional power co-exists with traditional and religious background of the employees, directed us towards a conception of face that is maintained significantly and primarily by avoiding any sex-related talk, particularly with the members of the opposite sex. Unpacking face in this way might not only challenge Brown & Levinson's universal claims regarding politeness and face, but it can also alert

us against accepting purely social attempts in which the individual is totally forgotten. In other words, our own conceptualisation is such that face is a product of both the 'individual' and the 'social context'. In what follows, we will deal with the methodology we have adopted in this work. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How is 'face' defined and understood in different-sex interactions in an Iranian workplace?
2. How do the Iranian women under study construct their face in workplace interactions?
3. How do gender and face interact in an Iranian workplace setting?

2. Data and Analysis

During the course of doing this research we encountered numerous problems regarding data collection, which we will deal with in some detail in this section. Though it might seem of no or little importance to the findings of this study, we argue that the problems we encountered were actually quite important in substantial ways.

The data collection and procedures for analysis were more or less on the basis of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 1994; Stern, 1994), though within a social constructionist framework (Charmaz, 2000). Following the rigorous steps of Grounded Theory we started collecting qualitative data, coded them on the basis of open thematic coding, found the most important variables (the core variables), and finally tried to figure out how the categories found were linked to each other. For instance, some of the themes we found in this ethnographic data were *intimacy*, *use of first name*, and *shaxsiyyat*, whose semantic domain has a considerable overlap with the English term 'face'. In our later engagements with the data we noticed a close link between these three themes, in a way that using first name to call colleagues of the opposite sex might lead to intimacy, which is considered to be detrimental to one's *shaxsiyyat*. We will explain this in some detail later.

The data were put in the QSR.NUDIST, which is a computer programme for analysing qualitative data. This software has two main sections, a 'document explorer' where interview data and field notes are inserted, and a 'node explorer' where codes are stored. The data were first imported to the 'document explorer', and were subsequently coded based upon 'obvious fit' (Stern, 1994: 119), i.e. themes suggested and implied in the data. For instance, a participant stated, "I think we should look at people as human beings rather than as men and women". This statement was coded as 'irrelevance of gender'. In further engagement with the data, we were able to categorise this code under the more general code 'gender at workplace'. The QSR.NUDIST software provides the researcher with the opportunity to group and regroup codes and make changes in the way they relate in the face of new data.

We started the research by observing six female staff in their workplace. After a while we found that this method rendered little data, and this was the first problem we encountered during the course of our research. The reason was that it was not possible for us to do participant observation, and even the non-participant observation would probably not yield rich data in the context under study. Subsequently we decided to interview some of the women, basing our interview schedule on the very little data we had collected in our observation and the very concept of face in an Iranian setting. This led to another problem in our data collection, as we were male and the majority of participants were female, and for the same theoretical reasons of male-female workplace relations we will discuss later, only five participants gave their consent to be interviewed. We asked a female colleague to do six more interviews. This colleague reported that even she had difficulty persuading women to be interviewed.

One of us also interviewed a white woman from North America who worked at a UK institution. In this interview we particularly highlighted the themes we had found in our interviews with the Iranian women under study. In other words, we engaged in "sampling", a stage in Grounded Theory where "... the main

concepts or variables ... are compared with the data to determine under what conditions they are likely to occur, and if they are indeed central to the emerging theory ..." (Stern, 1994: 199-125). It is obvious that this one interview is not enough to cast light on differences in the way women in Iran and those in the west understand 'politeness' and 'face', however, we argue it is important in that it has shown certain important contrasting ways of approaching these concepts.

Generally speaking, Iranians do not like taking part in interactions where sex differences are implicitly or explicitly referred to. This reluctance to converse with people on gender-related issues tends to be more serious in formal contexts, particularly, where the members of the opposite sex are involved. This, as we shall see toward the end of the article, is a key factor defining politeness within the context of our research. To be polite, either as an employee or as a researcher, one should be silent with regard to gender-related differences. We were in fact approaching something which was considered taboo. Thus, dealing with this problem turned to be one of the most difficult parts of our data collection. This was, however, not the case with the white North American young lady interviewed in the UK.

These problems might have some implications for the findings of this study, though the mere fact is indicative of the difficulty doing ethnography in the setting we were working. In addition, the fact that gender-related talk is something of a taboo, could be used to support the idea that face is defined by an empty place for gender in the community under study. In the section which follows, we will present some major themes we have encountered in this study.

2.1 Use of first name

One of the findings of this study was the way women under study called other male and female colleagues. The participants often referred to female colleagues using their family name preceded by the Persian equivalent of "Mrs/Miss" "Agha / Khanom" though some used first name. Such instances of the use of first name among female colleagues were particular to occasions where no male

colleague was present. They did not use first name to call each other in the presence of male colleagues because they believed this would jeopardise their face, as suggested in the following quotation:

I do not call my female colleagues using their first name, as there might be colleagues around who might take advantage (a female participant).

As we have already argued, this quotation is somehow ambiguous, but based on our own emic intuition, she did not want her first name to be accessible to males, as it is strongly taken to be a very private, individual attribute of a woman, hence a threat to their individual face. This might also lead to some sort of threat to their social self as male colleagues would be tempted to call them by their first name, which was considered taboo in the contexts under study.

Another interpretation is that calling by first name might lead to a degree of intimacy between male and female colleagues which was frowned at by the female participants under study. This, we would argue, shows that the women under study did not tolerate any reference to their first name, as this somehow indicated their biological self. Another evidence for this argument is that the women under study avoided their femininity to be thematised, and they acted in a masculine way. Some of the women in this study had gone so far that, in their absence, they were often referred to as Mr. rather than Ms by other colleagues.

In two different working places it was required by the institutions that the name of the staff be pasted on the wall behind them, or on their desks, and the staff were provided with name tags on which their first name and surname could be typed. The first name of the female employees was later erased, or their initials were pasted instead of their first name. When we asked one of the female employees who had done so, the reasons why she had erased her first name she answered:

I don't like other people know my first name or call me by my first name. I think first name should be reserved for really intimate relations.

It is also very interesting that women in Iran retain their surname after marriage. This is telling in that women symbolically retain their identity after marriage. In fact it could be argued that family name as allegiance to a group is so strong that even marriage does not, at least symbolically, make any alterations in it. This can be linked with our earlier argument that *face* in the context under study is very much a social one.

Another concept closely related to not using first name in workplace was *intimacy* and *taking advantage*. Some of the respondents believed that calling colleagues by first name would lead to a level of intimacy which is not sanctioned by social norms. This might also tempt male colleagues *taking advantage*, which might lead to one's loss of *abroo* (face). Based on such observations and our own emic intuition, we believe that the concept of *face* in the contexts we studied was closely related to illegitimate relations between men and women. This again supports our claim that semantic features defining *face* are not the same across cultures, and therefore it might not be an appropriate theoretical framework to study politeness.

2.2 Congratulations and compliments

One of the themes that came up in the grounded theory framework we were pursuing in the present study was the manner and context under which women congratulated their male and female colleagues or used expressions of compliment. It was usually the case that congratulations/compliments among female colleagues were permissible under all circumstances. This, however, was not the case in congratulations/compliments among employees of different sex. Male-female congratulations were usually conducted on occasions which were somehow substantial. For instance, whenever a colleague bought a house/flat or a new car, other colleagues congratulated him/her regardless of sex differences. However, it was not permissible to compliment a colleague of the opposite sex on a new piece of clothing. When asked why this was the case, one of the participants said:

I never compliment men when they buy a new shirt or a new pair of shoes, because this might somehow implicate that you are joking with them.

Our interpretation of the above quotation is that telling jokes and 'having a laugh' is something reserved for intimate relations while it is not socially appropriate to engage in such discourse with someone who is only a colleague. The reverse order seems to be even more profane. Based on our own emic understanding, it could be suggestive to compliment a female colleague on a new piece of clothing. This also extends to anything that is in close contact with the body of the female colleague. The reason behind this observation is traditional and religious. If we agree with Durkheim (1915) on his analytical approach to religion, we can argue that any contact, whether physical or mental, i.e., thinking about it, between strangers of the opposite sex is considered *profane*, and this observation that male-female compliments were considered taboo among the participants can in fact be taken as performing *negative rites*.

2.3 Shaxiat and Abroo

The concept of *shaxiat*, which is roughly equivalent to inner-self, was one of the cornerstones of the concept of the Iranian face in Koutlaki's (2002) analysis of *ta-arof*. According to Koutlaki, *shaxiat* is similar to Brown and Levinson's concept of positive face (2002: 174). She, however, argues that *shaxiat* in Persian is different in that its starting point is "social wants" rather than "individual wants". Brown and Levinson's concept of positive face is defined as "the want of every 'competent adult member' that his wants be desirable to at least some others" (1999: 322). *Shaxiat*, however, means that the individual should have certain intrinsic features that will make him abide by social norms and refrain from actions and behaviour which are considered taboo by these norms. In our own ethnographic data we noticed that the participants often thought of *shaxiat* as an intrinsic quality of individuals, which can hardly be changed, and which is determined by family background and upbringing (Beeman, 1986: 85-86).

The concept of *abroo*, however, is somehow problematic. *Abroo* in Persian means something like face, though as we have already argued, *abroo* has its own culture- specific features in Iran. Most of the interviewees acknowledged a link between *Abroo* and *Shaxiat*, though they believed that these two have their differences. They believed that *abroo* is something that can be acquired or lost, though *shaxiat* is an attribute of a person which has been with them either from birth, or at least it is formed through childhood, and in any case intransigent.

Our own understanding is that *abroo*, or acquired face, is closely linked to social norms and taboos. In our endeavour to understand how participants defined *abroo*, we asked them to mention factors that might lead to the loss of one's *abroo*. Our initial findings suggest that *abroo* is closely linked to out of marriage sexual relations and to a lesser to degree to financial scandals. *Abroo* in the first sense is linked to both conventional and religious settings under study. One of the recurrent answers in the interviews was *illegitimate male-female relations*. This is appreciated once we understand the religious rules regarding marriage and male-female relations. The participants' assumptions on the factors affecting loss of one's *abroo*, was not totally dependent on religious principles, but were also motivated by conventions and social norms.

3. Discussion and Conclusion

In this section, we will first revisit the research questions:

1. How is 'face' defined and understood in different-sex interactions in an Iranian workplace?
2. How do the Iranian women under study construct their face in workplace interactions?
3. How do gender and face interact in an Iranian workplace setting?

As we explained in sections 2.1 and 2.2 above, 'face' had a specific meaning among participants in this study, which did not quite map onto the concept of face as discussed by Brown and Levinson (1987). Face, as understood by the participants in this

study constituted parameters not completely explainable by 'positive' and 'negative' wants. Such parameters as 'abroo' and 'shaxiat' in different sex interactions in this study seemed to stem from both social norms and individual desires, though Brown and Levinson's model emphasises individuality as a main criterion in defining 'face'.

Regarding the second question, we observed that Iranian women resort to a set of strategies to construct their face in workplace interactions. One such strategy was to prefer their family names to avoid reference to their biological gender. This was more evident when male colleagues were around. This shows how social norms can affect interactions in the workplace. We believe that such strategies cannot be explained by positive/negative wants of the participants.

The third question focuses on the interaction of face and gender. As we saw in different sections of the paper, face, as a combination of social norms, can be greatly affected by gender of participants in an interaction. For instance, in instance where female participants used first name to refer to each other in the absence of male colleagues, they preferred to use their surnames when a male colleague or customer was present.

In addition to gender-related issues discussed above, there were further important points which will be discussed below.

The major objective of this research was to re-examine the concept of face and politeness theory in relation to the largely controversial theme of gender, in a non-western society in which tradition and religion are decisive factors affecting almost anyone's social identity. It seems that an awareness of traditional and religious values and observing them contributes a great deal to people's social status.

However, this is not the whole picture as facts relating to Persian language constitute a significant part of the above macrostructure. These linguistic facts, though simple and non-technical, might even be used to distinguish the Iranian society from similar religious societies. Persian speakers use the word "Jens" or "Jenseyyat" to

refer to both biological and linguistic gender- where English possesses the equivalents "sex" and "gender" respectively. But the word 'Jens' is originally taken from the grammar and is not used in other meanings that the English word 'sex' implies. Using a grammatical word for both biological and linguistic gender is in line with what the data imply: the fact that women as well as men detest any talk implying a reference to biological gender particularly when members of the opposite sex are concerned.

What is more interesting is that Persian pronoun system is neutral for gender. There is simply nothing in the grammatical system of Persian to indicate gender. For example, the nominative pronoun "'u:" is used neutrally to refer to both male and female, or the ending "-ash" which is attached to the end of nouns (e.g. "ketabash", 'her/his book') has no reference to gender. Thus, gender is an empty space in Persian, yet we do not call it a gap. Language might look much better without this distinction. As modern language writers nowadays work hard to undermine the gender systems in which the first member of the duality male-female appears as the unmarked gender.

In this ethnographic study of politeness among a small number of working women in workplace we came across some preliminary understanding of 'face'. We should emphasise here that due to problems in doing ethnographic research in an Iranian context, the findings are obviously not generalisable, though they are important first steps in doing ethnography in a non-western community in general and women studies in particular.

The environment of the study, namely, the offices where men and women perform similar activities is in itself witness to the significant fact that Iranian women believe – as the majority of interviewees indicated- they are at least as capable as men to work outside home. Many of the women interviewed described women to be more meticulous, patient, and more dependable. In addition, the employees said that efficiency at work does not depend on being male or female.

The participation of women in workplace has made gender a very important component of politeness and face in the community under study. For a man to possess face was greatly dependent on his attitude towards female colleagues. That seems to justify the significance of face-studies which take gender as their central theme.

The women in this study tended to avoid anything that in a hierarchy placed them as lower with respect to men. It is, thus, not strange that they disliked to be called by first name by male colleague. Even a boss who is the head of the institutional power cannot call a lady by first name.

The subjects observed and interviewed indicated a consciousness towards concepts such as 'honesty' 'dignity', 'nobility', 'decency' and 'intrinsic nature' which define people's 'Shaxseyat' or character. A person who possesses a (good) character, is honest and has good thoughts regarding people, can build themselves a good face in the society. A person who gives ladies unwanted attention and shows a consciousness for sex is never known as polite to women. The inner character is a necessary part of anyone's face.

To sum up, the concept of 'face' is a culture-specific construct which cannot be explained on purely individualistic and universal grounds. Nonetheless, purely social explanations which ignore the individual do not work either in the context of this study. The specific conception of face was greatly dependent on the treatment of the opposite gender in a polite manner. Politeness could be conceived of at workplace on the basis of an ignorance and omission of any talk related to the biological gender. The biological gender should remain unmentioned. This constitutes an integral part of anyone's face. Therefore any member of the community may not attain face without being conscious of these factors.

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