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Communication, interaction and the “face” issue

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Introduction

Working with people from different geographical and social backgrounds involves not only linguistic difficulties, but also more complex issues related to cultural differences. A communication process that aims at avoiding misunderstandings, misinterpretations and inappropriate actions should imply that individuals in intercultural interactions try to adopt a vocabulary and attitudes which take into account (and/or adapt to) their interlocutor(s). However, most trainings of professionals in contact with migrant audiences do not sufficiently induce real awareness of difference and of the difficulties generated in "intercultural communication" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1990). The knowledge of other cultures is often based on the ethnocentric position of one's own culture, giving rise to stereotypes and interpretations, which guide the decoding and evaluation of the situations encountered. These are based on the "guiding images" within the “sensitive zones” (Cohen-Emerique 2011), being at the origin of cultural shocks. The culture shock itself is a "reaction" to the perceived difference that the "other" brings to the encounter.

In the literature on the intercultural relation and its communicational difficulties (of which Margalit Cohen-Emerique is an outstanding figure), one of the recurrent issues is the notion of the "face". This notion is familiar to us in everyday language: in French and English the word used is “face”; in Italian it is “faccia” and in Hungarian “arc”. Common expressions are in French: “perdre la face” i.e. to lose the face, to become ridiculous; to be ashamed; to be humiliated in public; “prendre x en pleine face”, i.e. "to receive something in the face", which means to receive very unexpected, shocking, destabilising and painful news; “faire volte-face”, i.e. “to turn one’s face”: to confess a known fault; “sauver la face”, i.e. to save the face, to save one's appearances, one's dignity, after having been exposed to a compromising situation; “se voiler la face”, i.e. "to hide one's face”, to refuse to see an unpleasant reality, to delude oneself. In English, we find the terms "to save face" and "to lose face"; in Italian: "salvare la faccia", "perdere la faccia"; in Hungarian we can say: “van bőre a kékén”, literally, "he has skin on his



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face" meaning that he allows himself transgressing social norms. All these expressions bring us back to situations where the face is threatened, as a public social self-image, in a general context of interaction with no distinction between intra- and extra-cultural encounters.

The purpose of this text is to understand how the notion of face intervenes as a "sensitive area" as a common problem in all communication situations, and especially in intercultural interactions. All life in society implies the duty to confront difficult situations and to try to preserve one's face towards others as well as towards oneself. When the face is lost, the self-esteem is damaged, but the drama is not so much between people as between roles. Thus, to study the face as a sensitive zone is to study the interface between person and social role, the human in social interaction.

The symbolic function of communication

Communication is a symbolic process, in the sense that we always communicate by means of symbols (understood here as signs¹ in the broadest sense), whether they be linguistic signs (spoken or written) or other, such as gestures, images, objects, behavioral patterns, etc. It is in this sense that the systemic approach of the Palo Alto School (with Bateson) is based on an essential postulate: "*From the moment when individuals are in the presence of each other, it is impossible not to communicate, because it is impossible not to behave*" and that "*all behavior in an interaction situation has the value of a message*". (Marc and Picard, 2000). The idea is therefore that communication is not simply sending and receiving a message - against the simplified understanding of communication reduced to *transferring, sharing and disseminating* information and knowledge. Going beyond this functionalist view, communication can also be seen as a *process* of establishing a relationship or connection with another person. Communication – in this light - is a much more complex reality including everything that happens when individuals interact, involving not only verbal language, but also all the non-verbal signs emitted in a context that will concretely influence the relationship and the nature of the exchange. In a "face to face" interaction, the meaning of the messages does not only depend on the words, but also on all the reactions of the parties involved (gestures, looks, expressions, facial mimics, tone, rhythm of voice, postures, body movements, interpersonal distance, etc.), which are all messages that the communication partner(s) will decode or not.

¹ A sign is composed of both a material form and a mental concept. The signifier is the material form, i.e. something that can be heard, seen, smelled, touched or tasted, while the signified is the mental concept associated with it, i.e. the meaning that the signifier conveys and that allows us to understand this manifestation.



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This process involves hearing "*the 'noises' that confirm, contradict or blur the messages, in order to reconstitute little by little the secret and complicated code written nowhere but understood by all*" (Winkin, 1981). Every human act and behaviour is communication.

The primacy of the relational function: theories of exchange in the foundation of human societies

Since the dawn of humanity, in the cultures of our “past worlds”, human beings have constantly met, exchanged and communicated as they evolved. Among the anthropologists who have meticulously observed the behaviour of individuals in human societies, Claude Levi Strauss stands out. He highlighted that a constant in humanity is the urge to exchange. The function of all exchanges is to generate human relationships, which go beyond the “order of nature”. What is at stake is establishing communication between groups, setting up rules specifying the relationship between man and his fellow man. Levi-Strauss drew on the work of Marcel Mauss on the gift: "*First of all, it is not individuals, but collectivities that take up mutual obligations. They exchange between each other and establish contracts; the persons present at the contract are moral persons: clans, tribes, families, which confront and oppose each other either directly as groups, or through the intermediary of their chiefs, or in both ways at the same time*". The exchanges established are never purely material or economic: "*Moreover, what they exchange are not exclusively goods and wealth, furniture and buildings, things that are economically useful. They are above all courtesies, feasts, rites, military services, women, children, dances, festivals, fairs, of which the market is only one of the moments and where the circulation of wealth is only one of the terms of a much more general and permanent contract*" (Mauss, 1950). The desire for recognition, within all transactions, has a major role: men of the same social group establish **reciprocal relations** that strengthen the links between people and ensure the stability of the community (Levi Strauss, 1958).

When communication means interaction

These two terms (communication/interaction) have often been used interchangeably. However, interaction is distinct from communication because it refers to "*all reciprocal actions between two or more individuals in which information is shared*". It is this idea of reciprocity that is essential in the distinction. Interaction is said to be social not only because it produces meaning, but also because it is embedded in a context that influences one's actions. Interaction is not an easy concept: "*it sometimes designates a process, sometimes an object, sometimes a point of*

view (particularly in the interactionist perspective) for understanding relational phenomena" (Marc and Picard, 1989). We immediately think of the most banal and everyday acts, such as language interactions (what language to speak, what sounds to use, what rules to refer to), non-verbal interactions (what body positions, what gestures, what attitudes are used in the interaction?) In addition, the "relational" between the interactants comes into play: what is their degree of familiarity, their type of link (family, friendship, professional, educational), the context of their meeting, is it ordinary/extraordinary, do they belong to the same social class, to the same ethnic origin... Each situation is different and complex.

Interaction and the notion of "face"

E. Goffman has devoted his entire work to studying interaction, which he considers, to be *ordered*, in the sense that it is subject to regulations, and imposes a certain number of constraints on its participants (Cefaï and Perreault, 2014). "By (face-to-face) interaction he understands *"the reciprocal influence that partners exert on each other's actions when they are in each other's immediate physical presence"* (Goffman, 1973:23). He compares everyday situations to a theatre where characters play their roles; but his interest is not in the predetermined arrangement of roles according to situations, rather in the individuality as an expression of the particular in the universal which is not codified anywhere, in any text, in any role, but which is present in all human interaction. This is how *identity*² emerges, which is not the same as personality (the manifestation of the individual's deep self), neither is it assailable to the role. What is at stake is self-esteem, this is what forms the basis of social identity, i.e. a person's perception of his or her worth in society and how a person perceives themselves in relation to others, based on how he or she is "recognised" by others. This is what Goffman calls "face", that is, *"the positive social value that a person actually claims through the course of action that others assume he or she has taken in a particular contact"* (Goffman, 1974, p.9). Face is thus an image of oneself that a person forms according to the positive or negative gaze that others have on them. **For Goffman, in a situation of interaction the rule that every individual must respect is to preserve one's face (thus the positive image of oneself) as well as that of one's partners.** Moreover, since face is very vulnerable and can easily be threatened by oneself and by others, this forces the individuals to cooperate in order to guarantee its maintenance, each knowing that their own face is intrinsically linked to the face of the other, and that

² Identity refers to the perception that each individual has of himself, of his own consciousness of existing as a person, and also as a person in relation to other individuals with whom one forms a social group. (quoted by M. Cohen-Emerique, 2011)



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maintaining face implies respecting the other's face. To help with this task, society imposes certain ritually coded actions, to prevent and protect oneself from possible damage to the face - of oneself and of others.

Goffman explains that all societies provide for ways of preserving the face and for dealing with the face when it is lost, which is why he speaks of "staging daily life", of "figurations" (face work) to designate the procedures for maintaining this fundamental equilibrium, figurations which do not determine behaviour in a precise manner but which orientate it. This is what he calls "ritual constraints", i.e. procedures that aim to safeguard the identity of each person in the interaction. These rules will help each person avoid causing the other person to lose face (rules of consideration), and have a positive self-image (rules of self-esteem). Figuration implies being prepared for any risk, any incident that could compromise the face of one of the participants in the interaction, and to react in a way to avert the danger, for example by changing the subject of the conversation, when one realises that the subject being discussed is putting the other in difficulty. All individuals have some practice in figuration, but some excel at it more than others; they are said to have tact, a sense of diplomacy and elegance.

Is face a universal concept?

Although it is well known, "face" has been little studied in the Western social sciences, the majority of references that can be found refer to the work of Goffman, and it is only recently that we have access to the work of Chinese authors on the issue (in English)³. This consideration brings us to recent research conducted on the notion of face by Leung and Cohen (2011). These authors, taking up the concept of self-esteem, i.e. a person's perception of his or her value in society, develop a specific theory of the interaction between the individual and his or her context, in which groups differ on the basis of their "cultural logics", brought about by particular combinations of circumstances. They assume that individuals in a culture will be influenced by the logics of thought and action that have been developed historically and continue to have normative value. For the authors, **the foundations of self-esteem in different cultures would therefore vary according to the stability and hierarchical nature of the social structures in question.** This perspective is based on the idea that cultural differences are not simply integrated by the individual, but are generated in the interaction between different types of

³ It is interesting to note that Goffman drew heavily on his knowledge of Chinese culture to develop his concept of "face".



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people and situations encountered in a given cultural context. They distinguish three ideal types of cultural logics: cultures of dignity, of honour and of face.

Dignity is self-esteem, based on the achievements of the individual in the pursuit of his or her goals and values. *The cultural logic of dignity is therefore based on the inalienable autonomy of the individual and his or her personal responsibility for his or her actions.* An individual's dignity is therefore not easily questioned by others and his or her self-interest is only limited by an effective system of law that enforces contracts in an egalitarian social structure. This logic of dignity would be characteristic of people belonging to the northern US and western cultures.

Honour is personal value based on one's reputation and one's own evaluation of what others think of him or her. *The cultural logic of honour is based on the individual's personal responsibility to develop and protect the reputation of his or her group, and to maintain its collective honor.* In this logic, the norms transmitted belong to the social identity of the group. Social interaction is cooperative or competitive depending on whether or not the reputation of individuals is threatened.⁴ This active management of reputation in response to threats means that these hierarchical structures are much less stable than those characteristic of face cultures. This logic of honour is said to be characteristic of people in Middle Eastern, North African (Jamous, 1981), Mediterranean, Latin American, South Asian, Indian, Pakistani and Southern American cultures.

Face is self-esteem based on the evaluation by others of the individual's accomplishment of social obligations. *The cultural logic of face is thus based on the individual's accomplishment of the obligations of his or her social role, in order to preserve social harmony and stability.* The obligations are dictated by society, not freely chosen, as in cultures of dignity, and they are permanent. They depend on the individual's status in stable social hierarchies such as families or organisations. These characteristics mean that people are generally not free to act autonomously and in their own interest as in cultures of dignity. *"Face-concern exerts a mutually restrictive, even coercive, power over each member of the social network. Most of the time, the individual's actions, far from being directed by his or her own desires, are in fact dictated by the need to meet the expectations of others"* (Ho, 1976:10). Similarly, the logic of

⁴ In such a society, the issue of honour may require competitive actions to assert and protect not only one's own reputation, but also the reputation of one's family or other family-like persons, such as close friends or other close social groups.



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face focuses much more on the preservation of in-group harmony than on the external reputation of the group. This face logic is said to be characteristic of people from Asian cultures, such as China and Japan.

If we can say with Leung and Cohen that people of all cultures try to maintain and negotiate face in all communication situations, the distinction between these three "cultural logics" must be qualified: these notions are all linked to face and in each society they intertwine. The aim, therefore, is not so much to differentiate societies as if they were hermetically separate and homogeneous units, but to highlight one aspect or another, in order to understand those traits that are of different importance in different cultures. For E. Goffman, men, across their cultural differences, are everywhere similar, and the rituals linked to the face would be the result of a "universal human nature" (1974, p.41). This does not mean that the actual (cultural) practices, related to this "universal human nature", are also universal. If a person, group or society *"appears to have a unique character of its own, the reason is that the common elements of human nature have a particular tone and combination"* (Goffman, 1974:42). This means that the ritual procedures of face maintenance are found in all societies, they are universal: only their content, their manifestations and the importance given to them are variable.

One of the reasons for differentiated manifestations of the face lies in the gap between collective and individualistic cultures. Take the example of China, where an individual's action can result in a collective face loss and the circumstances of a collective can have an impact on an individual's face (or vice versa). When a person loses face, all those who relate to them are affected in their reputation: their family, their village, the social group to which they belong, and even the whole country. Giving face is assured in particular in the rituals of access: the way one addresses the other to mark one's deference (using kinship terminology), exaggerating greetings, farewells, paying compliments, minimising what one has or what one does... ("Come into my wretched house" one may say to guests), inviting the person to whom one wants to give face to a restaurant (the more expensive the restaurant and the more abundant the food, the more face you give to your guest); putting him/her in touch with one of your contacts; giving him/her a gift. However, face is also a manifestation of consciousness, as it functions as both a social and a psychological sanction: *"the success of Chinese culture is that it manages to make the individual oppose himself"* (Zheng, 1995).



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Positive face/negative face

It is the 'politeness theory' attached to the names of Brown and Levinson that remains closest to the sociology of E. Goffman in its exploration of reparative exchanges in verbal interactions. Brown and Levinson define politeness as "*a means of reconciling the mutual desire for face preservation with the fact that most speech acts are potentially threatening to some face*" (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1990). The authors postulate that the face is made up of two complementary aspects: the positive face, expressing the narcissism of the individual, reflecting all those valorising images produced in an interaction which corresponds to Goffman's notion of face; and the negative face, "territory" in the broad sense (bodily, spatial, cognitive and temporal), corresponding to the desire for autonomy, to be free of one's actions or to protect one's personal integrity. During an interaction, each individual will have to do his best to protect his own face (both self-image and territory/autonomy) and to protect those of others. In addition to these notions, Brown and Levinson use the concept of "Face Threatening Acts" (FTAs). They argue that in any human encounter there is an inherent threat to the positive and negative faces of the interacting individuals. Different strategies can be used to protect one's own and the partner's faces: safeguarding one's (positive) face consists of protecting one's image (preventing damage), and safeguarding one's territory consisting in protecting oneself from overly familiar, intrusive behaviors, or too close relationships. At the same time, it is also important to safeguard the partner's face, by avoiding harsh words and reproaches, and by safeguarding the partner's territory by avoiding brutal incursions of any behaviour that risks to be sensed as intrusive.

Regulating social relationships in interaction

C. Kerbrat-Orecchioni, taking up the two problems constructed by E. Goffman and Brown and Levinson, has refined the definitions. She does not speak of "the face", but of "the faces", referring to the positive face corresponding to the protection and enhancement of the self-image, constructed by the interlocutors in the interaction, and the negative face corresponding to the protection of what Goffman defines as "the territories of the self", i.e. "*the bodily, spatial or temporal territories; the material or cognitive goods and reserves*" (1990:167). According to her, all the rituals that we perform, all the verbal or non-verbal acts that we carry out can be threatening, or to the contrary, valorising for the face and/or for the territory of a person, depending on its perception and interpretation. Accordingly, each society proposes a whole series of strategies that regulate interactions and ritualise the encounter to facilitate mutual adjustment in everyday situations which can turn problematic or even conflictual, such as:



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opening or closing communication (greetings); giving or receiving (giving a gift/returning a gift, asking for a favor); changing status (losing one's job, changing one's marital or professional situation, etc.). The sensitivity of these actions and events lies firstly in the fact that they may threaten the faces of the actors or lead to territorial violations. But in addition, actions in these situations often require reconciliation of contradictory demands, inherent to social relations: accepting contact and maintaining distance; marking the hierarchy and preserving a certain balance; taking an interest in others and respecting their private life...

Rules of politeness and face in communication

So what are the social rules, the “ritual constraints” that must be respected? What is their purpose? In the situation of interaction between individuals, not only does language come into play, but also an infinite number of codes and rules, acting as "safeguards" that apply according to the situation, determine the ritual course of actions and thus participate in the regulation of social relations. *"There is no social interaction without a minimum of rituality; (...) this plays a fundamental role in codifying communication, regulating exchanges and reconciling contradictory demands inherent in social life (contact and distance, reciprocity and hierarchy, autonomy and sharing)"* (Marc and Picard, 1989:136). These rules are called "codes or rituals of politeness", "rituals of good manners" which propose models of conduct adapted to different social situations - "rituals of interaction” according to Picard - , making up a conventional system of prescriptions and proscriptions specific to each culture, from the most everyday to the most exceptional. These rules are learned during the primary socialisation process in childhood, and then they are internalised and become part of the personality of each individual. One example among others is what is called "access rituals": their role is to facilitate the management of communication. Two of these are of particular importance in social life: "introductions", which initiate a relationship, and "closing rituals" (or "farewells"), which mark the end of it. The authors also speak of "maintenance rituals", which are, for example, an invitation, a gift or a telephone call.

Respecting these rules in one's own culture is fundamental, because it allows one to enter into a relationship with others and maintain communication, taking the minimum of risks (of conflict, misunderstanding, loss of face, etc.), noting also that these rules are not homogeneous even in the same society; they may vary depending on one's social background, education, and also over time, from one region to another, from one social environment to another, from one



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professional environment to another, according to age, gender, etc. However, for Picard (2010), it is possible to discern in the expression of rules and rituals, similar principles and tendencies, beyond the differences across cultures. She calls this *the convergence of principles*, which may manifest in different areas: for example, in self-presentation, which occupies an important place in all cultures and social levels, as well as as in respect for others, which implies respect for their face and territory (delimiting the boundaries between private-intimate and public). Even if the expression of face, of what preserves it and what causes it to be lost is not the same in all societies, the general social imperatives are the same.

Some examples of communication rituals

The following descriptions show that some social interactions can be considered as examples of face-to-face behavior, even if they are not usually described or interpreted in these terms.

1. Rituals of access

The "Bonjour": in France, the "Bonjour" is an essential greeting (even if it loses its force in public places), which means to the person that we have identified them, that they exist for us. In a shared workspace, not saying hello when you arrive in the morning can be considered disturbing, even insulting.

The handshake: when you introduce yourself to a superior, you expect them to shake your hand first.

The kiss on the cheek: it has become an extremely common ritual in France, although it is currently 'suspended' during the pandemic period. Its practice might entail complications, as the rule is not the same depending on the region and social background: how many kisses, on which cheek, to whom? This vagueness in the ritual can lead to many misunderstandings. You are two people and you meet a third person, whom only one of you knows. The first person embraces the newcomer, but what does the second do? Some people will 'automatically' come forward to kiss, others will reach out for a handshake (implying: 'I don't know him, I won't kiss him'). But the second choice will most often induce a word (for example: "I don't kiss when I don't know the person"), accompanied by a smile, as if to prevent the potential offence (not having kissed) and to respect the face of the other.

2. Rituals of closure

If I am at a friend's house and the evening is over, I am not going to open the door, leave the house and leave without saying anything, there will be a long or short ritual of greetings at the end of the evening: I am in the other person's territory, I have been accepted, these rituals of greetings at the end of the evening allow me to leave while respecting them.



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3. Respect each other's territory

- * You don't enter a colleague's office, if the door is closed, without first knocking on the door and asking "it's ... X. May I come in? "
- * The questions “ Do you mind me opening the window?” or “I suppose you do not have a lighter to lend” are also expressions of the functioning of the negative face, i.e. protecting one’s and the other’s autonomy, because territory in interaction theory is also understood symbolically.

4. Apologies

Apologies are “restorative” rituals in Goffman’s sense of the word, which occur at any time in life, but they are tricky to handle, with the offender always running the risk of doing too much or too little in a field where the speaker's self-esteem (belittling him or herself) and the speaker's self-esteem (being humiliated) are at stake.

* You are in the street and accidentally bump into someone. The apology in this case should help to calm the anger or aggressiveness of the person being pushed.

* You go to see a friend in the hospital, and when you arrive, you apologize for not bringing something (even if it is forbidden by the hospital rules), because it would otherwise mean that you are demeaning his or her person. You keep your face and theirs, at the same time.

* Your neighbor’s car blocks yours and prevents you from moving. You knock on his door and say: "Excuse me, but... your car is blocking mine". By knocking on their door in an untimely manner, you are entering their personal space, their privacy. The apology serves to repair this intrusion, even if it is his action, his car that is blocking you that caused yours in the first place.

* You arrive late for an appointment, you apologise. If it's a schoolboy who arrives late for class, he can usually enter the classroom without being punished (the offence of being late for the teacher is usually remedied by the apology, except if the delays are cumulative). If it is a date, the apology may not be enough to erase the offence, additional explanations will be needed. If it is an appointment for a job, apologizing is unlikely enough to get the job. These three examples show that the effectiveness of the 'reparation' ritual varies according to the context.

Restorative exchanges in the case of face damage

For E. Goffman, face damage can have more or less profound effects, such as feelings of discredit, discomfort, rejection, contempt, exposure, even shame, damage to prestige and dignity, humiliation. In any case, the interaction is in danger. The subject therefore has an interest in doing everything possible to preserve his or her face when it is threatened, and will implement corrective strategies: whether by practices of avoiding any source of embarrassment or by restorative exchanges that restore the balance of the interactional order. *"The function of*



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restorative activity is to change the meaning attributable to an act, to transform what might be considered offensive into what can be considered acceptable" (Goffman, 1974).

There are three types of reparative exchanges: there are **justifications** (I forgot to return a book to someone who is very fond of it. He calls me to remind me, reproaching me for it. I then invoke my lack of memory as an extenuating circumstance), **apologies** (when I slightly bump into someone in the street, I say: "Sorry, excuse me"), and **implorations** (I get on a train and want to sit in the seat by the window when the one by the corridor is occupied. To sit down, I have to make the other person stand up. I then say to him: "Excuse me for disturbing you, I would like to sit in that seat, please"). In all three cases, the restorative activity has the function of preventing a future offence and/or repairing a past offence, by showing that one values the rules that one has only accidentally broken (e.g. entering the other person's privacy uninvited) and by showing that one recognises the other person's value. These face-related "reparation" procedures are therefore spontaneous reactions that respond to the internalisation of social norms, and are intended to maintain the social harmony disturbed by an act perceived as offensive. The reparative activity has a ritual function (Goffman, 1973:213).

The expression of face in intercultural situations

In cross-cultural situations, face management becomes more complex as politeness norms do not overlap and the prefixed scenarios for ensuring status are not only different but may even clash, which will make it difficult to maintain the other's face while not losing one's own. The variations in the communication rituals, for which we have given some – French-specific - examples above can appear in different domains: in codes of politeness (such as the rituals of giving and receiving a gift - in many societies the package received is not opened in front of the giver, whereas in other cultures it is an affront not to open the gift immediately); in the assessment of the types of behaviour considered threatening to the face (in an African context, not to start the interaction by asking about the health of the family would be very impolite, whereas in Europe it might be perceived as indiscrete); in the preferred response to a serious attack on the face either perpetrated by others (silence among Asians, insult among Mediterraneans, invitation to a duel in last century Europe, hara-kiri among the samurai), or induced by oneself (numerous apologies in France, protestations in China, etc.). It also happens that one imposes one's own standards of politeness out of ignorance or deliberately, which will have the effect of threatening the other's face.



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Another way to threaten the other person's face in intercultural situations - often to compensate for one's lack of knowledge about the other's cultural frame of reference - is to use stereotypes about the other person's culture in the communication, which will have the opposite effect to the one intended, regardless of the stereotype's orientation, positive or negative. In this case, the individual sees him or herself locked into a cultural identity without having been given the possibility to define him or herself. Finally, when the codes are contradictory, one often faces the dilemma of having to choose between preserving one's own face or threatening the face of the other.

The few situations that will be presented below are extracted from a vast corpus, constituted from cases reported in training, coming from professionals in situations of intercultural interactions in the fields of education and social work, all of which can be linked to attacks on the face of one or the other of the interactants.

1. Greeting rituals

A Turkish woman comes to the reception of the social center and asks for me. I often act as an intermediary between a school support association and this family. I come down from the second-floor office and walk over to shake her hand, saying "hello." The woman recoils and does not offer me her hand. I feel bad, because I am rejected, and I am afraid I have done something inappropriate.

Here, the two greeting rituals diverge, but neither of the two interlocutors is aware of it at the time. It is only afterwards that the professional realizes it, but he still has the feeling of having "offended" the lady by his ignorance, and also of having been offended, as the incident puts in question his status (as a man, referent at the social center) and his competence (having the feeling of not having done things properly). This is the very type of "damage to the face" which cannot be "repaired".

During an intake interview at the shelter, I receive a young Algerian man with his father. When they arrived, I shook hands with the boy and then with the father. The father refused to enter the office with me. Surprised, I call another colleague who will conduct the interview. I would then learn that the father had not accepted that I shake his son's hand before his own. I would have been disrespectful to him (told by a female educator).

Here, what is at issue is the link between identity and social roles: it is not the affront in terms of rituals of politeness that is at stake (the two people obey to the same social imperative: shaking hands), but



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rather a direct attack on the narrator's professional identity. What is being played out calls for the recognition of a double reference (age and gender) that does not belong in the same way to the repertoire of codes of the two people interacting? In France, the role of gender in interactions is denied (although it is present) and the value of age is reversed (age is devalued rather than valued). To this, we could add another conflicting double reference (gender and social hierarchy), which also manifests itself in a different way for the two interlocutors: the tension between the gender and hierarchical position is not acceptable for the father (when it is a woman in a higher hierarchical position), whereas it is not always conscious (or accepted as being) in French culture.

On my way out of my classroom, I was stopped by another student, a "white" French woman. "Hello Issa," she said, and I replied, "Hello." As I turned around, she was right behind me, ready to give me a "kiss." I saw her head come closer, her lips were getting ready. I didn't understand what was happening, I didn't move, my face was pale and I couldn't speak. As she almost reached my face, she stopped abruptly. In a surprised voice, she said to me: "Don't you kiss me? (told by a young Senegalese trainee).

The differences in approach to the "kiss" mentioned above in an intra-cultural situation are all the more significant in interculturality. The bringing together of bodies in the context of greeting rituals is probably not customary in the culture of this young person, whether between foreigners or between men and women. But we can also identify a breach of territory, in the sense of E.T. Hall and his study of proxemics, where the young student enters Issa's intimate space, without her being aware of it.

2. The way of communicating

I received a couple of Malian origin in an interview with the objective of seeing with them problems identified by the nursery concerning their youngest child. The man explained to the woman what I was saying, she did not understand French well and the interview went well. A few weeks later, the nursery informs me that the young child does not come anymore and that the mother has a rejection attitude towards the staff. In order to try to see with the couple what seems to be a misunderstanding, I contact them by phone. He doesn't want to hear about the daycare anymore and hangs up on me. I was both surprised by their reaction, because during the interview, I had the feeling of a good understanding, and then disturbed, because the effect produced is the total closure of this family towards the nursery.

What is at stake here is the way of communicating information: the dominant French relational mode is "free, transparent and direct" communication, which is not the case in all cultures. This makes it difficult for social professionals to question the effect of their message (has it been received, heard, understood?), especially when it comes to discussing serious problems. With parents on the phone, this type of "indirect" communication has become quite common. However, this is not always well received by



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families, whether French or foreign, all the more so in difficult contexts such as this situation. Suddenly, both faces are compromised: that of the father of the family and that of the professional. For the latter, it is her professional identity that is under attack (her competence), by the feeling of having missed something (the result of the interview being the withdrawal of the child from the nursery), while she thought she had done her job well. For the father, it is a direct attack on his face as a "good parent" and what was only an attempt at conciliation for the professional is felt by him as aggressive and not respectful.

3. The "personal space"

A man of Malian origin dropped by unannounced to ask for information. It was me (social worker) who had to receive him, because the receptionist was not at his post. He was a very tall man and he stood very close to me to talk to me, he almost touched me. During the exchange, I had to move back several times to be able to see him better and talk to him, but each time, he was getting closer. This made me feel very uncomfortable. I felt "assaulted" and "violated" in my intimate space, which was a barrier to communication. Moreover, he was on first-name terms with me, while I continued to be on surname terms with him.

This is a nice illustration of the difference in perception of the occupation of a physical space and the distance necessary for communication, depending on the culture. Several factors are touched upon here: the social worker feels invaded in her intimate space, which blocks her completely in her relationship with the user. There is also the question of being on first-name terms, which reinforces this feeling of being attacked, and which upsets all her points of reference (we don't use first-name terms with people we receive for a request for help). We can also identify the relationship between the sexes and the roles attached to the genders. And finally, professional and gender identity also comes into play. The professional certainly felt assaulted because she felt being treated by the user as a woman (potentially a "prey") and not as a professional.

It was an afternoon at the reception of the CAF (administration that delivers family allowances). I received a young black woman with a baby in a stroller. The interview starts and very quickly, the baby starts to cry because he is hungry. The lady takes her child out of the stroller, holds it in her arms and while continuing to talk, she takes her breast out of her blouse and starts to breastfeed her child. I was very shocked and felt this attitude as a huge lack of modesty and respect towards me.

Here too, the roles are not perceived in the same way: for the woman, the role of mother prevails, regardless of the time and place (intimate or public space). For the professional, there must be a spatial boundary for activities related to being a woman/mother. In addition, there is the posture in relation to



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the body and what is shown or not shown in the public space. One could also see a question of identity emerging, which refers to the always conflicting duality in French society between the posture of woman/mother and woman/professional. In any case, for her, the border is doubly crossed and her face threatened.

4. Hospitality

As a young professional, I went to the home of Mariama, a 6 year old girl of Senegalese origin, for school support. During the first visit, my supervisor at the time refused any drinks, cakes, etc. offered by the parents and instructed me to do the same, out of "professionalism". At the first session at home, Mariama's mother welcomed me and offered me a coffee, which I refused. After refusing her coffee, I could not discuss with her mother about her daughter's schooling, because she went immediately to her kitchen and did not come out until I left. The second time, I also refused her offer of a coffee. After that, the lady called the service to stop the follow-up of the child. So despite what my supervisor said, I felt like I had missed the point of the work I was supposed to do and was not as professional as I could have been.

The rules of hospitality represent an essential value for many cultures, and if they existed in France, their expression has been greatly reduced nowadays, especially in professional situations. Moreover, there is still in the minds of some professional hierarchies the need to separate personal and professional roles, in the idea of reinforcing competence, while denying the existing hierarchy between social professionals and their clients. Here two mistakes have been made: the ignorance of the universal demand for reciprocity and the consequent host-visitor obligations, and the refusal to erase a strict hierarchy by a simple gesture. Hence the immediate consequence by a radical action on the part of the mother (the stopping of the child's follow-up). The professional undergoes an attack on her "professional" face (feeling of having been incompetent, whereas she followed the instructions of her boss, which leads to her further destabilisation).

Repairing the threat to the face?

The work of Margalit Cohen-Emerique (2002) evokes the fact that damage to the face can become a real "threat" to the different "layers" of identity. This is even more true in intercultural situations, where many factors come into play: the difference in the codification of situations, the co-existence of different norms of politeness, the fact that the preferred scenarios to maintain an equilibrium may not only be different, but might even be opposing, and finally the fact that each culture gives different importance to the face and proposes different modalities for its restoration. For Cohen-Emerique beyond the difficulties of communication existing at



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the interpersonal level or the value-conflicts affecting the intercultural interactions, there is another level, which concerns the identity, both in its personal and professional dimensions. This level is very important, in that identity gives meaning and value to the individual. The vulnerability of identity explains why social situations which at first sight seem relatively banal, trigger powerful effects, blocking the possibility of continuing the exchange and overcoming the threat, all the more so if it is not consciously acknowledged. However, it can also be argued that if the links developed by social workers with their publics are strong enough, these links may not be broken, even if the face of one or both of the parties is affected. The link which has been built is precious, because it induces reciprocal recognition, which can slow down, or even preclude the feeling of threat or rejection, and constitutes in this way one of the strategies of which E. Goffman speaks, when he underlines the role of the "rules of consideration" for maintaining the face of the interlocutors in a (professional) interaction.

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