

CHAPTER 9

Insults as Assaults on Face

Sir Harold Nicolson (1939) described diplomatic language as “that guarded understatement which enables diplomatists and ministers to say sharp things to each other without becoming provocative or impolite.” Insults from diplomats may be rare, but they seem to have been more common as preludes to a war. Many of them were more than a careless phrase provoking an emotional response—they had a strategic point. This chapter explores their strategic basis and their connection to violence.

The chapter starts with examples of insults that provoked wars, at least in the opinion of historians. One account would take them as challenges to honor that force a nation to strike back or lose reputation. Some of them did challenge honor, but others do not fit the pattern. Another link between insults and violence is needed, and this chapter construes them as threats to face that sometimes must be resisted by war.

Face involves the group’s common belief about how much deference will be given to someone, especially in interactions that are face-to-face and publicly known. It sets behavior toward the individual by giving each group member expectations about how others will behave and what the individual will accept. If the individual has a higher degree of face, the group is more reticent to impose, it makes requests more carefully, and it offers various public signs of respect. Face-related behavior, or “facework,” is prominent in conversational disagreements. The higher person interrupts more, takes less care to qualify opinions or cloak disagreements, and may well have chosen the topic in the first place. Honor puts a person in or out of the group, but face sets a hierarchy within it, and two people’s relative positions determine the rules of their interaction.

In this usage, “face” means just about what it does in everyday English, as in “losing face” or “saving face.” The goal here will be to define it more clearly and show its strategic aspects. Erving Goffman (1967) treated it as a basis of so-

cial interaction, and linguists have applied his ideas to study verbal politeness (e.g., Brown and Levinson 1987). Even though Sir Harold MacMillan expressed his worries about the Russians' face in Cuba, as recounted in the preface, the word is uncommon in international relations discourse, perhaps because "national face" is an odd picture. Facelike practices exist in many societies, however, and it would be surprising if leaders did not use some version of them to regulate their international dealings.¹

A government loses face when it has to accede to another's will, and accordingly the word comes up around compromising in negotiations. Face can be saved by providing an on-the-record explanation that makes compromising seem voluntary. Good negotiators regard saving each other's face as a mutual cooperative activity, and one way is to arrange for superficially reciprocal moves. That was behind Sir Harold's offer to dismantle his Thor missiles in exchange for the Soviet missiles in Cuba, and it was the point of the famous Walk-in-the-Woods plan to resolve the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Force negotiations (Talbott 1985). Mobile trailers carrying four NATO cruise missiles were to be traded against Soviet SS-20 missiles with three warheads. The clever element was equating the missile-carrying truck with the multiwarhead missile. A problem was that four warheads were on each U.S. truck but three were on each Soviet missile. This was finessed by pointing out that the U.S. weapons were subsonic cruise missiles with longer flight times than the SS-20's. The matching of a truck and a multiwarhead missile was not based on any calculations of military operations analysis; it simply restored a superficial symmetry and made the deal look fair. Although the plan was rejected by both governments, the popular enthusiasm it generated may have increased the demand for an agreement, which was eventually signed.

The chapter starts with examples of international insults that pushed countries toward war. A definition of an insult is then given—it is a communicative act meant to attack face. This requires an explication of the concept of face and, in turn, the subsidiary concept of being "on the record." A model shows how face functions in a social context and how it can be maintained in a group without reference to any objective feature of the group's members. The model gives it a structure different from a simple ranking of people, as it is usually talked about. Members' faces can be regarded as ranges of values rather than exact values. The model is stated in a context of individuals interacting, but applies to relations among nations and delimits the possible hegemonic structures in an international system. Finally, the chapter points out the importance of common

1. McGinn (1971) refined the concept to analyze the U.S. dilemma in Vietnam.

knowledge of the actions that set the hierarchy of face and its relationship to communication in a group.

Insults That Led to War

An affront provoked Sweden's entry into the Thirty Years' War. In February 1629, King Gustav Adolf sent emissaries to Lubeck to observe peace discussions between Denmark and Austria. Germany's Albrecht von Wallenstein suspected an intrigue and induced the emperor to expel the Swedes from the country. King Gustav's resentment erupted in a memorandum to his chancellor listing his reasons for going to war. Number one was "that the commissioners at the Lubeck conference have declared us enemies of the Emperor. The reputation of a king will not allow them to treat us unjustly and disgracefully" (Charveriat 1878, 454; Ringmar 1993). The following June, Swedish troops landed on the northern shores of Germany.

On June 1, 1812, U.S. president James Madison called on Congress to declare war on Britain. He cited five British offenses: the impressment of American sailors, interference with shipping within American coastal territory, seizure of American cargo on the high seas, declaration of blockades against American trade with European nations, and instigation of Indian raids in the Northwest. The issues of seizing cargo and encouraging raids were objective and substantial. However, the other items on Madison's list are in the realm of honor: violations of U.S. coastal sovereignty and the British presumption that the United States had to respect a blockade on the pure basis of a British decree, when the Royal Navy was not able to enforce it and when in fact British merchants themselves were conducting shipping trade. Some historians (e.g., Pratt 1925) have claimed other objective motives for declaring war—the hope of annexing Florida and Canada and expanding into the Northwest—but others have stressed honor as a cause of the war (Risjord 1961). Many Americans viewed the impressment of sailors as the greatest affront of those on Madison's list and the main justification for fighting. In April 1809, the editor of the *Baltimore Whig* wrote, "I trust that no treaty [on trade] will be concluded without their previous release and an agreement that the flag shall henceforth protect the seamen; short of these we ought to be despised for regarding trade as everything—honor and the blood of our citizens as nothing. Next Congress must act like men." In October 1811, as negotiations failed, John Quincy Adams wrote to Secretary of War William Eustis, "The practice of impressment is the only ineradicable wound, which, if persisted in, can terminate not otherwise than by war." When the time came to fight, he said, the country should "declare a war explicitly and

distinctly upon that single point, and never afterwards make peace without a specific article renouncing forever the principles of impressing from any American vessel" (quoted in Zimmerman 1925.)

In December 1851, the British representative in Rangoon, a Royal Navy commodore, began a campaign of rudeness toward the local governor. Refusing to visit the governor's residence, he insisted that the governor present himself on the commodore's ship anchored in the harbor. The commodore sent emissaries to the governor, choosing lower officials who demanded an immediate audience without the required protocol. The commodore had been acting largely on his own, but his superiors in London, either fearing a loss of face or sensing an opportunity, demanded that the king of Burma, Pagan Min, express regret for his country's "insult" in not receiving the delegation and pay a large compensation for wrongs that British merchants were claimed to have suffered in Rangoon. The king had given up hope of compromise and refused to answer. In April, British troops landed in Burma (Woodman 1962; Aung 1965; Bruce 1973).

In the 1856 "Incident of the Lurcha Arrow," Chinese police seized a rice-trading vessel near Canton and detained the crew, claiming that they wanted to question a sailor about his father's activities as a pirate. The ship was Chinese owned, but its registry was British, and the boarding party allegedly took down the Union Jack. This act struck the British consul as an "outrage . . . a gross insult to our flag." The emperor's high commissioner was willing to hand the sailors back, but not in the public manner that the consul demanded, and he would not admit to lowering the ensign or apologize for it. British forces seized Chinese forts, ransacked the commissioner's house, and occupied Canton. The conflict escalated into the Second China War of 1856–60 (Bonnersmith and Lumby 1954; Costin 1937).

The spiral of affronts that led to the British invasion of Ethiopia in 1868 was a relatively pure example of insults provoking a war, since, according to documents, the British government had no desire to be there except to "vindicate the honor of the Crown," in Queen Victoria's words. In 1862, King Tewodros had sent letters to the English queen and to Napoleon III expressing his friendship as a fellow Christian monarch and requesting an official acceptance of his gifts (Asfaw, Appleyard, and Ullendorff eds. 1979.) For Britain or France to do this would have been a facsimile of diplomatic recognition. The French reply was noncommittal on the King's request and disrespectful in its form, as it was signed by Napoleon's foreign minister, rather than Napoleon himself. The British Foreign Office behaved worse, failing to answer in spite of Tewodros's repeated inquiries. Tewodros expelled the French consul and locked the British

consul in chains. He put off responding to British messages and later detained a delegation seeking the consul's release. The British foreign secretary declared, with inadvertent irony, "we rest our position there on what is vaguely called prestige. . . . we cannot accept an insult from an uncivilized power and merely say we are sorry for it." A British expedition seized Tewodros's fortress, and to avoid the humiliation of capture the king took his own life (Ram 1985; Rubenson 1976).

Some wars were fostered by faked or magnified insults, such as the de Lome Letter of 1897. The Spanish minister in Washington, D.C., wrote to a friend in Havana that President McKinley was "weak and a bidder for the admiration of the crowd." He revealed that Spain's negotiating stance had been insincere. Supporters of Cuban independence stole the letter and passed it to William Randolph Hearst's New York newspaper, the *Journal*, which published an inflammatory translation under the banner "WORST INSULT TO THE UNITED STATES IN ITS HISTORY." U.S. opinion was ready for a war with Spain, and the explosion on the battleship *Maine* a week later set it off (Company's Monchus 1987; Morgan 1963; Offner 1992).

In 1870, the crisis between France and Prussia over Spanish succession had been subsiding when Bismarck received a telegram reporting a chance meeting between the French ambassador and the Prussian king on the boulevard at Ems (fig. 19). He worked over the account to emphasize that the ambassador had placed strong demands on the monarch and the latter had snubbed him, then distributed this to the press (Lord 1966). Bismarck's trick provoked France and Germany into war. Emile Ollivier, France's chief minister just before the Franco-Prussian War, was described by Lord Lyons, the British ambassador in Paris, as "particularly alive to the importance of not exposing France to the appearance of being slighted; in fact he would not conceal from me that in the present circumstances a public rebuff from Prussia would be fatal— *'un echec* (he said) *c'est la guerre'*" (Ollivier 1913). On the Prussian side, the influential theorist and teacher Heinrich von Treitschke later wrote, "If the flag of the state is insulted, it is the duty of the state to demand satisfaction, and if the satisfaction is not forthcoming, to declare war, however trivial the occasion may appear, for the state must strain every nerve to preserve for itself the respect which it enjoys in the international system" (1916). The war was the seventh most lethal in modern times, costing almost 200,000 lives.

In 1889, the French lieutenant governor of Senegal was negotiating over port tariffs in Dahomey. He claimed treaty rights for France on the grounds that the documents had been ratified by the French Republic. In fact, the treaties were forgeries, and Kondo, the heir apparent to the throne of Dahomey, made



Fig. 19. Prince Leopold's renunciation of the Spanish throne is announced in the Cologne daily paper. Kaiser Wilhelm and the French ambassador, Count Benedetti, discuss it on the promenade at Ems. The chance meeting led to the Franco-Prussian War. (From Fechner 1890.)

the rejoinder that since France was now evidently under the government of the young and rash, it might be better off returning to a monarchy. He brought up the lieutenant governor's failure to send a message of sympathy on the king's recent death, and forced him to sign as a witness to a document declaring that the treaties were invalid. The French official assembled forces and seized the port, a move that failed militarily but led to a large-scale intervention and the fall of the African kingdom (Hargreaves 1985).

Some prewar moves combined a change in the objective conditions with the element of an insult, one example being the archduke's assassination at Sarajevo in 1914. In their private exchanges, German and Austrian leaders talked of "the outrage," of "settling accounts," and of "teaching Serbia a lesson" (Albertini 1952–57), phrases suggestive more of national honor than *realpolitik*. The re-

moval of the archduke made a difference politically, but its insult component had a major effect in propelling nations into World War I.

In July 1956, the United States unexpectedly rescinded its offer to Egypt to finance the Aswan Dam. Aiming to undermine President Nasser's leadership of the Arab nations, John Foster Dulles publicly questioned "Egyptian readiness and ability to concentrate its economic resources upon this vast construction program" (Neff 1981, 262). The president of the World Bank compared Nasser's humiliation to that of someone applying for a personal loan and reading in next day's paper that he would be refused for bad credit. The following week Nasser gave a speech lasting nearly three hours, cataloging Western abuses of the Arab world and finally announcing the nationalization of the Suez Canal. His move sparked the 1956 Suez War.

In August 1985, the secretary-general of the West African Economic Community, who was a Malian, gave an interview to a popular African magazine. He contradicted the claims of Burkina Faso's leader, Col. Thomas Sankara, about an embezzlement scandal in the organization. The Burkinabe leader called the Malian's words insulting and disrespectful and expelled him from the country. In the view of several commentators, this tension led the two countries into the "Christmas War" the following December ("Avant le Procès" 1985).

The 1990–91 U.S. confrontation with Iraq before the 1991 Gulf War involved sustained personal invective. George Bush referred to Saddam Hussein as the "mad dictator" and "the rapist of Kuwait" and repeatedly compared him with Hitler. Indeed, he asserted, the Iraqi leader was worse, because Hitler had never seized hostages. Bush referred to his adversary as "Sad-m" instead of "Sa-dam," a mispronunciation that was deliberate, according to a White House source (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 1991.) Saddam Hussein was more muted, but on occasions referred to Bush as a "liar" and an "enemy of God." The exchange lasted up to the start of the war, and even as bombs were falling on his country, Hussein continued to complain about the language Bush was using against a fellow head of state (*Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, January 17, 1991, pp. 17–19).

Honor versus Face in the Dynamics of Insults

Some of these examples recall the pattern of honor, where the insult is a challenge that calls for a violent response. That explanation seems to cover the War of 1812, the Ems telegram, the assassination at Sarajevo, and the Christmas War between Mali and Burkina Faso. Other prewar insults do not fit the pattern. A challenge to honor is supposed to come from a party of equal rank—someone

with honor does not challenge someone without it²—but some states issued insults to others they saw as of lesser status. Britain viewed Burma and China as inferior, as the United States did Egypt, and the insults seemed to be their way of saying that the others were not equals. Saddam Hussein repeatedly complained that Bush was not treating him as a bona fide leader (e.g., *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, November 1, 1990). He saw Bush's insults as sending a message that he would not be treated as an equal and he had better get used to it. Another discrepancy with honor is that some of the insults were directed upward in the hierarchy. A peasant who challenges a noble can be ignored, but some insults are taken all the more deeply when they come from below. The British foreign minister would not tolerate an offense from Ethiopia, an "uncivilized power." It will be seen that both of these practices fit the concept of face.

The Definition of an Insult

A good way to define a typical speech act is to specify what it intends the receiver to believe or, in some cases, to do (chap. 3). The following approach works well for insults: an insult is meant to generate a certain belief in the receiver: the receiver is to believe simply that this very act of insulting is meant to lower the receiver's face. An insult need not say anything in particular about the target. Just as a challenge can take an arbitrary form as long as it is hard to mistake, an insult is whatever the context allows or the culture specifies through convention or symbolism as conveying that intention.

DEFINITION: A (prototypical) *insult* is a communicative act whose meaning is that the sender intends the act to seriously diminish the receiver's face.

Each of the definition's elements are considered now to show that they apply to the ideal concept of an insult. After that, the question will be why a simple message of an intention to diminish someone's face can actually do that. This will come out in the discussion and in the subsequent game model.

2. Aristotle (translated by Thomson 1976) divided insults into three types; one of these, often translated as "insolence," was claiming superiority to someone through an insult. In the culture of the antebellum United States the distinction might be expressed by the kind of violence used. A gentleman would duel with a social equal but take a horsewhip to an inferior (Greenberg 1996). Stewart (1994) states that insults between unequals are relevant to "vertical honor," but in this book, this would be called face rather than honor. The difference is more than semantic.

The Definition Is for a Prototypical Insult

The definition is for a “prototypical” insult, meaning that it includes the conditions that are typically expected. Many insults, in extended senses of the word, violate the definition. Sometimes an insult is not communicated to its target, and sometimes it is not intended to lower the other’s face or not intended as a message at all. In 1979, Joe Clark, head of Canada’s Progressive Conservative Party, made a hasty election promise to consider moving the Canadian embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Leyton-Brown 1981). When he became prime minister, Arab countries and the Palestine Liberation Organization threatened economic reprisals if he followed through. One of his cabinet ministers remarked that “their bark is worse than their bite.” This was an unfortunate phrase, as many Arab insults use the dog motif. It was an insult, but not a prototypical one since it was not intentional. Another episode occurred in 1992, when President Bush’s nominee for ambassador to Ireland revealed during his confirmation hearings that he misunderstood some basic facts of Irish politics. The *Irish Times* of Dublin labeled the choice an insult to the nation. Even when one does not intend to attack the receiver’s face, one can insult in an extended sense by not taking proper care to protect it, in the Canadian case, or by unintentionally revealing one’s true opinion, in the case of the ambassador to Ireland.

It is common for words to have a full-fledged usage along with wider meanings—this happens especially with emotionally loaded words like *insult*. Speakers try to exploit their impact in contexts where they do not quite belong. George Lakoff (1987) calls one particular pattern of allied meanings a *radial concept*. It has a hub (or prototypical) meaning along with a group of subsidiary meanings generated by relaxing different conditions in the definition. Lakoff’s example is “mother.” Prototypically, my mother is the person who gave birth to me, gave me half her genes, cares for me, and is married to my father. However, there are many varieties of mothers that violate one or more of these conditions: step-mothers, biological mothers of adopted children, adoptive mothers, and so on. For every criterion, there is some kind of mother who lacks it, so one cannot produce even a minimal set of conditions that qualify someone as a generic mother. The only way to produce a definition is to specify the hub, then list the subtypes.

A definition counts as the prototypical definition because its conditions are what we expect, so features outside the prototype can be recognized through the “but” test (Lakoff 1987).

The insult is intentional:	I insulted him, but I didn't mean to. *I insulted him, but I meant to.
The insult is communicated to the receiver:	I insulted him, but he never found out about it. *I insulted him, but he found out about it.

The asterisked sentences seem to call for “and” instead of “but,” and this tells us that our expectations are being crossed, that insults that are intentional or communicated to the receiver are the norm. These two conditions are in the prototypical definition. Other conditions found by the “but” test may not be in the definition but are fairly direct consequences of it. Two examples are that insults typically threaten the receiver’s self-esteem and that they arouse hostile emotions.

Insults Attack Face

Consider two situations:

1. A husband tells his wife not to try to change a fuse, that he will handle it. She finds his comment demeaning.
2. A professor tells a student that he did poorly on a course paper. The student takes offense.

One can imagine that the husband’s remark qualifies as an insult, while the professor’s does not. (The husband is not delivering a prototypical insult, since he probably has no intention to diminish face, but it could be an insult in an extended sense.) The crucial element is face. Event (2) is not an insult because the professor’s criticism is consistent with a role that the student has accepted, and so it is not attacking the student’s claimed face.

An Insult Needs No Semantic Meaning and Can Be Delivered outside a Language

Some authors have defined an insult as a negative statement about another party (e.g., Stice 1973; Flynn 1977), but it is hard to specify what negative features one is attributing by hanging up the phone on someone, or refusing to shake hands, or not receiving the individual as a foreign visitor at the presidential palace. The premier English sexual insult is indecipherable in its semantic content, since its

grammar violates the normal rules.³ Sometimes it is put into words that explicitly say something negative about the target, but that could not be its essence as an insult, since the same idea could be put in a noninsulting way.

The essence of an insult is not what it literally says, but the intention it communicates. In 1956, President Nasser remarked that he was surprised not by Dulles's refusal to finance the Aswan Dam but "by the insulting attitude with which the refusal was declared" (Neff 1981; Jonsson 1991). An insult is intended to attack face, and the receiver is to believe nothing more than that the sender has that intention in delivering the insult. In theory a prosaic insulter who could think of nothing better might say, "I hereby attempt to diminish your face." Insults are unusual among communicative acts in this aspect: that recognizing their intention is the same as (not just "leads to") recognizing their meaning. With an assertion, in contrast, the definition of a communicative act (chap. 3) requires that it involve first, the utterance: X's making a statement to Y, like "Today is Monday"; second, the recognition of the intention: Y's recognizing that X intends to thereby have Y believe that X believes it is Monday; and third, the consequent belief: Y's believing, based on that recognition, that X believes it is Monday.⁴ Insults combine the second and third parts and make X's intention itself what Y is supposed to believe. The intention is the meaning, and when Y recognizes it, there is no need for further inferences. It follows that an insult needs no semantic content.

Communicating an Intent to Attack Face Is Itself Attacking Face

According to the definition, an insult both expresses an intention to diminish face and tries to carry it out. How could expressing an intention also fulfill it? There are various ways people get face from others: they have their opinions supported, their requests granted, their feelings considered. They also receive face. Possessing face involves, in part, others not trying to threaten one's face. When someone expresses an intention to attack face, this is itself attacking face. It suggests that the insulter will refuse to grant face again in the future, in the same or in other ways, and others who might be watching may follow the precedent that the act is setting. Expressing an intention to attack face is itself attacking face.

3. "Damn you" or "curse you" have respectively God and the speaker as the subject, but "fuck you" is a puzzle. Gregersen (1977) believes that the subject was once the devil.

4. Some analyses of assertions would, at this point, have Y simply believe it is Monday.

For the same reason that stating an intention to attack face is an insult, so is a public declaration that face has been attacked. Some accounts of the Ems telegram have it reporting scurrilous remarks from the French side; in fact it was not much more than an account of how the two parties took offense at each other, with little more about what they said to cause that. Ives (Ollivier 1913) paraphrased the attitude of French foreign minister Emile Ollivier: "In Gramont's eyes the insult consisted in the false pretense that there had been an insult." Convincing the world that there had been an insult would have had consequences for face even if no insult had been delivered.

How to Recognize an Insult

By the definition, an insult must be recognizable as such. One way would be to declare that one's remark is an insult when one makes it. As far as the definition is concerned, one could say simply, "I hereby insult you," and nothing more. However, this does not work, at least not in English. How does the definition account for this? One explanation was proposed by Leiber (1979) who points out that there are certain words that name speech acts but cannot themselves be used as performatives. "I hint that . . ." "I insinuate that . . ." or "I provoke you by saying that . . ." or "I insult you by saying that . . ." seems odd. The reason, he argues, is that the meanings of these words require that their illocutionary points be deniable, but including the assertion that one is hinting, provoking, and so on, makes them undeniable. They are "illocutionary suicide," in Leiber's view; one might as well say, "I lie to you that . . .". Insults must be deniable, and this explains why they are often exaggerated or ridiculous—everyone knows that the receiver does not literally "look like a horse's ass."

The present definition gives no role to deniability. On the contrary, as a communicative act, an insult is meant to be understood. One must distinguish denying the content of an insult from denying that an insult is being sent. The content can be ridiculous and deniable, but the fact of an insult is not. The communicative meaning is, according to the definition, not that someone actually looks like a horse's ass but that the sender wants to diminish the receiver's face, and after such a remark there would be no denying that. The present account of insults does not preclude "I insult you" in theory, so it is less powerful than Leiber's argument would be if his went through. It simply says that a language adopts certain conventions of insulting, and in English this phrase is not one of them. The conventions are signals that one is delivering an insult. One is the wild exaggeration of a negative trait. Another is the breaking of a taboo by referring to an improper bodily topic in connection with the receiver. Another is

to put a negative message in terms of a personal characteristic: to claim that the other is a liar rather than that he or she lied. Saying only that someone lied allows that there is a solvable problem to work on, but saying the other's words are generally not believable, that his or her personality is defective, is associated with the kind of longer-term disrespect required by the definition of face. Suggesting insanity, as Bush did about Saddam before the Gulf War, does the same. The point is not whether the sender believes these assertions; they are conventionalized signals of the intention.

Face depends on the target's social role, so not granting the target the verbal concomitants of that role is one way to make the insult recognizable. Before the 1991 Gulf War, Bush would not refer to Saddam Hussein as "President Hussein." As in his 1984 television debate with Congresswoman Ferraro, whom he continually called "Mrs. Ferraro," he used the name without the title. The message got through: Saddam constantly emphasized that he was not receiving the respect due a national leader. On his part, Saddam also claimed a discrepancy between the actions of his adversaries and their proper roles. Bush, Baker, and Cheney were going around the world hat in hand for war funds, he stated: "Imagine a state that claims to be the biggest, yet it is begging like street jugglers" (*Federal Broadcast Information Service*, November 30, 1990).

Another way to make an insult recognizable is to abandon the politeness formulas of the language. A criticism or a demand can be a threat to face, and polite communication remedies this by depersonalizing it, by phrasing it in a way that separates it from the individual. In many languages, one politeness strategy is to use the passive voice and thereby omit the agent as an object of criticism (Brown and Levinson 1987). A genteel street sign would read "Spitting is not allowed," instead of "You must not spit." In diplomacy, one depersonalizes a criticism by blaming the national government rather than its leader. Doing the opposite signals an insult, and Bush continually made Saddam Hussein the actor. His opening statement at one news conference (*Washington Post*, December 1, 1990) had 14 points where he could construe his adversary as impersonal (as Iraq or the Iraqi government) or personal ("Saddam" or "the Iraqi dictator.") Ten of the 14 were personalized, and the choice was systematic: negative statements tended to name Saddam ("Saddam's violation of international law"), while hopes for better behavior were put impersonally ("We seek Iraq's immediate and unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait"). Bush's January 16 announcement of the start of the war named Saddam Hussein 20 times (Newhouse 1991). By ignoring the politeness formulas that protect the receiver's face, these statements became recognizable as insults.

Definition of Face

Roughly, face is everyone's expectation about how everyone else will treat the individual. Unfortunately the exact definition must be longer to include the idea that it is a hierarchy. It is defined here as a pattern of behavior that allows a certain measurement scale, as a pattern of deference that can be represented by numbers. Since it is representable by numbers, face is a hierarchy, that is, deference cannot go in circles. Other conditions are that face regulates who accedes to whom, that it is determined by past deference behavior, and that it is kept in place by the common belief that the group is using it to coordinate deference.

DEFINITION: A group *exhibits a hierarchy of face* if its members can be assigned scale values whose relative magnitudes determine the direction of the deference shown in on-the-record interactions in the group. It is also required that present deference to someone in the group is determined by past precedents of deference shown to the person, and that the members expect their current behavior to set such a pattern for the future.

Some associated terms can be added, consistent with Goffman's definitions. The scale values that determine the deference shown to members are their *degrees of face*. If, other things equal, someone would have lost face but some event or action prevents it, the individual *saves face*.⁵ If someone saves face in a particular way by skillfully acting as if nothing has happened so as to diminish the common belief that face was lost, he or she has shown *poise*.

To count as face, the deference must be based on past precedent and motivated by the precedent it sets for the future. If I let someone talk more because I want to hear that person's opinion, face is not in operation.⁶ Also, the precedent must involve behavior across the group, so that a regularity involving the interactions of only two individuals would not be face.

On versus off the Record

Face deals with the superficial. A folk story from New England tells of a young swell who comes into the blacksmith shop to waste time and chat. Horseshoes,

5. McGinn (1971) makes this point. It is similar to Brown and Levinson's concept of "face-threatening acts" (1987).

6. In an extended meaning, face can arise from an individual's actions alone, when the person displays competence or power or proper behavior. The United States lost face when the 1980 Iranian hostage rescue failed, and a country that violates a treaty is also said to lose face. These events determine the group's expectation on how to treat a party in the future, but they are not based on precedents of this treatment. They are analyzed as prestige in chapter 12.

just out of the forge, sit cooling in a row on hooks. He picks one up and quickly drops it. "Hot?" the blacksmith asks. "Nope," the young man answers, "just doesn't take me long to feel a horseshoe."

An element in the definition of face, and therefore of insults, is being "on the record." To say something *on the record* is to perform the communication in a way that generates common belief in the fact that one is saying it. Recall that common belief means that each person believes it, believes that the others believe it, ad infinitum. The definition given here is put in terms of general communicative acts, including symbolic messages, rather than pure speech. A broader common usage is that an on-the-record communication is one where any can render it common belief in the future if desired. This sense of the term takes account of the fact that memories fade or that important parties may not have been present, but a "record" can be produced to inform the group of what happened. Using the phrase "public event" of chapter 5, saying something on the record means deliberately making one's communicative act a public event.

DEFINITION: A communicative act is performed *on the record* when it is meant to generate common belief in the fact that it was performed (or in a broader sense, when it allows members of the group to render it common belief over time, if they wish).

Suppose a sender *S* leaves a note for a receiver *R* and that *R* reads it. Each knows the note might have been lost on the way, and in fact each has common knowledge of this. We then have a communicative act but one that is not on the record. In contrast, if *S* met *R* directly and conveyed the message, each could see that the other understood the situation. The event would be communicated on-the-record.

The strategic importance of common belief in a communication arises when there is also common belief that the person is trustworthy and in a position to know, which is assumed in most communication situations. In that case the proposition being asserted (not just the fact that it was asserted) becomes commonly believed. A phrase that fits this context is to "put" something on the record, which carries the suggestion that one's communication is convincing.

Some formalism can clarify the distinction between simply communicating and putting something on the record (under the assumption that one's communications are commonly known to be trustworthy). Let *p* be the proposition, and $B_R p$ mean that the intended receiver believes *p*. Also let $I_S p$ mean that sender *S* intends to bring about *p*. These terms can be conjoined—for example, $I_S B_R p$ means that *S* intends that *R* believe *p*. The performance of a convincing communicative act produces $B_R p$ (since the communication is convincing),

also $I_S B_R p$ and $I_S B_R I_S B_R p$ (since the sender intends the receiver to believe it, and believe it by virtue of recognizing the sender's intention). Putting p on the record means all of these, but it also means $B_S B_R p$, and $B_R B_S B_R p$, and so on.

The strategic point of staying "off the record" is that one's communication cannot be used with confidence in future situations that require higher levels of knowledge of it. If a potentially embarrassing event has happened to someone, that party can display poise, and the onlookers can avoid commenting. Everyone may recognize the event but be unsure that everyone else recognized it. An off-the-record event is usually harder to narrate to third parties. The young man in the blacksmith's shop claimed he was just feeling the horseshoe. The foolishness of his act may have been obvious to anyone present, but when he avoided admitting it, he avoided reinforcing the higher orders of belief. If you tell me that my new suit looks ugly, then we both know what you meant, know that we know what you meant, and so on. But if you say haltingly that my suit "certainly has an unusual color and design," then you are staying somewhat off the record. I know that you dislike it but I am less sure that you know that I got your meaning, and as we ascend to higher levels of beliefs our confidence trails off.

Just why a face-threatening event requires common belief in its occurrence is illustrated by the model of the next section.

A Model of a Hierarchy of Face

This section presents a game model that yields some of the important elements in the definition of face. The group confronts a series of conflicts, which are resolved using a scale that determines deference. Past deference sets the current scale, and current actions influence deference for the future. The game has a large number of players who interact at times $t = 1, 2, 3, \dots$. At each time, they are paired randomly, the possible matchings being equiprobable and independent from one period to the next. Each pair of players is randomly, independently and equiprobably, assigned roles in the game of figure 20. As the figure shows, player A has the opportunity to Impose on B, which means to take some kind of liberty that violates deferential treatment. The alternative to A Imposing on B is A Deferring to B. Player B can Acquiesce or Resist the Imposition. Acquiescing carries a cost to B alone, while Resisting means a conflict with a greater cost that is mutual. At any point players have common knowledge of who was matched with whom and how they acted. A player aims to maximize the sum of his or her payoffs, with future payoffs discounted by a factor δ in $(0, 1)$ —a payoff of x units received next period is evaluated now as δx , received two periods from now it is equivalent to $\delta^2 x$, and so on.

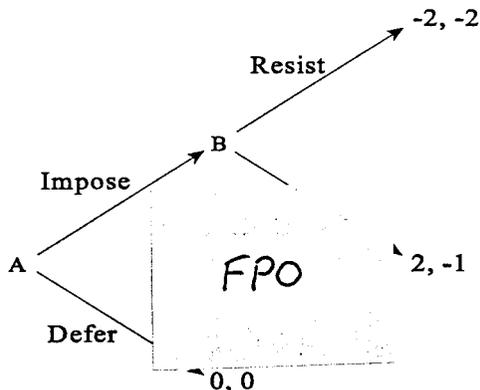


Fig. 20. Stage game for the basic model of face

If this game were played once, it would have a unique subgame perfect Nash equilibrium, where player A Imposes and B Acquiesces.⁷ As a repeated game, for any discount factor one subgame perfect Nash equilibrium is to choose this outcome every time. The equilibrium is an uninteresting one and is “faceless” since past precedents are ignored.

THE FACELESS EQUILIBRIUM: At every matching, the A player Imposes and the B player Acquiesces.

The next equilibrium has players paying attention to the past in a way suggestive of face. It divides them into an arbitrary number of categories ordered highest to lowest—here there will be seven groups. Anticipating the interpretation of the equilibrium, these will be called *face groups*. When two players meet their behavior is determined entirely by their roles as A or B and the two face-groups to which they currently belong. A player X in the role of A will decide whether to Defer or not to a player Y in the role of B, according to a rule $A[f(X), f(Y)]$, where $f(X)$ and $f(Y)$ are X and Y’s face groups and the rule A assigns an action, either Defer or Impose. Similarly, the B player’s rule at the equilibrium will have the form $B[f(X), f(Y)]$, assigning Resist or Acquiesce. Both rules depend only on the current face groups, so at this equilibrium one’s history is summed up in one’s face group.

Membership in a face group is not permanent—players can move up and down. Suppose that two players are matched; one Imposes and the other Acquiesces. If the Imposer is lower on the hierarchy than the Acquiescer, possibly

7. A subgame perfect Nash equilibrium is one with utility-maximizing behavior even at points in the game that players are sure they will not reach.

the Imposer will gain face and the Acquiescer will lose it.⁸ At the equilibrium to be constructed, the new pair of faces will be a function of the old pair of faces plus the actions taken at the matching. The rule for a “shift” is $S[f(X), f(Y)]$, which assigns an ordered pair of faces to the players in the A and B roles, after an Imposition and an Acquiescence. In general, the resulting pair may be different or the same, but it is assumed here that if there is no Imposition and Acquiescence, the faces stay the same.

Behavior in the game is thus influenced by the ordering of the face groups, their initial membership, and the three functions A , B , and S . These factors are not given exogenously; they are part of an equilibrium. The particular equilibrium depends on how one specifies them. One way, which will be termed the *complete-order* equilibrium, says that A players Defer to B players who are higher up but not to B's at or below their own face level. Players in the role of B Resist only those lower down.

$$A[X, Y] = \text{Defer, if } f(X) < f(Y),$$

$$= \text{Impose, otherwise.}$$

$$B[Y, X] = \text{Resist, for } f(Y) > f(X),$$

$$= \text{Acquiesce, otherwise.}$$

Here “<” and “>” mean “lower than” and “higher than” in the order of the face-groups. The two functions A and B are linked in a simple way at equilibrium: no A player would Impose on someone who would Resist. The equilibrium's rule of shifting is that if someone higher Acquiesces to someone lower down, the two switch faces:

$$S[X, Y] = (f(X), f(Y)), \quad \text{if } f(X) < f(Y),$$

$$= (f(Y), f(X)), \quad \text{otherwise.}$$

(A less drastic rule could be used that moves them up or down one level only, or only with some probability, but this one is simpler and should not change the

8. This idea is reminiscent of Rashevsky's analysis of status (1947). When two individuals interact the higher-status person passes some status to the lower in the group's eyes. Status was continuous and Rashevsky derived a distribution for the number of people at each value. He drew a parallel with the distribution of energy in a gas with molecular collisions and suggested that if the total status is constant before and after an interaction, then the distribution of status in the population should follow Boltzmann's law.

qualitative conclusions.) It is assumed that at the start of the game there are seven face-groups of equal size (it is assumed that n is divisible by 7). At the equilibrium, they will stay equal because players will not move among the face groups. Even if they did, the shifting rule would keep the group sizes constant.

THE COMPLETE-ORDER EQUILIBRIUM: For the payoffs of figure 20, the following is a subgame perfect equilibrium for any discount factor $\delta \geq .824$. At the start players are divided into seven ordered face groups of equal size. At a pairing, the A player Imposes on the B player if and only if the B player has an equal or lower face; B Acquiesces if and only if A has an equal or higher face; if (contrary to the equilibrium) a higher player Acquiesces to a lower one, the two switch face levels. (The proof is in appendix C.)

Subgame perfection requires that if a player of higher face is Imposed upon, that player should have no incentive to Acquiesce, and the form of the shifting rule guarantees this. Acquiescing means losing face and will cost the player in future interactions. To provide the incentive to stay with the equilibrium, Acquiescing must be more costly than a fight. The higher-face B player's decision to Acquiesce (and hence the A player's decision to Impose) is set by the magnitude of the immediate loss of one unit of utility in the stage game (payoff -2 versus -1), compared to the longer-term discounted loss occasioned by moving to a lower face group. Since the latter is a future-oriented consideration, the future must have some minimum importance, so the discount factor is bounded below.

The two equilibria so far can be compared by their benefit to the players. If the discount factor $\delta = .9$, the simple "faceless" equilibrium gives every player a total discounted payoff $.5/(1 - .9) = 5$. In the complete-order equilibrium, one's payoff depends on where one is in the facial hierarchy. For the seven face-groups, the discounted expected payoffs are, lowest to highest, -3.57 , -1.43 , $.714$, 2.86 , 5 , 7.14 , and 9.29 . Not surprisingly they are increasing, and each is at least one unit higher than the previous payoff, ensuring that the higher player will fight rather than switch. The average utility is 2.86 , which is lower than the faceless equilibrium, and only those with the two highest faces prefer the complete-order arrangement.

In this equilibrium, players' faces were constant, but one can construct another where they change during play.

THE IMPOSE-ON-ONE-LEVEL-UP EQUILIBRIUM: For discount factors in the range $.660 \leq \delta \leq .789$, the following is a subgame perfect equilibrium. At the start, players are in seven ordered face groups of equal size. At any pairing, the A player Imposes on the B player if and only if the latter is no more than one level

higher; B Acquiesces if and only if A is no more than one level lower; if a higher-face player Acquiesces to a lower one, the two switch face levels.

An A player who has the luck of getting paired with someone exactly one level higher will Impose, receive Acquiescence, and move to the higher level. For $\delta = .75$, the expected payoffs from being in each face group are $-.75, -.23, .58, 1.43, 2.27, 3.05, 3.36$, for an average of 1.39. At each face level, the next level down is less than one unit lower, so a player prefers to drop a level rather than Resist. However, a player would Resist someone two levels down. Subgame perfection requires that future-oriented considerations should exert some influence, but not too much or a one-level-up player will not Acquiesce, so now the discount factor is bounded above and below. This group has mobility. A player's face engages in a random walk with a reflection at each endpoint. There is less deference—the probability of deference between a random pair is $15/49$, compared to $21/49$ in the complete-order case, although the two are not really comparable since the ranges of possible discount factors do not overlap.

Patterns of Deference in a Face-Based Society

So far equilibria with three different deference patterns have been constructed, and one might wonder what patterns are possible. This can be answered, assuming a shifting rule that says, as before, that when a higher person Acquiesces to a lower one, they switch faces. For a function that gives an A player's responses, we can define a *deference graph* whose points are the face groups and whose lines go from one point to another, $f_i \rightarrow f_j$, if and only if the function tells the former group to defer to the latter. At equilibrium, the response of the B player follows immediately from this graph. Figure 21 shows the deference graphs for the two equilibria that involve one face. According to the impose-on-one-level-up graph, A players at level 3 are willing to Impose on B players in face groups 1, 2, 3, and 4 but not on 5, 6, or 7, and so on.

What graphs are possible as equilibria? A deference graph must be a *semi-order*. This is one that can be generated by assigning to each of its points a closed interval on a line, such that in the graph $f_i \rightarrow f_j$ if and only if in the line the f_i interval lies entirely below the f_j interval; it is also required that no interval contain another (Fishburn 1985).⁹ All the deference graphs must have the form of

9. Semiorders arise in the theory of psychological measurement. The partial order might be one on sensory stimuli, where an arrow indicates that one sound is *noticeably* louder than the other or one color is noticeably brighter. Our sensory organs are not perfect discriminators, so indifference will not be transitive—if sound A seems the same as B, and B the same as C, possibly A will seem louder than C.

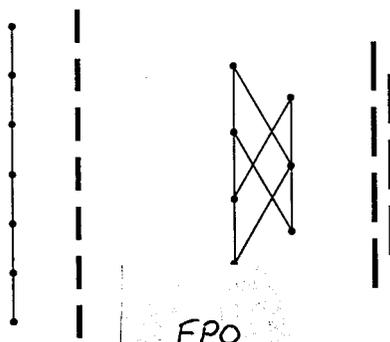


Fig. 21. Deference in the complete-order equilibrium (*left*) and impose-on-one-level-up equilibrium (*right*). Two representations of each equilibrium are given. A face-group commands deference from another if there is a downward path from the former's node to the latter's in the graph or, equivalently, if its interval lies entirely above the latter's in the interval order.

a semiorder, since at an equilibrium a player will Impose on someone else if and only if the latter is one utility unit or more down. This requirement can be reproduced by assigning to f_i the interval on the line is $[u_i - \frac{1}{2}, u_i + \frac{1}{2}]$, where u_i is the discounted expected utility at the equilibrium for a player who has face level f_i . This gives two ways to think about a hierarchy of face. In one, an individual's face is measured by *an exact number*, the expected utility of being in the face group. One person defers to another as long as the other is *far enough* above. The other way measures someone's face as *a range*, where one defers to another only if the latter's range is *entirely above* on the face scale. The comparison is shown in figure 21.¹⁰

If the number of face groups is small, all possible semiorders can be generated,¹¹ using a theorem of Luce (1956) that a partial order is a semiorder if and only if it does not contain certain subgraphs.¹² The partial orders on a given number of points were constructed and examined by a computer routine, and

10. Another way to portray semiorder is in a higher-dimensional space. The elements are assigned coordinates so that one ranks higher in the semiorder if and only if it is higher on all dimensions. Rabinovitch (1978) proves that it is possible to find such a representation in a space of three dimensions or fewer.

11. These intervals are all of equal size. Scott and Suppes (1958) proved that restricting the intervals to a constant size still allows one to represent any finite semiorder.

12. Often it is easier to understand a theory by considering what it rules out. One excluded pattern has group w deferring to x , and y deferring to z , and that is all. The other has a vertical chain of $w \rightarrow x \rightarrow y$ along with a fourth group that gives or receives no deference. It is impossible to set up intervals on a line whose positions reproduce these patterns.

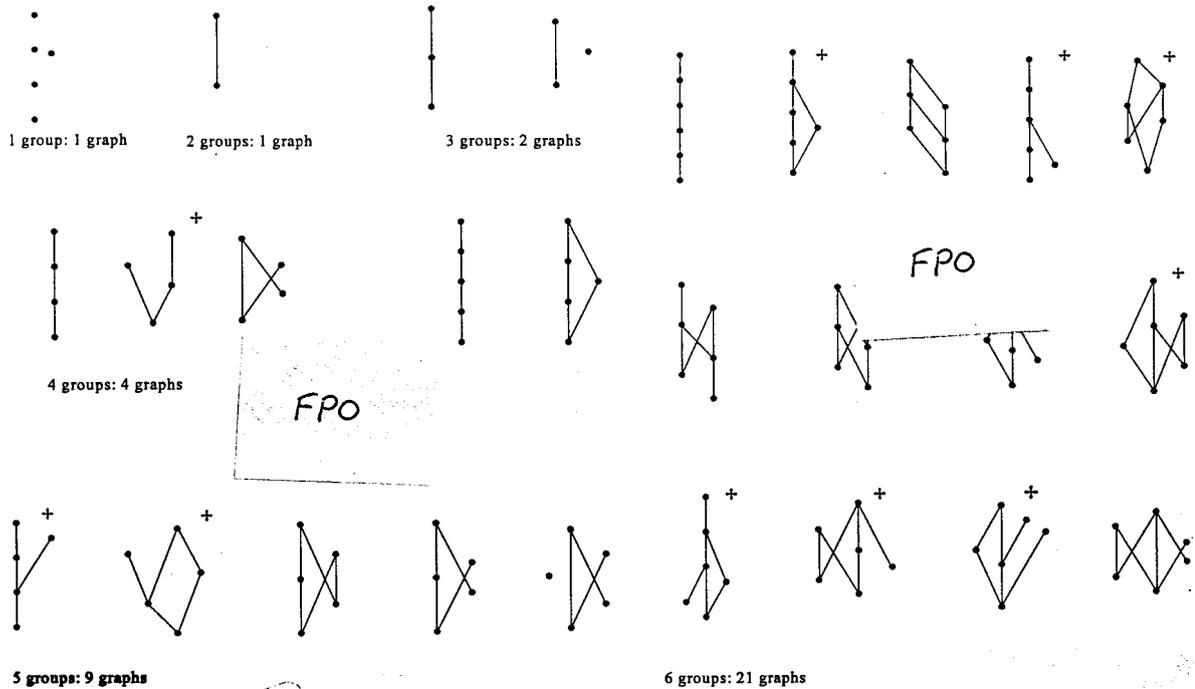


Fig. 22. The possible deferece graphs for one to six groups are these semiorders plus the top-to-bottom reversals of those with vertical asymmetry (marked †). One group commands deferece from another if there is a downward path from the former to the latter. The height of the group indicates its face ranking.

those that contain the forbidden graphs were eliminated. Another restriction was added to reduce the number of cases: there should be no two face groups that are symmetrical with each other in the graph. Such groups would be indistinguishable vis-à-vis the deference patterns of the whole society, and in effect they would be the same face group. Thus, for example, the three-group society with one group at the top and two groups that defer to it was excluded since the two groups are one as far as face is concerned. The possible deference graphs with six face groups are shown in figure 22. They are drawn so that the vertical dimension gives their representation as a semiorder.¹³ There are 21 of them, compared with 126 six-element partial orders with the same restriction of no equivalent groups, so the model implies a significant limit on the possible deference structures. It limits the possible structures of an international hierarchy within the model.

Insults and Symbolic Deference in the Model of Face

In the model, interactions were important in themselves and set precedents for future deference. It is also possible that interactions with no innate importance could set precedents. They would represent conventional signals of face or else signals of face that were special to the occasion using focal symbolism. Conventions might be removing one's hat, calling someone by the proper title or not doing so, or delivering a deliberate insult. A variation of the game includes this idea. Players confront two kinds of games, randomly and equiprobably chosen, one of which is of real importance as before and the other symbolic (fig. 23).

Symbolically Imposing would mean violating the rule of politeness, so that the other must decide whether to let it pass or engage in a conflict. The symbolic game has no payoff gains from Symbolically Imposing and Acquiescing. The only real payoffs are the costs of Resisting. Resenting an insult, or getting even, is costly, but at an equilibrium players are still ready to do it for fear of the precedent. A higher discount factor is necessary to maintain the hierarchy of face, because benefit comes only from every second game on the average.

COMPLETE-ORDER EQUILIBRIUM WITH SYMBOLISM: For any discount factor $\delta \geq .903$, the following is a subgame perfect equilibrium. At the start, players are divided into seven ordered face groups of equal size. In the real (symbolic) game, A Imposes (Symbolically Imposes) on B if and only if B is the same face or lower;

13. Inclusion among these graphs is a necessary condition, but nothing here promises that one can construct a deference order of a given graph.

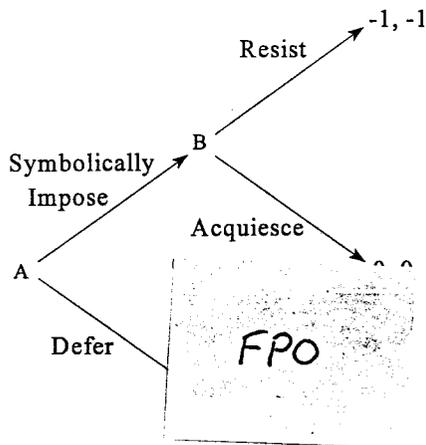


Fig. 23. Stage game for the model of face with symbolism

B Acquiesces if and only if A is the same face or higher. In either game, when a higher-face player Acquiesces to a lower one, the two switch degrees of face.

Face and Gossip

The model shows why the events that determine face must be not only known but to some extent commonly known, and accordingly it shows why being on the record was part of the definition of a prototypical insult. Suppose that the game has been in progress for awhile, that you and I are now matched, and that you have the opportunity to impose. You need to predict how I would respond to an imposition. This would depend on how I compare our two degrees of face, so your decision requires that you know my belief about your degree of face, which depends on the history up to now. Second-level knowledge, not just simple knowledge, of past moves is required. For models with more complicated stage games, especially those where more than two players interact, higher levels would be needed.

Many studies of animal behavior have based dominance on objective, observable attributes. One contribution of biological game models has been to show that the observable attribute can be otherwise irrelevant to the payoffs (Maynard-Smith 1982; Hammerstein and Selten 1994; Kim 1995), explaining why the controlling element might be whether a gorilla has a silver stripe on its back or whether one speckled wood butterfly is in prior possession of a spot of forest sunlight. The present model goes farther and involves no objective traits

at all; it explains the dominance pattern by the players' histories in the game. Still, players must possess higher-level knowledge of the history. This might come from direct observation of the past encounters and observation that others are observing it. It is more accurate, however, to think of it as coming from communication. This requires language, perhaps "gossip"—news about what someone did in his or her confrontations, vis-à-vis the norms and expectations of the group, and also how others reacted to it. Language lets us learn the social order without observation or physical cues. Dunbar (1996) has suggested that a positive loop was a factor in the development of our species: the circulation of "gossip" promoted the development of language, which in turn allowed a more extended social order than occurs in animal species, which in turn generated more communication. The model of the hierarchy of face shows the connection between the group's knowledge of its history and its present social order.

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