

Impression management, face value and decision-making: Chinese and Australian managers

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Abstract:

This paper examines the relationship between the impression management and the ways of decisions making. The findings indicate that the image-related value of face enhancement has a general impact on managers' decision-making behaviors. Based on research in China and Australia, the research also examines cultural differences and similarities between Chinese and Australian managers and shows that there is a significant difference between them on their impression management related to enhance face in the hierarchical context.

Key words: self-image, face, decision-making style, and participation

It has been argued that one's self-presentation style can facilitate or impede an individual success in the organisation (as well as organisational effectiveness). Managers are aware of either self-protection or self-promotion to protect, preserve and sustain or enhance their image in organisation operation (Bell and Tetlock, 1989). Based on this self-awareness, they choose corresponding styles in the decision-making process. Within the cultural context, the self-presentation is related to 'face' protection and 'face' enhancing. Face enhancing, hence, may have an impact on managers' decision-making styles, which are involved in the image of leaders amongst followers. 'Face' enhancing provides an attribution account for people's relationships in different societies. There are differences between some Asian countries and Western countries on the perceptions of face enhancing (Bond and Hwang, 1995). Australia has a mainly Western, Anglo-Celtic cultural background. In contrast, China is the originator of Confucian culture. It is clear that there are particular differences between Asian and Western countries in perceptions of face and of its enhancement (Bond and Hwang, 1986). Chinese and Australian management inevitably reflects these differences in their impression management.

THEORY, CONCEPTS AND HYPOTHESES

Impression Management, Face and Decision Making

To be effective, managers sometimes manipulate their image among subordinates. How a manager wants to be perceived by subordinates reflects his or her "face value" (the nature and extent to which they value their face). Research has found that managers often choose a decision making style on

their assumption how they *should be* look to others. They believe that the style will show themselves to be the kind of manager they wish to appear to be (Arkin & Sheppard, 1989). Managers may enhance their self-image (“face”) by appearing to be decisive, or by avoiding or denying personal responsibility for a failing outcome.

Moberg (1989) argues that people conduct two types of distinctive face-work, “saving face” and “enhancing face”. In impression management, *saving* face is related to passive or defensive impression management, which arises in response to the need to defend oneself from predicaments and misunderstandings. People deliberately demonstrate that what they do is appropriate. *Enhancing* face, in contrast, is active or assertive impression management, which is dynamic rather than reactive (Moberg, 1989). People try to build a positive image on others by acting in a particular way. Thus, one engages in “impression management” so as to give the most positive impression to others. This study focuses on impression management from a perspective of enhancing face.

Social roles can be differentiated in societies between those that accord status to people on the basis of their achievements (*achieved roles*), others that are ascribed to them by virtue of age, class, gender, education, and position (*ascribed roles*). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner argue that “East Asian cultures are more ascriptive of status; Western cultures are more achievement oriented” (1997). In more ascriptive cultures, people “deserve” the status that is given to them before they have actually earned it, though living up to the status may lead to higher performance. (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997). People holding high status in this type of culture are found to be reluctant to admit to and expose their weaknesses, especially in public (Gao, Ting-Toomey & Gudykunst, 1996). This means that face-enhancing behavior in a relationship characterized by high power distance often easily accepting subordinates’ participation. Management will not like to be challenged by subordinates, as accepting participation would be seen as admitting that they do not have enough leadership ability, cannot obtain sufficient information or cannot make the final decision on their own. In their view, inviting or accepting participation by their subordinates would cause them to **damage their image**. In this context, managers who link their face enhancing to their position of the hierarchy usually expect their face to be “added to” by being given compliments, having their opinions agreed with and their behavior conformed to, instead of being challenged. Therefore, they are likely to be negative in their attitudes towards employee participation. In contrast, if managers link equality to their self-image rather than inequality in the context of *achieved* orientation, then they are likely to positively accept employee participation. Therefore:

Hypothesis 1b Managers’ face enhancing behavior (preference for hierarchy) is related to the degree of participation that subordinates have in the decision-making process.

Face Values: Chinese and Australian managers

Although concern with face is a universal phenomenon, it is grounded, Ting-Toomey argues, in webs of interpersonal and sociocultural variability (Ting-Toomey, 1988). In an individualistic society, *face-work* focuses more on maintaining one’s personal identity with little concern about helping others protect theirs. In contrast, people in a more collectivistic culture are strongly concerned with how to protect or enhance both their own *and others’* face (Ting-Toomey, 1988). In an individualistic society face-work establishes a positive image by demonstrating abilities, appropriate feelings and personal qualities. By comparison, the face-work efforts made by members of a collectivistic society strengthen connections and status within fixed hierarchical relationships (Bond and Hwang, 1986).

Bond and Hwang argue that face-work is frequently used in Chinese society for enhancing one’s influence over others (1986). However, the behavior that they describe for enhancing face is uncannily like the western face-work described by Goffman (1955, 1971), that everyone plays the game of

one-upmanship using elevating oneself as means of establishing a positive image. “(The Chinese person) may deliberately arrange the setting for social interaction, take particular care with his or her appearance, and behave in a specific manner, in order to shape a powerful and attractive image when dealing with others” (Bond & Hwang, 1986).

Significant differences between China and Australia have been found in national values for power distance and individualism-collectivism, using Hofstede’s well-known four-dimension instrument (Smith et al., 1996). China and the Chinese-related countries surveyed scored higher on power distance and lower on individualism than did Australia. Hofstede proposed that the degree of individualism within a culture is related to the degree of participation in organizations and the hierarchical nature of work-manager relations (Hofstede, 1991). Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1997) once again found that the Chinese are more *particularistic* and diffuse than Australians, who are more *universalistic* and specific. People in particularistic cultures are likely to act in support of others (and against rules or regulations) in order to save and enhance the face of others and of oneself, because value friendship or close relationships are valued above rules and laws. These findings show that managers in the two countries are likely to hold different views on enhancing face.

It is generally argued, however, that face is evident in all aspects of Chinese life and that their concept of face refers not only to a person’s private affairs, but also to concerns of the person’s whole family, social networks, and community at large (Fang, 1999; Wang, Zhang & Goodfellow, 1998). Importantly, in Chinese culture, concern with face is *relationship* oriented and any face enhancing or self-image work must be based on principles of either respecting higher status or reciprocating with others at a peer level. Most Chinese face-work is closely related to a hierarchical relationship within a hierarchically structured society with relative permanency of status levels (Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996). Enhancing face in Chinese society means that a person with higher power strongly expects people with lower status to “add” to his or her face, by presenting compliments and conforming with his or her opinions and behavior and/or by doing pleasant things for him or her.

In Western society, self-image in organizations is most related to ability, or to competence and personality (Arkin & Sheppard, 1989; Bond & Hwang, 1986), and face is the situationally defined self-image (Alexander & Knight, 1971; Goffman, 1955). Hofstede (1980) found that work-related values in Australia demonstrated low power distance and high individualism. He argued that countries like Australia based identity on the individual; that the relationship between employer and employee was regulated by a contract supposedly based on mutual advantage; that management was the management of individuals; and that task prevailed over relationships. Hofstede saw Australian values as characterized by expectations that the use of power should be legitimate and subject to criteria of good and evil; that all should have *equal* rights; that power is based on formal position, expertise, and the ability to give rewards. He argued that for Australians hierarchy in organizations means an inequality of roles established for convenience; that subordinates expect to be consulted; and that the ideal boss is a resourceful democrat. In the light of Goffman’s theory of self-presentation, the social value of “face” in such individualistic cultures is not linked to hierarchical relations, but to the situationally defined self-image that a person deliberately acts out to obtain respect from others (Goffman, 1955). Australian managers are unlikely to link their face enhance to their hierarchical position. Chinese managers are likely to link their face enhance to both vertical and horizontal organizational levels. Hence:

Hypothesis 2b Chinese managers have a stronger concern with “face” enhancing in the context of the hierarchical relations than Australian managers.

METHODS

Subjects and Procedure

Four organizations in each country, Australia and China, were surveyed. After a pilot survey in both countries, a selection of Australian organizations was obtained and a matched sample of Chinese organizations was chosen. The sample of useable questionnaires consists of 216 managers from four organizations in China and 112 managers from four organizations in Australia. Respondents ranged from top and middle management to first-line management, with the majority in both groups from middle management: 56 percent in China and 52 percent in Australia.

Measures

An examination of existing questionnaire instruments showed that they were not entirely suitable for providing the required measures or for meeting the conditions of the present study. Hence, a new measure was specifically developed for the purposes of the study. The items of questionnaire were either based on relevant current theories or were adaptations of items from existing instruments (Hofstede, 1980; Muna, 1980; Rowe & Boulgarides, 1992; Trompenaars, 1993; Vroom & Jago, 1988). Versions in both Mandarin Chinese and English were developed, using a pilot survey in both countries to refine the questions and with most of the questionnaire back-translated from Mandarin to English as validation.

“Face” was measured using two items modified from Trompenaars’ (1993) questionnaire relating to universalistic versus particularistic orientations and specific versus diffuse orientations. For these “face” items, subjects expressed their level of agreement with a given statement via a competing scale –agree or disagree. Face Item 1 tested the judgement which a manager made when deciding whether a friend’s unreasonable requirement should be satisfied or not, and obtained information on face enhancing at the peer level. Face Item 2 tested managers’ judgement on face-enhancing at the hierarchical level by asking whether a person should offer the boss help beyond the work setting.

RESULTS

Table 2 provides Spearman correlation coefficients for all variables. The managers’ face-enhancing at the hierarchical level correlated **negatively** with the degree of employee participation in making a final decision ($r=0.142$, $p < .05$), **negatively** with the extent of reflecting employee idea in outcomes of the final decision ($r=.152$, $p < 0.01$), negatively with the extent of taking responsibility for decision implementation ($r=0.261$, $p < .01$), and **negatively** with main commitment to decision making ($r = 0.171$, $p < .01$). **Hypothesis 1b**, that managers’ face enhancing behavior (preference for hierarchy) is related to the degree of participation that subordinates have in the decision-making process, is thus supported.

The relationship between managers’ face enhancing at the peer level and the degree of participation in the decision-making process was also explored. However, there was no correlation found and thus **Hypothesis 1a**, stating that managers’ face enhancing behavior (preference for equality) is **not** related to the degree of participation that subordinates are given in the decision-making, is accepted

Table 1 Correlations for Face Saving and Decision Making ^a

Variable ®	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Face saving at the peer level								
2. Face saving at the hierarchical level	0.01							
3. Identifying decision objectives	-.04	-.01						
4. Collecting information	-.12*	.02	.20**					
5. Choosing a final decision	-.02	-.14*	.03	.07				
6. Main commitment to decision making.	0.01	-.17**	.01	.03	.29**			
7. Enhancement of subordinates' decision	.0.07	.08	.01	.14**	.10*	.07		
8. Dealing with divergence from subordinates	-.05	-.15**	.03	.08	.20**	.16**	.02	
9. Taking responsibility on decision	.01	-.26**	.12*	.09	.22**	.28**	.04	.16**

^a N = 328

? Spearman's correlation.

® items 5 & 6 were reverse coded before analysis.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

The Mann-Whitney test of the difference of the rankings between independent groups with ordinal data was used in the present study to test statistically significant differences between profiles of Chinese and Australian managers in face-enhancing and decision-making process at the national level. The results of Mann-Whitney test (Table 2) indicate that there was no significant difference between Chinese and Australian managers in views of face-enhancing at the peer level. **Hypothesis 2a**, that Chinese managers put more weight on face-enhancing in the context of the peer relations than Australian managers, was rejected. However, the results of Mann-Whitney test show that there was a significant difference between Chinese and Australian managers in their view of face-enhancing in the hierarchical context ($p < .01$). For Chinese managers, concern about face-enhancing was significantly higher than that of Australian managers. Thus, **Hypothesis 2b**, that Chinese managers have a stronger concern for face enhancing in hierarchical relationships than Australian managers, was strongly supported.

Table 2 Mann Whitney Test - Comparison of Chinese and Australian Managers' Decision Making & Face Enhancing

	Chinese N=214	Australia N= 112	Mann Whitney U Test
Item ®	Mean Ranking	Mean Ranking	Z Value ^a
1. Identifying decision objectives	172.39	144.89	-2.646**
2. Collecting information	167.98	147.23	-1.957*
3. Making a final decision	141.23	207.70	-6.2994**
4. Main commitment to decision making	138.03	214.54	-7.263**
5*. Enhancement of subordinates' decision	179.96	136.01	-4.171**
6*. Dealing with divergence from subordinates	151.63	192.50	-4.349**
7. Taking responsibility for decision	136.85	213.42	-7.271**
8. Face saving at the peer level	161.85	166.65	-.706
9. Face saving at the hierarchical level	190.18	108.18	-8.846**

Note:

® Items 5 & 6 were reverse coded before analysis.

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p < .01$.

A: Z-value and significance of comparison of mean ratings using Mann-Whitney U test

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether managers' impression management had an impact on their decision-making styles and whether Chinese and Australian managers were different in this dimension and their decision-making styles. Firstly, the results suggest that face-enhancing within the hierarchical context has a negative impact on managers' willingness to encourage employee participation while face-enhancing with a preference for equality does not have a direct impact on the degree of subordinate participation. Secondly, there was no significant difference between Australian and Chinese managers in treating face-enhancing relationships at a peer level. Most Chinese managers did not believe that they would tend to satisfy a friend's unreasonable requirement in order to enhance his or her friend's "face" and/or their own. The majority of both Australian and Chinese managers believed that respect for the truth was more important than "giving a friend face". However, there were significant cultural differences, between Chinese and Australian managers in treating face-enhancing relationships between different hierarchical levels.

Impression management amongst Chinese managers is associated with hierarchy. It emphasizes that a person should meet the social or personal requirements of others above him/her in hierarchical relationships. They should show them co-operation without considering their own willingness or ability in order to add prestige and "face" to others who are of higher status. Australian managers do not take others' hierarchical status into account when enhancing face. These findings are consistent with significant studies of Chinese people (mainly the overseas Chinese) and with comparative studies involving them and people from individualistic egalitarian cultures such as America (Bond &

Hwang, 1986; Redding, 1990; Ralston & Gustafson, 1992; Gabrenya & Hwang, 1996; Gao et al, 1996).

The self-image management attached to face-enhancing influences the manner of co-operation. Some Chinese managers who highlight the value of “face” enhancing like their subordinates to co-operate at work without question. Ultimately they prefer subordinates to enhance their face by accepting their suggestions without participation or offering their opinions. The need to enhance face causes Chinese managers to co-operate with others in non-work relationships, as they are involved in relationships of reciprocal obligations (“*guanxi*”). From a Chinese point of view, a necessary condition for an individual to function appropriately in his or her job is that he or she should be sensitive to relationships with those higher on the social scale and be aware of the important authority they hold. On the one hand, managers expect that their image should be kept in authority status and that subordinates should enhance their face by giving compliments, doing them favors and showing obedience. On the other hand, a subordinate should think that the boss has given him or her “special face” – by enhancing their face. For example, if the boss asked a subordinate to do a favor after work, it would mean to him or her that the boss trusted them more than others and was closer to them than to others and that would be good for his/her career. Refusal to co-operate in this would be thought not to enhance the boss’s face, but to hurt his/her boss’s “face”. That might harm the employee’s career, who caused it, because a person who loses “face” in a Chinese sense would feel very offended. “Face” enhancing for Australian managers is based on setting up a participative agreement between people of higher and lower positions instead of the obedience of people at lower levels to those at higher levels. This confirms the general view that small power distances characterize Australian society. This study has several potential limitations that may need to be considered in future research. First, although the same administrative procedure was employed in the questionnaire survey in both countries, the response rates were distinctly different. This may be because of cultural differences and was beyond the control of the research, but it might, to some extent, have an impact on the results of analysis, from a theoretical point of view. Generalization of the findings of this study, therefore, should be made with caution. Secondly, this research probed the level of employees’ participation in the decision-making process from a general point of view. Examining the extent of employees’ participation in different types of decisions, such as strategic and routine decisions in future research would be more informative and more accurately reflect management practices. Finally, although the questionnaire instrument employed in this research proved largely successful, its further refinement in future research would be useful. In particular, a further development of multiple indicators would increase the reliability of the instrument.

Conclusions

This study contributes to comprehending this relationship by linking face to the decision making process and to a cross- cultural study of managers in organizational settings. The results provide a number of insights into management in both the PRC and Australia through the application of notions of interpersonal impression management. The results suggest that the self-image management related to face-enhancing within a hierarchical context has a negative impact on managers’ attitudes towards employee participation. Chinese managers possess a stronger sense of face-enhancing within a hierarchical context and are less willing to encourage employee participation than are Australian managers. This difference in the value attached to face-enhancing explains why Chinese managers are in less favor of employee participation than Australian managers.

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- (c) holding conferences and publishing material as a means for disseminating ideas and information and promoting their discussion
- (d) promoting closer relations between management educators, researchers and practising managers or others who may be interested in the advancement of these objects.

Over the years, ANZAM has been involved in various initiatives for the purpose of heightening the status of management research and education in Australia. In 1997, ANZAM co-funded the ARC (Australian Research Council) Report on *Management Research in Australia*. ANZAM was given an ARC Special Research Initiatives grant of \$150,000 in launching a pilot program in management research networking and collaboration in 1998-2001. ANZAM has also helped to raise the recognition of management as an important research discipline in Australia through establishing closer links with the ARC. These efforts culminated in the appointment of Professor Geoff Soutar, one of our ANZAM Executive, to the ARC Social, Behavioural and Economic Sciences Expert Advisory Committee. ANZAM has also grown locally and internationally - ANZAM is a member of the International Federation of Scholarly Associations of Management (IFSAM) and a joint ANZAM/IFSAM Conference will be held at the Gold Coast on 10-13 July 2002. Strategic alliances have also been established with the US Academy of Management, the Asia Academy of Management and the British Academy of Management.

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