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Peer reviewed

P. Christopher Earley. **Face, Harmony, and Social Structure: An Analysis of Organizational Behavior across Cultures.** New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 244 pages, \$45.00.

Reviewed by *Jone L. Pearce*, Professor, Graduate School of Management, University of California, Irvine, CA.

There is nothing like enforced speechlessness in an unpredictable social world to sharpen our ability to see what is happening around us. Time spent in exotic foreign places seems to make us trenchant observers of our own social life. The best-known example of this phenomenon is the work of Erving Goffman (1959, 1967). Like many readers, I fell in love with his delightfully astute observations of what he called the self-presentations of our everyday life, work based on his studies of the subsistence farmers of the isolated Shetland Islands. An illustration:

When a neighbor dropped by to have a cup of tea, he would ordinarily wear at least a hint of an expectant warm smile as he passed through the door into the cottage. Since lack of physical obstructions outside the cottage and lack of light within it usually made it possible to observe the visitor unobserved as he approached the house, islanders sometimes took pleasure in watching the visitor drop whatever expression he was manifesting and replace it with a sociable one just before reaching the door. However, some visitors, in appreciating that this examination was occurring, would blindly adopt a social face a long distance from the house, thus ensuring the projection of a constant image (p. 8, 1959).

In the book reviewed here, Chris Earley also writes of social influences on the presentation of the self, and brings to his work a framing steeped in his Asian studies. Yet although Earley shares Goffman's focus on one's image in social settings, he takes a quite different approach, one that should be particularly attractive to psychologists. Goffman's approach was to use a dramaturgical metaphor, with its deliciously wicked implication that we are all actors (i.e., phonies) creating a performance with carefully chosen settings and masks. Although Goffman was careful to note that the act may be sincere and the self presented can be the one the actor genuinely believes in, nevertheless, part of the fun in reading him was the sense that he was exposing all of our pretensions by describing the stagecraft. Yet like all great love affairs, once the memory of the pretty words faded, we were left somehow unsatisfied with the idea that all self-presentation is just an act. Earley provides relief in his

ambitious scholarly theory of face in which the self-concept is no longer epiphenomenal to, but a primary purpose of, self-presentation.

Earley, like Goffman, imports a metaphor to describe his theory of the construction of self through social interaction. Here, this American adopts an Asian perspective on social life, in which "face" becomes central (so much so that its different forms and facets need to be distinguished) and "harmony" is the glue that links the self to the social world. In his model, face is at the center of the individual's struggle for self-definition and it is through various types of social interaction that all people define themselves. Building on Hu's (1944) classic work, he distinguishes two distinct forms of face. *Lian* is concerned with society's confidence in a person's integrity and moral character, and *mianzi* is prestige or social status. Thus a person who wants social status (*mianzi*) too much may lose *lian* (be seen as lacking in moral character) for being a pretentious status seeker. Because virtually all theories and the few empirical studies of face have been conducted by Asia specialists, this book provides a valuable introduction to these ideas for those unfamiliar with this work.

Although Earley's use of face is consistent with the literature, he develops his own definition of harmony. Here harmony is defined as the regulatory processes by which face is maintained, much like Goffman's idea of "facework" but not constrained to dyadic relationships. This is different from the more familiar use as a characteristically Asian (*vis-à-vis* Western) preference for avoiding open confrontation, concern with maintaining the face of all participants, and the adoption of a pleasant demeanor in social encounters (cf. Doucet & Jehn, 1997). Certainly, authors are free to use terms in any way they please, particularly when, as is the case here, they are careful to define and explain the distinctive usage. However, redefinitions do have the potential to mislead. For example, the conventional understanding of harmony includes giving face, that is assisting another in the maintenance or enhancement of the (favorable) face he or she has claimed in the social setting. Earley's use empties harmony of that meaning. Now it is any kind of regulation by any of the parties of others' face. Whether your actions support or undercut, destroy or enhance another's face, intentionally or unintentionally, all is the practice of harmony in this model. Readers expecting they will learn more about distinctly Asian conceptions of harmony—who practices it when and why and to what effect—will be disappointed. Harmony here is simply social exchange, the link between individuals and their social environments. How that linkage works is not the focus of this work.

Rather, Earley's focus is on linking the establishment of self-identity to research on cultural differences. It posits linkages between face and social structures, and suggests that the *lian* form of face is more likely to

be sustained through internal referents while the mianzi is maintained through external (social) referents. These frameworks are then linked with several of the well-established dimensions of culture used in the cross-cultural psychology and organization fields. The lian and mianzi components of face are analyzed with reference to cultural dimensions, such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, tight/loose cultures, and so forth. Different ends of these continua are suggested to make one form of face more important to members of that culture.

For example, Hofstede (1980) identified differences in “power distance” across cultures, such that in high power-distance cultures hierarchical differences are valued (i.e., powerful people are expected to display their status and all expect them to claim special privileges). Whereas, in low power-distance cultures, equality is valued and those with more power or status should not act in ways that call attention to their advantages. Earley suggests that mianzi and lian should both be important in high power-distance cultures, albeit for different reasons:

Additionally there is likely to be an important contribution of lian in a high power distance culture inasmuch as charismatic leaders must show significant personal integrity in order to be effective [citations omitted]. In contrast, an organization in a low power distance culture emphasizes equality and social memberships over personal gain and differentiation. Given that status and material differentials are less significant in this type of society, an effective CEO is someone who garners the personal respect of organizational members for having a strong moral character and vision (which emphasizes lian).

This passage is quoted at length because it illustrates the one flaw in this ambitious scholarly work. This flaw is the converse of one of the book’s strengths, which is that Earley’s model is a complex synthesis of numerous literatures. The literature reviews are breathtakingly wide-ranging. In addition to the balanced discussions of his core concepts of culture, identity, and face, Earley reviews the literatures on values, personality, exchange theory, economic equilibrium, and institutional theory, among others. For these literature reviews alone this book would make a valuable resource.

Yet, perhaps because of this extensive scope, and the fact that so much new ground is being broken, too much of the work consists of a breezy connection of concepts without explanation or analysis. Do we know that charisma is more important in high power-distance cultures? Perhaps lian is necessary to all successful leaders in all circumstances. When wouldn’t followers’ confidence in their leaders’ integrity be important? Too often, just when I was taken by a connection and expecting a discussion of the point asserted, I felt I was being rushed off to the next

literature review on yet another new topic. This approach is sustained by frequent unsupported assertions (e.g., “I differ with Rohmer inasmuch as I view behavior as an outcome from a social system and not the system itself”; “Although I would agree with Hu’s point that face is not simply a personality characteristic, I would contend that it is not merely a social evaluation”; and so on). Undoubtedly, this is a weighty, broad-reaching undertaking linking a wide range of literatures at several levels of analysis to develop a genuinely new conceptualization. Perhaps the kind of careful support of ideas I was expecting is not possible in this work, one with the scope of a Parsons or Geertz classic.

This is a serious work designed to produce testable theory about an important concept, the establishment of the self in differing cultural circumstances. It is rich in examples from many cultural perspectives, particularly Chapter 10 in which the model is illustrated with examples from the Czech Republic, Sweden, the United States, and India. I expect *Face, Harmony, and Social Structure* to be a classic reference for all scholars concerned with questions of identity and culture.

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