



Performative face theory: A critical perspective on interpersonal identity work

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ABSTRACT

Power operates not only through ideological and institutional control, but also through everyday interpersonal communication practices that sediment what is and ought to be. However, critical theorizing about power remains scarce within the sub-fields of interpersonal and family communication. To answer questions about operations of power in interpersonal identity work, performative face theory is set forth, which places Erving Goffman's theorization of face in conversation with Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Performative face theory suggests that discursive acts cited or repeated in negotiations of face constitute and sometimes subvert naturalized identity categories. Four theoretical principles are provided and an empirical example of childbearing identity is presented. Finally, implications of this novel critical interpersonal and family communication theory are discussed.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 July 2016
Accepted 28 February 2017

KEYWORDS

Critical theory; interpersonal communication; family communication; power; identity

Interpersonal communication practices are inseparable from cultural systems. Culture not only exerts influence over interpersonal practices, but interpersonal practices also sustain an inequitable social order through the articulation of what is and should be (Baxter & Asbury, 2015). Interpersonal communication, defined broadly in this manuscript as communication between two or a few people¹ (Braithwaite, Schrodtt, & Carr, 2015), is therefore inexplicably intertwined with operations of power that sustain knowledge claims. Critical theories, which provide multiple lenses through which to identify, critique, and transform power relations, have the potential to provide productive insight into interpersonal communication practices, especially about identities (Baxter, 2015). Postmodern/poststructural critical theories in particular provide insight into how certain identity constructions are more or less legitimated within a given culture (Baxter & Asbury, 2015; DeFrancisco, Palczewski, & McGeough, 2014; Moore, 2017; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005; Wight, 2011). The addition of diverse critical voices to the sub-fields of interpersonal and family communication will enrich the scholarly conversation by offering new ways of theorizing and empirically analyzing power beyond individual-level social influence (Baxter & Asbury, 2015; Moore, 2017; Suter, 2016).

However, despite numerous calls for scholars to integrate critical perspectives into interpersonal communication research (Baxter & Asbury, 2015; Braithwaite, Moore, &

Abetz, 2014; Manning & Denker, 2015), less than 3% of journal articles published by interpersonal communication scholars between 1990 and 2013 demonstrate critical perspectives (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2008; Braithwaite et al., 2015). Scholars have argued that just a handful of critical theories have been used to study interpersonal and family communication: relational dialectics theory, narrative performance theory, feminist theories, and intersectionality (Baxter & Asbury, 2015; Few-Demo, Moore, & Abdi, *in press*). However, relational dialectics theory 2.0 continues to be employed more interpretively than critically and narrative performance theory, feminist theories, and intersectionality have not often been used in empirical interpersonal and family communication research (Manning & Denker, 2015; Moore, 2017). Although these theories lend insight into identity in some way, none provide a vocabulary to specifically analyze everyday identity work.

Critical interpersonal and family communication theories provide various lenses through which to study and critique relations of power that manifest in multiple, simultaneous ways. Relational dialectics theory focuses scholars' attention toward power in the struggle of two or more competing discourses that create relational meanings (Baxter, 2011). Narrative performance theory considers power in rules that regulate who is and who is not allowed to tell a particular story (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). Feminist theories centralizes the power of patriarchy while intersectionality considers the power of various – isms to sustain privilege and oppression across individual, relational, and structural levels (Few-Demo et al., *in press*; Manning & Denker, 2015). These theories lend different insights into identity, power, and the reproduction of and resistance to inequalities at the micro level. However, they do not provide a framework to analyze and critique how *identity categories* come to be considered real or how identity categories are sometimes “troubled” in everyday communication practices. Developing and utilizing multiple critical theories in interpersonal communication research is certainly an important endeavor in a sub-field where analyses of the connections among power, culture, relationships, and everyday encounters remain limited.

The present manuscript sets forth performative face theory, a new critical interpersonal theory of identity work. This theory blends an established interpersonal communication theory, Goffman's concept of face, with a critical poststructural theory, Butler's theory of performativity. An empirical example of how performative face theory can be used to analyze and critique the shifting identity work of mothers who previously told others they never wanted to have children is then provided. Finally, implications of this critical theory of “doing” and “undoing” of identity (Butler, 1990) and directions for future research are discussed.

Performative face theory

Elsewhere I (Moore, 2017) have argued that critical theories can be productively merged into existing interpersonal communication theories to gain critical insight while still remaining firmly in conversation with interpersonal communication scholarship. Performative face theory emerged from this type of critical interpersonal communication theorizing, and shifts the analytical focus from how/why individuals do facework to achieve individual goals to how identity work relates to broader materializations of power. This preserves the vocabulary of Goffman's theorizing about face, which has proven valuable for understanding identity work from an individual and relational perspective, but

additionally asks what negotiations of face do in terms of power relations in a particular culture. This move is significant because it takes into account how interpersonal communication not only manages impressions and sustains the interaction order, but also connects to larger social (in)justices. It also reconsiders the notion that identity work is completely rational, in favor of identity work as enabled and constrained by the repetition of discourse. Before delving into the nuances of performative face theory, it is necessary to first provide a brief overview of face and performativity.

Face has been incredibly enduring and heuristic among interpersonal communication scholars (Braithwaite et al., 2015), and continues to explain what facework strategies individuals employ and why certain facework strategies are effective for identity management in particular contexts (Metts & Cupach, 2015). Goffman (1967) defined face as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for [her or] himself by the line others assume [she or] he has taken during a particular contact” (p. 5). He conceptualized face as a social concept, and stressed that he was not concerned with individual psychology, but instead with the relationship between people’s actions and the organization of social acceptability. Situated within the interpretive paradigm of symbolic interactionism, and more specifically within the dramaturgical perspective, Goffman (1967) theorized that small behaviors reveal the normative ordering of everyday interaction. Interpersonal communication scholars often draw on one or more theoretical iterations of face, including face (Goffman, 1967), politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), or face negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988). Face theorizations are therefore best described as a family of related, but not interchangeable, theories.

Butler’s (1990, 1993) poststructural theory of performativity is much less known to interpersonal communication scholars than Goffman’s scholarship, but Butler also theorized about identity work. According to Butler (1990, 1993), identity is performative² in that it is created and sustained through the citation or repetition of discursive and bodily acts, or verbal and nonverbal communication practices. Performativity offers a view of discourse³ as constitutive that centralizes *power*, *materiality*, and *history* of regulatory norms surrounding particular identity categories (Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1980; Jackson, 2004). Discourses gain power through cultural circulation (Weedon, 1997) by making knowledge claims that people come to accept as real (Baxter & Asbury, 2015). Therefore, power and knowledge are always inseparable from one another and from discourse (Foucault, 1978, 1980; McCall, 2005). Performativity asserts that it is through the citation/repetition/circulation of discursive and bodily acts that material – lived and tangible – effects become *sedimented*, or constituted as real, natural, and ultimately taken for granted. Performativity “is not performed *by* the subject” (Butler, 1993, p. 95) because the subject, or individual, is the effect of the discourse rather than the creator of it. In other words, the “I” – or the self – is constituted rather than the constitutor, or the product of discourse rather than the inventor of discourse (Butler, 1990, 1993). In short, performativity explains *how* culturally permitted identity performances came to be culturally intelligible or understandable and *why* culturally permitted identity performances continue to be enacted and legitimated.

Goffman and Butler’s theorizings are commensurate in that they both offer views of communication as constitutive of identity, offer philosophies on identity work, and are grounded in derivatives of “performance.” Each theory provides important insight into the doing of identity: face centers the importance of ordering social interactions to

maintain relationally harmonious encounters, while performativity centers the relationship between social interactions and broader relations of power. However, each one also lacks what the other offers: face lacks a concern for theorizing power and (in)equality of the social order, while performativity lacks firm grounding in the pragmatic individual and relational explanations for doing identity work in particular ways. Thus, each theory has the potential to enhance the other because facework provides insight into how identity norms are policed and perpetuated in interpersonal communication practices (Wight, 2011). I adopt Smith's (2010) argument that "We might say that Goffman's conception of performances locates them firmly within a performative analytical framework," where "Goffman gives readers the tools to analyze the specifics of empirical performances while Butler provides the theoretical and philosophical contexts that Goffman's work so conspicuously lacks" (pp. 172–173).

Performative face theory is a critical interpersonal communication theory of identity, difference, and power. It retains scholars' attention toward the individual and relational functions of identity work (i.e., maintenance of identity and interactional harmony) while simultaneously asking and answering questions about how negotiations of face constitute and/or reconfigure relations of power (i.e., how rigid identity categories are created, sustained, disciplined, and sometimes reconfigured). "Power" in this theorization is the reiterative force of discourse to construct, maintain, and subvert norms of socially intelligible identity categories (Allen & Moore, 2016; Brickell, 2005; Butler, 1990, 1993; Foucault, 1980). Consequently, performative face theory is a framework that can be used to examine and critique how individual, relational, and/or familial identities are sedimented and/or troubled across interpersonal moments of identity work. Next, I offer four principles of performative face theory that (a) rethink negotiations of face as discursive and historical and (b) link negotiations of face to performative power relations.

Rethinking negotiations of face as discursive and historical

Negotiations of face, including face threats and facework, are the foundation of Goffman's (1967) theorization of face. Face threats occur when a person's face is challenged in interpersonal interaction (Goffman, 1967; Metts & Cupach, 2015). The social norm of maintaining another person's face is so unconscious and taken-for-granted that it is only when face is threatened that people are aware that they must strategically manage it through facework (Goffman, 1967). Face can be threatened when a person is *in the wrong face* when information is introduced that is incommensurate with her or his face, or *out of face* when participating in a context where her or his face is inappropriate. Brown and Levinson (1987)⁴ further typologized a multitude of face-threatening acts, including but not limited to requests, advice, disapproval, criticism, contempt, contradictions, disagreements, and boasting. A face threat, in turn, often necessitates facework, or "the actions taken by a person to make whatever [she or] he is doing consistent with face" (Goffman, 1967, p. 12). Facework can be defensive or protective, or oriented toward saving one's own face or another's face, respectively (Goffman, 1967; Metts & Cupach, 2015). Cupach and Metts (1994) offer one typology of facework strategies that includes *preventive strategies* before a face threat occurs, such as avoidance and disclaimers, and *corrective strategies* after a face threat takes place, also including avoidance as well as apologies, humor, and accounts. Interpersonal communication scholars have often analyzed what

facework strategies are effective for maintaining a positive social value in specific contexts (e.g., Bell & Hastings, 2011; Heisler & Ellis, 2008; McBride, 2010; Miller, 2009). Descriptions of face threats and facework strategies provide a starting point for critical analyses of negotiations of face, but necessitate further theorization to be linked to the powerful sedimentation of identity categories.

A performative perspective on negotiations of face reorients scholars' attention toward face threats and facework strategies as discursive acts, which link power and knowledge together through defining what is and ought to be (Baxter & Asbury, 2015; Foucault, 1980). Face threats and facework strategies are not simply discrete statements spoken in interactions, but are also discourses that circulate throughout a culture to materialize taken-for-granted knowledge claims about identities and relationships. Notably, the citation of discourse is neither completely agentic nor completely passive (Brickell, 2005; DeFrancisco et al., 2014). Instead, the repetition of discourse lies somewhere in the middle where individuals can purposefully act within particular cultural constraints, although acts are often unconscious and taken for granted and sometimes cited passively (Butler, 1993). Thus, the first principle of performative face theory states that *discourses circulate in negotiations of face*.

Discourses gain power through their repetition over time. Although Goffman (1967) described how facework maintains the normative interaction order in particular situations, he did not delve into how the normative order came to be or how the normative order maintains inequalities between people. Therefore, in interpersonal communication research, negotiations of face are generally characterized as contextual rather than historical. However, a few interpersonal communication scholars have challenged the general ahistoricity of interpersonal communication scholarship (e.g., Duck, 2002; Lannamann, 1991). As Duck (2011) wrote,

Although we are as unaware of our positioning in a material history as previous generations have been in theirs, we are nevertheless surrounded by the expectations of the historical social order that puts speech and talking about oneself into a particular context. (p. 196)

Thus, interpersonal communication practices are always informed by the histories of interlocutors, the history of the immediate exchange, and much larger cultural histories (Duck, 2002).

Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of performativity can lend necessary critical historical insight into face. Butler (1993) noted that so-called natural identity categories, such as sex (or more specifically the man/woman binary), are actually historical constructions. It is through the repetition of discourses across time and space that "common" knowledge claims and regulatory norms about identity categories are constituted. Performative face theory directs scholars to make visible the historicity of discursive and bodily acts across cultural and relational levels, which illuminates the relationship between identity work and the sedimentation of binary identities over time (Butler, 1990, 1993). History, in addition to context, can offer productive insight into negotiations of face. The second principle of performative face theory therefore asserts that *negotiations of face have histories*. In addition to rethinking negotiations of face as discursive and historical, performative face theory also explicitly links negotiations of face to operations of power.

Linking negotiations of face to operations of power

In theorizing facework strategies, Goffman (1967) observed that

the particular set of practices stressed by particular persons or groups seems to be drawn from a single logically coherent framework of possible practices. It is as if face, by its very nature, can be saved only in a certain number of ways. (p. 13)

Referring to this as the “single matrix of possibilities,” Goffman made little attempt to theorize why these possibilities exist, except that it becomes normative through ritual repetition. Although Goffman (1967) did not offer explicit postulations about power in his writings, he explained in *Relations in Public* (1971) that social situations are settings in which people proceed through a scaled-down judicial process. Duck (2011) similarly stated that “the power of public opinion (social order) exerts a force on how you give accounts and narratives of your relationships” (p. 175). Negotiations of face are therefore constrained contexts where individuals are evaluated and sometimes punished.

Butler’s (1990, 1993) theory of performativity asserts that discursive and bodily acts sustain power relations by rendering some identity categories superior to others, and other categories completely unintelligible and subject to disciplinary action. Performativity explains the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler, 1993, p. 3). Some existing knowledge claims assert that there are only two (heterosexual) sexes, thereby limiting the intelligibility of, and sometimes inciting violence against, gay, transgender, and/or intersex individuals (Butler, 1990, 1993; Sloop, 2004). Words and actions, from benign to violent, tend to place individuals into oppositional identity categories that are already culturally intelligible (e.g., male/female, straight/gay) in the powerful process of disciplining (DeFrancisco et al., 2014). Face threats are one particular type of disciplining where power operates to define identities (Wight, 2011). The intention of the face threatener matters much less than the impact: relational (dis)harmony and the (de)construction of normative identity categories. Therefore, the third principle of performative face theory specifies that *negotiations of face reinscribe relations of power by sedimenting identity categories*.

Interpersonal communication practices, however, do not always contribute to the rigid sedimentation of identity categories. Butler (1990) argued that to be *constituted* in discourse is different from being *determined* by discourse. To be determined by discourse would leave no room for agentic acts that work outside of concretized identity configurations. To be constituted in discourse means that individuals can, and sometimes do, perform identity in a way that disrupts established categorizations through the process of subversion (Butler, 1990, 1993). Subversion occurs when instabilities are revealed in the performativity of identities, and space is opened up for those who do not neatly fit neatly into the rigid signification of either opposing category (Brickell, 2005; Butler, 1993; Chávez, 2010). Subversion always works from within binary configurations to expose categories as constructed rather than natural, because it is only from within the logic of identity categories that they can be exposed (Jackson, 2004). Subversion, then, describes the undoing of the either/or logic of identity binaries, which allows for multiple and/or shifting identities to become more intelligible (Kelan, 2010). It should be the task of feminist scholars, Butler (1990) contended, “to locate strategies of subversive repetition enabled by those constructions, to affirm local possibilities of intervention through participating in precisely those practices of repetition that

constitute identity” (p. 201). It is not enough to attempt to elevate the marginalized identity to the status of the privileged identity in the binary (e.g., women to the status of men), but should instead seek to denaturalize identity categories to make space for those who do not conform (Butler, 1990; Chávez, 2010).

Subversion takes multiple formations, but always troubles the taken-for-granted naturalization of binary identity categories. Butler (1990, 1993) argued, for example, that drag has the potential to be subversive when it makes visible the constructedness of binary construction of man/woman and mocks the idea of a true gender identity through parody. Drag, Butler (1990) wrote, can create dissonance between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. The disunity of these three facets in drag performances de-essentializes their coherence and, in turn, exposes how gender performativity is a repetition – a cultural and political construction – rather than real. Noting that analyses of subversion rarely focused on women parodying women or men parodying men, Shugart (2011) located three moments of parodic subversion in three episodes of Ellen DeGeneres’ sitcom *Ellen*. Shugart argued that DeGeneres’ parodies of femininity denaturalize and demystify gender and work subversively through conspicuous performances of femininity, incongruence between Ellen’s “real” androgynous character and the feminized gender performance, and comical excess. However, subversion extends beyond parody and irony, and subversion includes any small-scale reorganization that encourages new ways of doing identity (Brickell, 2005). Subversion, unlike revolution, is not a radical reconstruction of what is intelligible, but instead small and fleeting movements that rework identity categories (Chávez, 2010). This is significant because the intelligibility of identities is what humanizes people (Butler, 1990, 1993; Chávez, 2010). Therefore, the fourth principle of performative face theory affirms that *negotiations of face are subversive when they denaturalize taken-for-granted identity categories*.

To summarize, *negotiations of face are performative in that they contribute to the (re)de)constitution of identity categories and relations of power*. Specifically, the principles of performative face theory assert that (a) discourses circulate in negotiations of face, (b) negotiations of face have histories, (c) negotiations of face reinscribe relations of power by sedimenting identity categories, and (d) negotiations of face are subversive when they denaturalize taken-for-granted identity categories. Performative face theory therefore lends insight into anticategorical complexity, or the deconstructive “undoing” of identity categories (McCall, 2005). Performative face theory also leaves open the possibility for analyzing the relation between multiple, intersecting, sedimented identity categories⁵, where race, gender, class, sexuality, and so forth interact in ways that afford disparate possibilities for doing and undoing identity differently. Interpersonal communication scholars have the opportunity to play a central role in deconstructing taken-for-granted identity categories, and subsequently identifying and advocating for transforming interpersonal communication practices. Next, I provide an example of how performative face theory can be used to analyze negotiations of face among mothers who once articulated themselves as permanently childless by choice.

Example analysis: Negotiating changing childbearing identity

Mothers who once told others they never wanted to have children have embodied two seemingly contradictory childbearing identities because they vocalized that they would never

have children but then ultimately became mothers. However, these two oppositional childbearing identities – mother and childfree – are generally not considered equal. Researchers have demonstrated that motherhood continues to be privileged above voluntary childlessness, and women are often assumed to be natural future mothers (Sevón, 2005). Womanhood is equated with motherhood, and the desire for motherhood is essentialized as in-born (Morell, 1994). Alternatively, permanent childlessness is becoming more accepted in the United States, though it is still stigmatized (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). More women are choosing to never have children, and many women remain voluntarily childless throughout their lives (Abma & Martinez, 2006). Although pathways to voluntary childlessness vary based on individual, relational, and structural constraints, voluntarily childless women articulate themselves as *permanently* childless by choice (Moore, 2014). In Gillespie's (2000) study, voluntarily childless women reported that others disbelieved that their childlessness was a choice, disregarded childlessness as valid choice, and considered voluntary childlessness to be deviant. To cope with this stigma, many voluntarily childless women articulate their desire to never have children to be natural and in-born, rather than a conscious choice (Morison, Macleod, Lynch, Mijas, & Shivakumar, 2015).

Thus, voluntary childlessness and motherhood are constructed as a never mother/ (future) mother binary and understood through antithetical meanings. Mother “connotes a myriad of positive associations, including children, love, protection, home, nourishment, altruism, morality, religion, self-sacrifice, strength, the productive body, the private sphere, and the nation” while childless woman “invokes negative attributes, such as childlessness, self-centeredness, work, materialism, hysteria, irrationally, the sensual/sexual body, and the public sphere” (Buchanan, 2013, p. 8). These mothers stand at a discursive intersection because they have embodied both sides of the childbearing identity binary at different points in their lives. Given the seeming contradiction of childbearing, I posed two research questions to analyze how discourses that circulate in negotiations of face perpetuate and subvert naturalized childbearing identity categories: *How do mothers who once articulated themselves as permanently childless by choice negotiate face in interpersonal communication about having children? Moreover, how does power operate within and across these negotiations of face?*

Method

The sample included 32 participants recruited from online and regional parenting communities from across the United States. Participants averaged 35 years of age, and their children averaged 6 years of age. Although the call did not specify that participants identify as heterosexual or have biological children, each participant conceived at least one biological child while in a heterosexual casual or dating relationship, long-term committed relationship, or marriage. Twenty-eight identified as White, two as Asian, one as Latina, and one as multiracial. The women participated in a two-part interview. First, via email the participants were asked to engage in a modified life story book chapter activity (Campbell, 1999). This prompted them to think about their journeys from childless by choice to mothers as a book, and write down up to 10 chapter titles to organize their story chronologically. Second, the women were prompted to describe each chapter in their life story during an interview. Follow-up questions asked participants to recall conversations and messages about childbearing that occurred at each stage: “describe a conversation you

had with your partner/family members/friends/co-workers about this chapter”; “what did they do and say?”; “how did you respond?”; “how did they respond?”; and “how did you feel during this conversation?” A few interviews took place in person, but most were conducted via Skype or telephone. Interviews averaged 67 minutes in length, yielding 517 single-spaced pages of interview data for analysis.

This study used discourse tracing, a poststructural method of discourse analysis that locates power in the transformation of discourse over time (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). The analysis first identified common face-threatening and facework statements recounted by participants. Analysis then took a more critical approach to analyzing the qualitative interview data (Manning & Denker, 2015; Moore, 2017), using performative face theory to engage in critique of the negotiations of face as contexts in which discourses circulate and power operates. After initial analysis, four scholars versed in face and/or critical-qualitative interpersonal and family communication research participated in a face-to-face data conference (Braithwaite, Allen, & Moore, *in press*). They were provided with an outline of performative face theory and preliminary results with exemplars, which resulted in consensus about the usefulness of linking negotiations of face to discourse and power. Additionally, all participants were invited to engage in member reflections, of which 14 participated (Tracy, 2013). They were asked about how the majority of interviewees mentioned that others would often say to them, “You’ll change your mind” about never wanting children, and asked them to reflect on how much this resonated with their own experience, how they responded, and what they thought about the statement, “It’s okay to change your mind.” Participants overwhelmingly indicated that these statements resonated with them greatly.

I further reflected upon my positionality as a voluntarily childless woman throughout the research process, and how my own “mind and body of a qualitative researcher literally serve as research instruments – absorbing, sifting through, and interpreting the world through observation, participation, and interviewing” (Tracy, 2013, p. 3). I became particularly sensitive to how my own (lack of) childbearing desire might inform what I found most compelling to represent in research findings, most notably the how participants largely did not disavow their previous childless by choice identities. A researcher from a different subject position would likely hone in on a different facet of power in the negotiations of childbearing face. Through these iterative processes of analysis and validation emerged the transformation of pronatalist face threats into subversive facework.

Performative face threats: “You’ll change your mind” and “I told you so”

Participants indicated that their transformations in childbearing choice or status necessitated identity work with family, friends, and acquaintances. Nearly every participant described how earlier in their lives, when they were vocal about never wanting to have children, others would threaten their face by *disagreeing* that their choice to never have children was actually permanent by stating, “You’ll change your mind.” For example, Lisbeth recalled how in high school her mother would say, “You’ll change your mind when you get older.” Leslie similarly explained how some of her friends would mention her biological clock to rationalize their disagreement with her choice to never have children: “Some of them would say, ‘Oh, you know, things will change,’ bring up the whole biological clock, which I’ve never had.” Scholars of face have identified disagreement as a prevalent

type of face threat defined as an “expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker” (Sifianou, 2012, p. 1554), where the face threatener specifically implies that the other person is “wrong or misguided or unreasonable about some issue” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 66). This statement is face threatening because it construes the voluntarily childless woman as *in the wrong face* (Goffman, 1967). Many participants indicated that the same people would often say, “You’ll change your mind” repeatedly, thereby continuing to threaten their childbearing face when they articulated themselves as permanently childless by choice.

Unlike many voluntarily childless women who remain childless throughout their lives, the participants in the present study eventually *did* have children due to a change in choice or circumstance. Moore (*in press*) described how before conceiving, voluntarily childless women decided with certainty to have children, became ambivalent or indifferent about having children, and/or conceived accidentally. Regardless of participants’ particular pathways to motherhood, some recounted how others would explicitly say, “I told you so” after they disclosed their change in desire and/or became pregnant. For example, Kylie explained how multiple family members continued to threaten her face after she vocalized her change in childbearing desire: “I talked to my aunt about it, and she was smirking and, ‘I told you, I told you so!’” Kylie, like many participants, found this statement to be very aggravating. She elaborated on how she felt when her family members, including her aunt and cousin, have said, “I told you so”:

It pissed me off, and I have a contrary personality, so it made me want to be like, “Screw you guys, now I’m never having kids!” [laughs] Obviously you can’t really do that when it’s something as big as a life decision. So I just sort of was like, “Alright, you win, whatever. You were right. Yay. Hooray. Rub it in my face.”

Marian, who became ambivalent about having children before becoming pregnant with her husband, described how her mother threatened her face when she announced her pregnancy to her parents:

I was concerned because I wasn’t sure what their reaction was going to be, but they were so excited. And then I had to hear for the next five days my mom saying, “I told you, I told you. I told you that you were going to have a kid.”

Marian found her mother’s statement “so annoying.” The statement of “I told you so” is an example of *boasting*, or a face threat that articulates good news to the face threatener but ignores the feelings of the person whose face is threatened (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Boasting, like disagreements, indicate that participants were still in the wrong face for having previously articulated their desire and intention to never have children.

Sensitized by performative face theory, however, the face-threatening statements of “You’ll change your mind” and “I told you so” are more than a disagreement and boasting between individuals. These statements also cite or repeat the pronatalist discourse of disregard (principle 1, *discourses circulate in negotiations of face*), which delegitimizes complex lived experiences of childbearing desire and agency. The discourse of disregard articulates pronatalist ideology by constructing voluntarily childless women as simply “future mothers, who would change their minds with the onset of maturity and the assumed ‘inevitability’ of heterosexual partnerships” (Gillespie, 2000, p. 228). Thus, power operates through the repetition of the knowledge claim that women – especially

white, heterosexual, able-bodied women who are/will be financially stable – should have children (principle 3, *negotiations of face reinscribe relations of power by sedimenting identity categories*). Discipline, in this sense, is not a punishment, but rather a discursive sedimenting into an existing, already-intelligible identity category (Sloop, 2004). These face-threatening statements circulate pronatalist discourse at the micro level, thereby reiterating a relation of power that naturalizes women as (future) mothers.

Further, this discourse of disregard has a broader cultural legacy (principle 2, *negotiations of face have histories*) that informs the power of “You’ll change your mind” and “I told you so” to make sense in interpersonal communication. In the early twentieth-century, social reformers and politicians who feared change, impermanence, and possibility sought to restore a sense of traditional morality and social order by evoking “nostalgic modernism” in their policies and campaigns (Lovett, 2007). Politicians and reformers encouraged this pronatalist vision of traditional morality through campaigns to encourage childbearing among rural families, including Fitter Family Contests in the 1910s, where rural eugenically “fit” families were encouraged to have more children and organizers awarded prizes for the most physically and psychologically ideal families (Lovett, 2007). Pronatalism today also operates at the interpersonal level by drawing upon a modernist conception of the in-born stability of women’s gender identity. Unlike the policies and campaigns of the eugenics era, which drew on modernist logics of resisting change to the social order, face threats in the present era often drew upon modernist logics of the essential and unchanging self. The pronatalist face threats of “You’ll change your mind” and “I told you so” are performative and intelligible within broader modernist knowledge claims, which discipline voluntarily childless women into an identity of a natural (future) mother, even when they insist on the present or past permanence of their choice. The power of pronatalist discourse to privilege motherhood above voluntary childlessness – at least among the specific type of women represented in this study – has sustained throughout contemporary U.S. history.

Although Goffman (1967) asserted that “Social life is an uncluttered, orderly thing because the person voluntarily stays away from the places and topics and times where [she or] he is not wanted and where [she or] he might be disparaged for going” (p. 43), the results of this brief analysis indicate that face threats *do* uphold the normative pronatalist social order, even when it disrupts the interaction order. Participants’ interpersonal communication sometimes includes repeated embarrassments, disagreements, and ongoing negotiations of face related to the identity associated with the choice to never have children. Unlike the fleeting interactional gaffes described by Goffman (1967), face threats that stem from an untoward identity appear to be much more challenging to manage, as indicated by the repetition of “You’ll change your mind” and “I told you so” in many participants’ stories. Whether the face threateners were cognizant of the implications their interpersonal communication had for upholding the pronatalist power relations was not the focus. What matters was how interpersonal communication practices contributed to the powerful performative construction of a reality where women’s childbearing choices are only taken seriously if they choose to become mothers.

It is also worth asking who is more able to speak, “I don’t ever want to have children”? Previous research has demonstrated that among all racial groups in the United States, white women have the second-lowest birth rate after Native American women (Martin, Hamilton, Ventura, Osterman, & Mathews, 2013). Educated women in high-status and

high-earning careers are also likely to choose childlessness, and these opportunities are most available to educated white women (Dion, 1995). Further, voluntary childlessness tends to be viewed more positively by individuals who are younger, more educated, and white (Koropecj-Cox & Pendell, 2007). Lesbian women, in contrast to heterosexual women, also tend to have less intense childbearing expectations placed upon them (Kazyak, Park, McQuillan, & Greil, 2016). The notion of childbearing “choice” is therefore never completely autonomous but is afforded by specific intersections of race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. When broadly considering change in childbearing desire and intention, some groups of women (e.g., non-white, less educated, and more religious) may have less support for choosing childlessness, fewer models of voluntarily childless women in their lives, and/or feel more discomfort articulating a desire to never have children. The ability to speak about never having children is afforded by particular social locations, as is the ability to subvert the dualistic childbearing identity categories of never mother/(future) mother.

Subversive facework: “It’s okay to change my mind”

When discussing their change in childbearing choice/status, some participants engaged in facework by simply stating, “I changed my mind.” This implicitly acknowledged that the people who said, “You’ll change your mind” and “I told you so” were correct, and did not challenge the performative knowledge claim that participants were always “truly” future mothers. Alternatively, a few women explained how they reframed this statement to “It’s okay to change my mind,” which deconstructs the taken-for-granted oppositional identity categories of never mother and (future) mother. Kylie, for example, stated,

I do feel like it [being childfree] was part of my identity for so long. It’s hard for me to be like, “I changed my mind.” I don’t know. I feel like I need to be giving myself more credit by just saying, “Look, I am allowed to change my mind and I changed my mind.”

Lori explained how she has conversed with her childfree co-worker about having children: “I’m like, ‘One day when you’re working through things, it may change, or it may not!’ Like, ‘You’ve got the right to change your mind. I’ve got the right to change my mind.’” Melinda likewise embraced the fluidity of her childbearing identity:

I still sort of stick up for my former self. I don’t perceive any conflict or hypocrisy between the fact that when I was 24 I didn’t want to have kids and then when I grew older I did. To me, that is just you grow and you change, and your beliefs change, and what you want might change. So I will stick up for childfree people to the bitter end because I really do believe that people want different things. As much as to me, parts of this do feel like this miraculous wonderful experience that I think everyone could love if they had this experience, it’s like, “Well okay. But maybe this isn’t for everyone.” And that’s totally fine.

As a *justification*, or an account “in which one accepts responsibility for the act in question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it” (Scott & Lyman, 1968, p. 47), this type of facework supported participants’ own and others’ childbearing face. Notably, this justification was never articulated in response to others stating, “You’ll change your mind” or “I told you so.” Instead, participants articulated this justification *preventively*, without prompting, after they became mothers in conversations with other women about childbearing. This justification validated participants’ past and present childbearing face by

reframing their own choice to never have children as sincere at that time and place, and their motherhood as also valid and good.

This seemingly small discursive shift from “you *will* change your mind” to “it’s *okay* to change my mind” justified not only women’s agency to choose childlessness or motherhood, but also to choose both at different times in their lives, without framing either as incorrect. In contrast, if these mothers were to disavow their previous voluntary childlessness when doing identity work, thereby expressing their choice to never have children as inauthentic or not “real,” it would not be subversive. “It’s okay to change my mind” resignifies childbearing identity because it makes visible the constructedness of the never mother/(future) mother binary by destabilizing the meanings imbued within each category as well as the binary’s either/or logic (principle 4, *negotiations of face are subversive when they denaturalize taken-for-granted identity categories*). This statement troubles the knowledge claim that all women will and should become mothers, as well as the knowledge claim that voluntary childlessness is stable, in turn cultivating a new, non-essentialist both/and childbearing identity. This facework embodied Gillespie’s (2000) argument that it is “Through resistance to cultural discourses, such as those of motherhood and childlessness, women’s individuality, diversity, subjectivity and agency may increasingly come to be more fully acknowledged, validated and accommodated” (p. 232).

The both/and childbearing identity works from within the never mother/(future) mother binary, calling into question if only momentarily its oppositional logic, which asserts that a person embodies one end but never both and never neither. This is not an impressive upheaval of the status quo, but rather a “nudging” (Brickell, 2005, p. 38) of identity categories out of their either/or configuration. These mothers expressed a more fluid and multiple self, fostering a more postmodernist discourse of identity (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Stating, “It’s okay to change my mind” was also informed by interpersonal histories of having their face threatened when others would say, “You’ll change your mind” and “I told you so.” Participants actively avoided repeating these statements to others because they recalled how face threatening they could be. “It’s okay to change my mind” also works within the historical modernist discourse of the autonomous and agentic self who is freely able to act for herself (principle 2, *negotiations of face have histories*). As more women’s childbearing pathways become characterized by fluctuation and change, and the both/and childbearing identity becomes legitimated, stating, “It’s okay to change my mind” will no longer be subversive. At this historical juncture, however, this provides a small but significant reconfiguration of women’s possible childbearing identities.

This subversive facework has implications beyond individual- or relational-level identity work because it has the potential to contribute to the cultural resignification of womanhood, motherhood, and voluntary childlessness. This potential remains limited, however, due to the narrow contexts in which these women enact the both/and childbearing identity. This potential is also limited by the complex ways in which heterosexual childbearing “choice” is raced, gendered, and classed due to individual and cultural beliefs about childbearing and motherhood and disparate access to contraception and abortion. The present analysis must not be taken to represent all women’s experiences. Instead, the present study provides a selection of women who vocalized their desire to never have children, felt immense pressure to have children when they did not desire them, and then resignified childbearing identity in a way that problematized the notion

that women are *either* (future) mothers *or* voluntarily childless. Women of different intersectional social locations likely negotiate childbearing face differently based on contextual particularities which should be teased out in the future. Still, these participants' transformation of performative face threats into subversive facework disrupts – if only subtly – the never mother/(future) mother binary, thereby lessening its power to maintain the taken-for-granted regulatory norms that mandate fixed either/or childbearing identity categories.

Discussion

Performative face theory extends Goffman's theorizing about face by integrating post-structuralists' attention to discourse, power, and history, and enhances Butler's theory of performativity by sensitizing critical poststructural scholars to empirical analyses of identity work. Performative face theory shifts the way that interpersonal communication scholars have traditionally considered communication about identity as stemming from cognition, socialization, and/or group norms, and instead theorizes identity work as enabled and constrained by the powerful circulation of discourse within a particular culture. In what follows, I offer theoretical implications of performative face theory and then discuss limitations and directions for future research.

Theoretical implications

Face theories have proven to be highly influential to the study of interpersonal communication. Drawing upon "face" as a concept in performative face theory serves two functions. First, face has proven to be an incredibly generative concept (Metts & Cupach, 2015), and performative face theory remains in conversation with previous and future analyses of face. Second, face explains micro-level communication practices because "almost all acts involving others are modified, prescriptively or proscriptively, by considerations of face" (Goffman, 1967, p. 13). Performative face theory adopts and extends this idea to take into account how power/knowledge informs negotiations of face, and how negotiations of face subsequently sediment power/knowledge. This theory can be used to study other identities beyond gender and childbearing, including negotiations of face related to intersectional identities (e.g., race, class, ability, and age), family identities (e.g., interracial families), illness identities (e.g., cancer survivors), worker identities (e.g., blue collar workers), or activist identities (e.g., environmentalists).

Because of the post-humanist orientation of poststructuralists, some scholars might dispute that Butler's (1990, 1993) theory of performativity is commensurate with Goffman's (1967) theorizing about face. Butler rejects the pre-existing "I" or individual subject, while Goffman's perspective focuses on individuals as autonomous social actors. However, performativity acknowledges and theorizes the ways in which individuals *do* act within the constraints of repeated patterns of possibilities. Butler (1990) wrote, "My theory sometimes waffles between understanding performativity as linguistic and casting it as theatrical. I have come to think that the two are invariably related" (p. xxvi). In other words, the ability to act does not mean that individuals are completely unconstrained, nor does the constitutive force of discourse mean that individuals are completely passive and determined by it. Performative face theory offers a middle ground between the outright

rejection of human agency and the over-determination of rational autonomy. Individuals have agency to communicate strategically, but the possibilities for strategic communication are always enabled and constrained by discourses that have historical legacies and contribute to the performative constitution of power relations.

Because performativity is often an unconscious, uncontested, and compulsory process (Butler, 1990), it is unproductive to simply condemn individuals who contribute to the (re)constitution of identity binaries. Instead, the larger array of interlocking discourses and bodily acts upon which identity categories become intelligible should be interrogated, challenged, and ultimately altered. Additionally, performative face theory does not offer a tautology where all face threats uphold the normative status quo while subversion always take the form of facework in response to a face threat. The solution to the disciplining of identity categories is not simply to end face threats. Undoubtedly there will be situations in which face threats are subversive and facework is performative, and future researchers may tease out the historical and contextual relationship between negotiations of face and power/knowledge. Performative face theory therefore has the potential to lend useful practical insight into how interpersonal communication practices can be ethically transformed to account for the powerful cultural implications of relational-level identity work.

Limitations and future research

Although the present study offers new theoretical and contextual insight, it is limited in two primary ways. First, the sample was mostly white, educated women who had biological children while in heterosexual relationships. Future research may adopt other critical interpersonal and family communication theories to study changes in childbearing identities across different social locations. An intersectional lens that centers intracategorical or intercategorical complexity (McCall, 2005), or structural inequalities within or between social identity categories (race, gender, sexuality, class, etc.), would productively illuminate privilege and oppression at work in everyday identity work about (never) having children. The use of multiple critical theories to study a particular communication phenomena will strengthen understanding of how power operates in multiple and simultaneous ways. Second, the present study was limited by using interviews as a data generation method, where participants retrospectively reconstructed past conversations. The analysis was therefore limited to discursive acts. In future research, performative face theory can turn attention toward the materiality of discursive *and* bodily acts. Ethnographic, interactional, and/or mediated data sources could build upon nonverbal facework literature to critique performative and subversive gestures, eye contact, movements, artifacts, clothing, and space – in addition to discourse – that are repeated in negotiations of face.

To conclude, performative face theory offers a significant contribution to the emerging critical interpersonal and family communication conversation because it provides a lens through which to study how power operates in the “doing” and “undoing” of identity categories. Scholars can productively attend to how negotiations of face not only maintain or disrupt naturalized identity categories and/or interactional harmony, but also how they may uphold the normative and often inequitable status quo. As the conversation surrounding critical interpersonal and family communication intensifies, interpersonal and family communication scholars can play a central role in advocating for more a more

humanizing and less constraining ways of communicating with one another in everyday life.

Notes

1. Although many scholars adopt a view of interpersonal communication as occurring exclusively in close relationships (e.g., Miller & Steinberg, 1975; Stewart, 1999), performative face theory is suitable to study everyday practices across contexts regardless of perceived closeness between interlocutors (e.g., family, work, health, service, public, mediated, etc.).
2. Butler (1990, 1993) wrote about gender performativity specifically, but noted that race is also performative. Other scholars have argued that the theory of performativity can be applied to a multitude of identity categories (e.g., Allen & Moore, 2016; Jackson, 2004).
3. Notably, communication scholars have defined “discourse” in many ways, ranging from all spoken and written words to broader social narratives (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009). I define discourses as statements that link power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980), which sustain regulatory norms of how/what certain people should act, say, and desire (Butler, 1990, 1993).
4. Although Brown and Levinson’s articulation of politeness theory is distinct from Goffman’s theorization of face, scholars of face have productively drawn upon Brown and Levinson’s typology to enrich their descriptions and analyses of face threats without engaging all of the propositions of politeness theory (e.g., McBride, 2010).
5. Although Butler (1990, 1993) makes explicit her perspective that identity politics – and intersectionality – are an inadequate and limited form of gender politics, identity categorizations are nonetheless experienced as real with material effects. Therefore, in the constitution and deconstruction of identities, intersections of privilege and oppression are worth exploring in relation to who is – and who is not – able to perform and subvert categorizations at a particular time and place.

Acknowledgements

The author thanks Dawn O. Braithwaite, Jody Koenig Kellas, Carly S. Woods, Carole Levin, Joshua P. Ewalt, Jordan Allen, and Jenna S. Abetz for their invaluable comments on her dissertation from which this manuscript was drawn. A version of this manuscript was presented at the 2016 annual meeting of the National Communication Association.

Funding

This research was supported by an American Dissertation Fellowship awarded by the American Association of University Women.

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