

The Chinese concepts of face and violence against women

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(no. of words: 3,491)

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### Abstract

The study examines the Chinese concepts of face embedded in marital violence. Results from the analysis of male batterers showed that the stronger in face-orientation, the greater the masculine gender role stress and thus the greater is the likelihood of using violence against a female partner.

**KEY WORDS:** Chinese culture, risk factor, male batterer, gender role stress, face-sensitive intervention

(no. of words: 46)

### The Chinese concepts of face and violence against women

There has been a proliferation of research on violence against women and intervention programs with perpetrators and victims of wife abuse in Western societies, especially North America, during the last two decades. However, no consensus has yet been reached on the theoretical explanations, relevant risk factors, and the gender equivalence of violence in intimate partner relationships, due to differences in study design and methodology (Kantor & Jasinski, 1998). Cultural-specific studies of risk factors usually draw from the research findings of Western societies and focus on factors such as patriarchal structure (Dasgupta & Warrier, 1996), family-of-origin (DuRant et al, 1994), and interpersonal skills deficits (Yahia, 1997) as predictors of spousal violence. The concept of "power and control" (Dobash & Dobash, 1979) has often been adopted in studies of wife abuse in Chinese societies. In the studies of Tang (1999) and Chan (2000), the majority of the female respondents regarded male domination as a critical risk factor of spousal violence. Patriarchal authority is a common risk factor that has been identified in the studies of spousal violence conducted in Mainland China and Hong Kong. However, almost all the subjects under investigation in Chinese societies have been battered women; the experience of the male batterers themselves has not been documented.

In this study, the concept of face will be applied to understand men's feelings and behavioral responses in face-losing situations caused by spousal conflict. Ho (1976) regarded face as a useful construct in the analysis of social interaction. Applying his definition of face to the development of masculine identity in spousal relationships, face is thus defined as a necessary resource that a man needs in order to perform his masculine roles. It is the respectability which a man can claim for himself from his female partner, by virtue of the position he occupies in the family and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in the family roles as well as acceptably in his conduct of being a good husband and a father. In terms of the two interacting parties in a spousal relationship, face is the reciprocated compliance, respect, and/or deference that he expects from, and extends to, his female partner.

While face is recognized by all societies (Goffman, 1955), it assumes a particular importance in Chinese culture (Hu, 1944). There are two kinds of face, or *mien*: a moral type and a social type (King & Myers, 1977). According to the social *mien* or face perspective, "to have *mien-tzu* (face)" means that the individual has "achieved a position of honor in the society". This type of face can be increased or decreased. Moral *mien* or face, on the other hand, is a fixed quantity that can be acquired or lost. Face can act as guidelines for social behavior as well as be the product of social processes. Losing,

maintaining, and gaining face occurs through a dynamic process and interaction with people.

## **METHOD**

The purpose of this study is mainly to identify the themes, patterns, and variations of Chinese men's violence against their intimate partners, and the relationship between masculinity, face, and spousal violence. Sampling was purposive to include those respondents who fit the requirement of the study. Criterion sampling (Patton, 1990) was adopted to include the male respondents, aged 21-55, that an incidence of violence against their partners had been reported in the year preceding the research interview. The respondents of the study were invited for individual in-depth interviews (Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell, 1996) conducted by the researcher. An interview guide approach was adopted to provide a structured/standardized open-ended interview (Patton, 1990) that also maintained a certain degree of flexibility.

This was the first study of Chinese male batterers in Hong Kong and the Mainland China. Not many batterers were willing to receive help from social services. Recruitment of subjects was mainly through referrals from professionals like psychiatrists, social workers and clinical psychologists. Although the study was open to batterers of varied types, in reality those batterers who had acute psychotic symptoms,

such as hallucinations or delusions, were usually not referred by social workers or psychiatrists since they were put under psychiatric treatment. Batterers who had reported severe violence such as rape or homicide were unwilling to join the study. As a result, a total of 18 men who had used violence against their female partners were recruited for the study. The majority of the respondents were referred by social workers from family services, medical social services, school social work services, and refuges for battered women. They were aged between 25 and 55 with most of them being middle-aged. Over half of the respondents had an educational level lower than secondary school. Eleven of them were married or cohabiting with their partners, and seven of them were divorced or separated at the time of the interview. They held a variety of occupations – among them were laborers, skilled workers, civil servants, a policeman, a correctional officer, and businessmen. Four of the respondents were unemployed. Three of their female partners were employed and 15 were housewives. Except for one, they all had children.

The data analysis involved the transcription of the interview, which was audio-taped for open coding. After the transcripts had been prepared, 10 accounts were selected for coding development. The content was analyzed by the open coding procedure to develop categories or themes. The open coding pertains specifically to the

naming and categorizing of phenomenon through close examination of data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). After a coding scheme was constructed, each interview was coded on a present/absent basis for each category.

## **RESULTS**

### **Types and Severity of Violence**

The types, frequency, and intensity of the violence inflicted by the respondents varied from minor to severe according to the definition used by the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996). Eleven of them had used severe violence against their female partners. Eight reported minor to severe sexual coercion. Half of them had caused injury from minor to severe levels. Twelve men reported verbal conflict with partners that could be classified as psychological aggression. The respondents were mainly family-only batterers, according to Stuart and Munroe's (1995) classification. None of them reported substance abuse or criminal behavior. There was no report of child abuse, though some might have had some conflict with their children. Generally speaking, they were not anti-social and understood that wife abuse was socially undesirable behavior and even illegal behavior in severe cases.

### **Masculine Gender Role Expectations and Face**

Face orientation was emphasized among the male respondents. They were sensitive to their face needs and their social image, and would burst into temper in face-losing situations. "Saving face" was the guideline for social behavior. It is relationship-specific, varying according to social and family relationships.

#### **a. Maintaining social network: Friendship and social face**

The respondents were conscious of their performance in society and appraisals from other people, especially their peers. Their desires to protect face and maintain their social standing before people were pronounced. One respondent emphasized that he had to remain trustworthy before his friends to gain their respect and support when he needed it. To keep the exchange of respect, he had to treat them nicely. However, he received a lot of complaints from his wife that he spent too much time with friends and treated his friends much better than his family. He complained,

She did not give face to me and my friends. She just treated my friends poorly and always complained that I was wasting time being with them. She never knew that when my son was sick, I would call my friends or colleagues to help. I asked them



to visit my home and see how my son was doing. That's the only thing that I could do. I had to lean on my peers. (M 1)

He felt that his friendship and his effort to enhance his support network were not recognized. He even felt that what he was proud of and deemed important was regarded by his wife as trivial. He felt humiliated and later in a conflict with his wife, he beat her hard.

b. Maintaining family role: Filial piety and moral face

Most of the respondents felt caught in handling conflicts between their wives and their parents. A respondent presented a typical scenario of in-law conflict. His wife was always fighting with his mother. She complained that his mother was unreasonable and was not easy to get along with, and so refused to communicate with her. The man was deeply distressed about the conflict. On the one hand, he felt he should be respectful towards his mother and also felt his wife should respect her, on the other hand, he also felt that he should bear with his wife and try to act as a peacemaker. He spoke of how he felt defeated when dealing with this in-law conflict to the extent that he offered to kneel down and apologize to his wife.

My mom called her [the respondent's wife] but she refused to talk to my mom. I asked her why and she replied that she would not speak to a person who was not reasonable. I then asked her how she could know that my mom was unreasonable because she had never lived with her. She then mentioned some incidents that had happened many years ago. I said, alright, I apologized on behalf of my mom. I said I would kneel down and apologize to her. (M 2)

In order to avoid in-law conflict, the man tried to give in to and please his wife. Although he felt humiliated by kneeling down, he thought it was at least a way to stop the conflict and prevent his mother from being blamed further. He could not bear the guilt of disrespecting his mother in any more ways. Under normal situations of conflict, he tried to stay neutral and not get involved. Sometimes he would ask his wife to give in or even scold her. It was not a matter of who was in the right; he believed that the most important thing was that they should unconditionally respect his parents. However, his wife did not accept this and came to hate him because she felt he did not support her. He felt very frustrated when handling such conflict situations. As he put it:

How can I scold my mother? She is my mother. I have to be respectful towards her.

But my wife is so rude and inconsiderate. Not only does she fail to respect my mom,

she is also so unreasonable as to push me to take sides. I feel so stressed every time they start a fight. If my relatives or neighbors knew that I took her side and acted against my mother, I would lose face and be blamed for being an unfaithful son. (M 2)

The man was very frustrated that his filial piety was challenged by his wife. He was angry for failing to be loyal to his mother and was afraid of being blamed by other people. Although he regretted his violence, he still blamed his wife for not showing filial piety towards his mother, and understanding towards him.

c. Maintaining family role: Respectability and family hierarchy

The respondents were concerned about how to maintain functional family roles as a husband and a father. They felt that they had responsibilities towards their own family. They were looking for ideal family relations in their spousal as well as parental relationship that included “love and responsibility”, such as being a “caring father and a filial son”. The respondents stressed that the exercise of love and responsibility should be placed in the context of fulfilling the husband’s face needs. They expected their wife to play a complementary role, assisting them to fulfill the gender role expectations and

showing their competence to people outside the family in the name of their face. When there is conflict, the needs of the wife are given a lower priority. Most of the respondents treated their children better than they did their wife. They cared so much about their children, especially their sons, that sometimes they would neglect their wife's feelings. In the words of one respondent:

I had invested all my heart, energy, time, plans for the son's education, and future plans in my son. Thus, I neglected my wife's feelings. At that time, I believed that I had to help my son first, then our relationship would become better. My wife wanted to work but I could not accept that; it worried me. She had to give up her goals and take care of my son. I neglected my wife's feelings as well as her needs. I put all my attention on my son. Now I think I was wrong. (M 12)

This respondent held a traditional gender role assumption that the man as the provider and the woman as the caretaker was the ideal form of role differentiation. To be able to meet masculine gender role expectations, a man must be self-sufficient and competent. However, disregarding one's personal limitations could result in undue burden and frustration. In the case of the respondent, he would push himself very hard in order to reach an exceptionally high standard because of the self-esteem that he

would gain from positive appraisals from people around him. He was concerned about his face needs.

In the above discussion, the gender role expectations of a man in regard to face have been examined. The respondents all had a similar ideal image of masculinity. However, they encountered a lot of challenges in their efforts to uphold this ideal. In particular, they experienced a strong sense of failure in their attempt to fulfill their face needs, almost ironically. Social change is eroding the traditional Chinese belief that gender role differentiation should take the form of: “men go to work, women stay at home”. In modern Hong Kong society, women enjoyed a greater level of achievement through work and social settings while there is a reduction of financial contribution from men to their families due to salary cuts and higher rates of unemployment that have occurred in recent years. A respondent gave a vivid description on this,

It is very stressful to be a man. You can imagine being a man and being unemployed without income. ... The more money your wife can earn, the more pressure you will experience. ... You will feel as if you are living like a slug that is sucking up your wife. How can you communicate with your wife at home? You will lose your face and status in the family, and she will treat you like a fool. (M 11)

To rely on wives' financial support is very shameful to many Chinese men. They are no longer competent enough and thus experienced a loss of status in their families. "No income, no power" is a typical belief shared among the respondents.

## **DISCUSSION**

The limitation of the study is that the findings cannot be generalized to Chinese male batterers because the sample size is small and the samples are not being chosen to be representative of all batterers. The purpose of the study is not to make generalization from the findings but to identify Chinese cultural factors that are embedded in Chinese men's violence against their intimate partners. From the findings, it was found that the stronger in face-orientation, the greater the masculine gender role stress and thus the greater is the likelihood of using violence against female partner. In light of this, two major clinical implications are addressed.

### **Redefining Chinese Masculinity**

As shown above, the rigidity in the definition of masculine gender roles and the overemphasis of face-oriented behavior that weaken the stress coping capacity increases the chances of using violence against female partners. Helping men reach a more

flexible definition of masculinity would create more room for them to handle stress and shame arising from the loss of face. It involves the expression of masculine gender role stress, identification of gender role expectations for a man, self-recognition of achievement, taking responsibility to ending violence. These intervening components have been practiced in the group therapy for Chinese male batterers (Chan, 2004).

### **Face-Sensitive Interventions with Chinese Male Batterers**

Men, especially male batterers, seldom seek help and disclose themselves because of face-orientation (Li, 1999). It is very difficult to recruit, engage, and work with male batterers. A third to one half of male batterers quit treatment groups prematurely (Edleson, 1996). This is obviously unsatisfactory. Psychotherapy process research shows that effective engagement predicts positive treatment outcomes (Brown & O'Leary, 2000). A greater understanding of men's face needs and the stress they experience when confronted with social changes can help social workers address the problems they have and engage with men in topics that the latter feel uncomfortable talking to their female partners about. An attitude of open listening and support can help bring about effective engagement, while at the same time, the responsibility to avoid being violent can also be emphasized (Chan, 2001).

Losing face results in anger and shame, and thus can lead to violence. If they are aware of their face needs and the events that lead to a loss of face, male batterers will be able to detect early their temper and imminent violent behavior. Further interventions in regard to the identification of their gender role expectations can enhance their self-awareness and their ability to control their anger and violence.

This study has sought to enhance the understanding of the Chinese male batterers and to the larger population of Chinese men. The study aims to contribute to the well-being of female victims, their children, and men who have used violence against women.



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