

Comparative Analysis 2

Women navigating conflict in patriarchal, collectivistic cultures of honor are expected to use indirect, avoidant or integrating behaviors that preserve mutual-face and thus familial reputation, which is especially true when they face additional constraints on their behavior such as racial oppression or physical violence. While Face Negotiation Theory posits that all cultures engage in face-saving tactics during conflict (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003, p. 600), mutual-face saving is particularly important in collectivistic, patriarchal cultures of honor such as the Southern United States culture in “What’s Your Name, Girl?”, Mexican-Tejano culture in “Woman Hollering Creek” and, to a lesser extent, the highly culturally-blended setting of *Real Women Have Curves*. Although men in cultures of honor are often expected to respond to conflict with violence or aggression, women must respond with care and delicacy. Ana from *All Women Have Curves*, Margeurite from “What’s Your Name, Girl?”, and Cleofilas from “Woman Hollering Creek” all represent unique cases of women navigating the contradictions between personal agency, face concerns, and the expectations that cultures of honor place upon women. Whether through openly challenging societal expectations—as Ana does with her mother—discretely planning an escape like Cleofilas, or craftily orchestrating her own dismissal like Margeurite, each story demonstrates that women in cultures of honor are expected to conform to outside expectations, save mutual face, and navigate conflict using indirect methods in cultures of honor, especially when speaking out might be met with shame or violence.

Initially, Margeurite does not protest to Mrs. Cullinan’s objectifying nicknaming, opting instead to use the preventive strategy of avoidance of conflict due to an unequal racial and socioeconomic power dynamic between her (a young, working-class Black woman) and

Mrs. Cullinan (a wealthy White woman), saving mutual-face with Mrs. Cullinan and her friends by politely smiling when they call her Mary (Angelou, 1969, p. 13). To preserve her own safety as a person on the bottom of the pre-civil rights era Southern United States socioracial hierarchy, she cannot explicitly resist the wealthy White women and their insults. After Mrs. Cullinan continues to call Margeurite by the name “Mary,” Margeurite protests indirectly, engaging in further avoidance behaviors by arriving to her work shift late, by leaving her work shift early, and by half-heartedly performing her cleaning duties (Angelou, 1969, p. 15). Although Margeurite avoids direct conflict, she attempts to subtly reclaim her agency by acting out. Mrs. Cullinan does not seem to notice or acknowledge Margeurite’s protests and continues to objectify Margeurite.

Upon repeated infractions from Mrs. Cullinan and a failed attempt to win over Hallelujah, Margeurite creates an opportunity for an exit strategy from her employment through the passive-aggressive “accidental” destruction of Mrs. Cullinan’s prized kitchen dish—restoring Margeurite’s internal sense of dignity by asserting agency through a veiled protest. Margeurite is also protecting herself from further humiliation through ensuring that Mrs. Cullinan fires her, a preventive strategy (Angelou, 1969, p. 15). Margeurite’s ploy to get herself fired, although taking the form an indirect avoidance strategy expected of women in cultures of honor, results in loss of mutual-face, as Margeurite becomes a clumsy, incompetent servant and Mrs. Cullinan a hysterical, shrieking mess. Margeurite, despite the loss of mutual-face with Mrs. Cullinan, achieves her goal and is effectively dismissed from employment.

Like Margeurite’s initial submission to and eventual escape from Mrs. Cullinan’s relational abuse, Cleofilas endures and survives Juan Pedro’s physical abuse by avoiding further direct conflict until her escape. Cleofilas does not speak up or attempt to physically

defend herself from Juan Carlos, instead avoiding any action which could further escalate the situation. When the abuse began, Cleofilas found herself completely stunned, unable to react:

The first time [that Juan Pedro hit her] she had been so surprised she didn't cry out or try to defend herself...but when the moment came, and he slapped her once, and then again, and again...she didn't fight back, she didn't break into tears, she didn't run away... (Cisneros, 1991, pp. 3166-3167)

Cleofilas continues to react to Juan Pedro's abuse with complete inaction throughout most of their marriage, preferring to save mutual-face for herself, her husband, and likely the other-face of both of their families by staying silent and remaining in her role as a loyal wife and obedient daughter. As an only-daughter coming from a Mexican family with traditional patriarchal values (Cisneros, 1991, p. 3164), Cleofilas is likely expected to follow traditional Mexican gender roles by conforming to the image of a good wife. Highly patriarchal cultures often expect women to work through their marital strife, even when that involves living with an abusive husband. There is often great shame and "disgrace" (Cisneros, 1991, p. 3168) placed upon women who leave their marriage, regardless of how justified they might be in doing so. Accordingly, Cleofilas does not report Juan Pedro to the police, nor does ever attempt to alert her father despite his reassurance that he would "never abandon" her (Cisneros, 1991, p. 3165).

Cleofilas begins to advocate for herself when she pleads for Juan Pedro's permission to attend her next doctor's appointment while promising to save Juan's face (other-face) by concealing the true cause of her bruises. Cleofilas remarks to Juan Pedro:

Because the doctor has said so. She has to go. To make sure the new baby is all right, so there won't be any problems when he's born, and the appointment card says next Tuesday...No, she won't mention it. She promises. If the doctor asks she can say she

fell down the front steps or slipped when she was out in the backyard, slipped out back, she could tell him that. (Cisneros, 1991, p. 3170)

Cleofilas' protests are successful, as she makes it to her doctor's appointment with Juan Pedro. As Cleofilas' doctor privately remarks to her friend on the telephone during Cleofilas' appointment, Cleofilas "...hasn't been allowed to call home or write or nothing..." (Cisneros, 1991, p. 3170), indicating that while Juan Pedro allows Cleofilas to attend her appointment, he keeps tight control over Cleofilas' communications to prevent her from seeking help.

Despite technically having the opportunity to alert her family or authorities while Juan Pedro is at work for most of the day, Cleofilas preventively avoids threatening Juan's face through a loyalty response, acting as if she is a loyal wife who will not argue against her abuse--all while saving up money and planning an escape. Although the reader learns that Cleofilas does not speak English (Cisneros, 1991, p. 3170), possibly interfering with her ability to communicate with local authorities for help, she lives in a southern Texas town where a significant portion of the population likely has dual fluency in Spanish and English. Cleofilas' neighbors, Dolores and Soledad, seem to speak Spanish, are within walking distance, and likely possess telephones as well. Being a foreigner without English fluency in a small town without any real support network, however, it is no wonder that Cleofilas opts for a well-planned physical escape rather than risk her life trying to alert the local authorities, especially since the police appear unable to prevent violence against local women, as evidenced by the daily newspaper's numerous examples of women being murdered by the men in their lives (Cisneros, 1991, p. 3169). The possibilities of great familial shame and further violence, even death, keep Cleofilas trapped in her abusive marriage, unable to speak out for fear of retribution if Juan Pedro were to intercept her.

After breaking down and revealing her situation to the doctor, (Cisneros, 1991, p. 3170), Cleofilas engages in the preventive strategy of avoiding direct conflict with Juan Pedro through her assisted escape to San Antonio. Cleofilas resorts to the safest method of conflict response in her circumstances, the exit strategy. Since Cleofilas has lost significant face with Juan Pedro through her submission to his violence, proving to him that she will not resist and thereby reinforcing the abusive dynamic, her escape becomes a restorative exercise through which she regains her autonomy and agency. And, having experienced that Juan Pedro's violence does not even stop during her pregnancy, Cleofilas has no other recourse.

Just as Margeurite creates an opportunity for an exit from an abusive employer, Cleofilas carefully crafts her exit from an abusive husband. Although their abuse differs in form, as Margeurite suffers relational abuse in the form of objectification while Cleofilas suffers physical abuse, both Margeurite and Cleofilas experience a sense of powerlessness during their abuse and freedom during their escape. Both women avoid direct conflict, placing their personal safety in precarious circumstances as a priority above immediate and direct confrontation with their abusers.

Both Cleofilas and Margeurite find themselves near the bottom of their local socioracial hierarchies. Cleofilas, a monolingual, unemployed, female Mexican immigrant married to a working-class Tejano man in southern Texas, occupies the lowest or near-lowest space in the south Texas socioracial space. Margeurite, a young, working-class Black woman in the Jim Crow-era Southern United States, similarly occupies a little-respected position. Low socioeconomic status, female gender, and minority racial status all converge in their lives as disempowering circumstances which both characters fight against through their exit responses, thus achieving a kind of self-liberation from their immediate oppressors. While their exits do not solve the underlying cause of their conflicts, their interpersonal conflicts

with their abusers are effectively ended through the physical distance their exits create and the resulting end to their relationship with their abusers.

Ana from *Real Women Have Curves* similarly liberates herself after a period of initial acquiescence to outside social expectations. Upon her admission to Columbia University, Ana's teacher, Mr. Guzman, visits Ana's house to give her the news personally (Cardoso, 2002, 00:58:44). When Ana's parents reject the idea of Ana attending Columbia University, Mr. Guzman argues on her behalf to convince Ana's father that Ana should attend college, saying "sir, you left your country for a better opportunity, and now it's Ana's turn" (Cardoso, 2002, 00:59:17). Ana's parents reject Mr. Guzman's arguments, claiming that they need Ana to work at the factory and that college would break their family apart. Ana protests using the voice response shortly before surrendering to her parents' wishes (Cardoso, 2002, 00:59:40-01:01:00). Eventually, Ana's father comes to accept her protests that she must leave California in pursuit of better opportunities, but her mother (Cardoso, 2002, 01:17:00-01:20:00) remains obstinate, refusing to bid farewell on her trip to the airport. Ana's exit response to her mother is more directly assertive than Cleofilas and Margeurite's exits from their abusive situations, though all their exits achieve independence and dignity.

Ana's family, much like Cleofilas' family, is a highly patriarchal family of Mexican origin, meaning that Ana's opportunities as a daughter are of similarly limited scope. Ana's primary gender role as a Mexican American woman is to get married, have children, and loyally serve both husband and family. Ana must maintain mutual-face for herself and her family by playing the role of obedient, innocent daughter until she is ready to marry. Ana's gender explicitly limits her possibilities, as her mother and father expect her to conform to rigid gender norms. Ana, however, rebels by secretly having premarital sex and being unconcerned with her body weight. Because of this, Ana suffers repeated, abusive face-threatening through her mother's body-shaming, insults to her intelligence, and restriction of

her independence, just as Cleofilas suffers face-threatening from Juan Pedro's abuse and Margeurite suffers face-threatening from her objectification by Mrs. Cullinan.

Ana, just like Margeurite and Cleofilas, exists toward the lower end of the socioracial hierarchy. As a Mexican American woman raised by working-class immigrant parents in Southern California, her only chance to avoid a life of endless physical labor is to attend college as a first-generation university student. Although Ana suffers neither the Jim-Crow era legal discrimination nor physical abuse, she is still subject to the racial dynamics of Southern California, which, although a racially diverse region, implicitly favors Whiteness. The film subtly reflects the racial dynamic of Southern California, as Ana's parents see university education as more of a luxury than a necessity, highlighting how first-generation immigrants and their second-generation children have limited opportunities. Additionally, all the women working in Estela's dress factory are of Mexican descent, highlighting how Ana's family must resort to labor-intensive factory work that is generally reserved for working-class, poor people of color in Southern California.

Ana, Margeurite, and Cleofilas all enact exit responses to their systemic oppression to reclaim their dignity. Ana assertively exits her patriarchal family dynamic for a better future by attending college, Margeurite quietly resists her employers' relational, racist abuse by crafting an "accident" that enables her to exit the relationship with minimal danger, and Cleofilas silently endures physical abuse until she can enact a carefully planned escape with the help of a compassionate stranger. These women, markedly different in their level of willingness to approach their conflict directly, all successfully find liberation in exercising their own agency by resisting the limitations that their gender, race, culture, and socioeconomic status place upon them. All three women exemplify that while resistance to structural oppression can be both direct and indirect, both methods require endurance and courage.

As Margeurite and Cleofilas' stories demonstrate, successful navigation of interpersonal conflict may not always be possible through direct communication with one's opponent, especially if one's opponent is also one's oppressor. Real-world conflicts between perceived equals can often be resolved with direct interpersonal dialogue, but conflicts between oppressor and oppressed often cannot be resolved with direct interpersonal communication. If peacefully communicating with one's oppressor is not productive and using violence to overthrow them is not possible, the oppressed are only left with the option of enacting an exit response. While exiting from one's oppressor may not solve the root of the conflict—just like Ana's exit to college does not erase the sexism embedded within her family's psyche and Margeurite's exit does not eliminate the racist hierarchy of the South—it may end the conflict between the individuals involved through physical distance. As Julia Wood observes in her textbook, *Interpersonal Communication*, sometimes direct communication cannot mediate conflict (Wood, 2016, p. 33), but physical distance can put conflict to an end.

References

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