Podcast #: The Power of Politeness in Police Interactions

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Host: Grace Jones

Guests: N/A

Description: Listen as Grace explains and discusses the applications and importance of Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and Goffman's Theory of Face for the field of law enforcement.

Transcript:

Intro

Grace

Hey podcast family! I'm Grace Jones and today we'll be delving deep into the world of police communication.

Some theories we're going to be looking at are Goffman's Face theory and Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. For those of you who already know about these theories you might be wondering how these relate to police communication or you might know exactly where I'm going. Either way throughout this episode we're going to be going to step by step and discovering just how applicable these theories are to this profession… so buckle up and get ready…

Before we delve into these two theories, I want to share a story with you. This story was shared by Charles Ramsey a former Philadelphia police commissioner that appeared on TEDTalk- and I highly recommend you go and watch his TEDTalk which you can find on YouTube under *Mending Broken Trust: Police and the Communities They Serve.* So, Charles shared a really great story when he was working narcotics in Chicago. He said that at the time this officer that was working for him- he said this guy could sweet talk anybody. He said that even when they would go hit a narcotics raid, you know, very chaotic experience- break down the door, going in separating people, making sure nobody had weapons or anything like that. He said by the time that was all over, this guy would have everybody calmed down and may have even developed an informant. And he said one time he just had to- to ask him "how do you do it?"

He officer responded with, "It's really very simple. He said at the moment of birth every person is a perfect 10. But deduct 3 right away because life is temporary- it doesn't last forever. If you're born into a dysfunctional family" - maybe a family that has, you know, a family member with substance abuse or there's domestic violence- He said "deduct another 3. Because the environment you're in now, maybe you don't have a good role model or-or guidance." He said "if you're a member of a minority group deduct another 3 because some doors may not be open to you." He said, "that leaves one. That one is that person's dignity and self-respect." And he said "do what you have to do as a police officer, but never do anything to take away that person's dignity or self-respect because that's all they have left and they will fight you to hold onto it."

When I heard this story, my mind instantly went to Goffman's Theory of Face. Now Goffman defines "Face" as the "positive social value that a person claims for themselves in the context of a social interaction." In other words, our "face" is our self-image and dignity. Think- think about the phrase "saving face." Um… its-it's the thing that gets damaged or lost when we get embarrassed or confronted. Now, Goffman broke "face" into two types. He said there was positive and there's negative face.

Positive face refers to the want to be liked or approved of. We can kind of constrict this image for ourselves and that's what we show to everyone else, and we want them to approve of that and believe that.

Now, negative face, on the other hand, refers to the want and need to not be restricted. So, we don't want people telling us no. we don't want people giving us, you know, orders or anything like that.

So, when someone causes damage to someone's "face" we call that a Face Threatening Act or an FTA. And they can either commit a negative FTA or a positive FTA. So, think about a typical police interaction. I think the most common one is probably getting pulled over for speeding or something like that. Those usually include confrontation and embarrassment. I think even before the officer even gets to our car that I have this preconception of, you know, "I know I'm going to be confronted" and perhaps we're even a little bit embarrassed, right? And in that moment, we are being disapproved of um… we're speeding, something we did is not being approved of. And we're going to get a warning, we're probably going to be ordered to pay that-that fine, whatever it is. So, depending on how the officer interacts with us can lesson or in enhance that FTA.

So, now something we have to understand about police and their interactions is that, just like in the story, there are often going to be interacting with people that don't have much more than their dignity and self-worth, and some people might be just struggling to hang on to that. I might be able to walk away from an FTA easier depending on how- kinda for the lack of a better term- how reenforced my self-image is and where I am in life at that moment.

So, knowing this and also knowing just by the nature of police community interactions that FTAs are going to be committed, how then do officers leave people's "face" or dignity intact?

This is where Brown and Levinson step in and say there has to be a way to either avoid FTAs or repair them. So, they began to look how we do that with language. So, following Goffman's Face Theory they proposed certain strategies to either repair or avoid negative and positive FTAs, and they called this positive and negative politeness.

So, lets first look at some positive politeness strategies. Because Positive face is concerned with the want to be approved of, it would only make sense that positive politeness would focus on validating and showing approval in some way. Brown and Levinson put it this way *"positive politeness in partially satisfying that desire by communicating that one's own desires or wants are in some respects similar to the addressee's wants."* One way this can be accomplished is by claiming common ground, indicating that you and that person in some way share specific wants, goals, or values. This may be expressed by emphasizing membership in a group or category, or simply claiming common perspective.

This is very similar to communication accommodation theory or CAT in which it talks about how people either emphasize or minimize the distance between them. CAT has had a significant impact in Police communication and community perceptions. Studies have even shown that when an officer is more

accommodating people perceive them to be more trustworthy and will likely be more willing to comply. And this is really accomplished through applying positive politeness. So, how does the officer, in some way claim common ground?

We have to remember that officers have to interact with a very diverse group of people. People they may have nothing in common with. I know I've been there; I meet someone or maybe it's a new c-worker and I just don't have anything in common with them. And it's hard to try to find something. But I've always found that there is always something you can find in common. And it doesn't have to be anything super profound either. Depending on the situation It could simply be small talk about the weather. And actually, when discussing this topic with an officer I went on a ride-along with, he mentioned that some officers are very robotic when they interact with the public- they're very by the script. And actually, said how this is really detrimental to the image of police. He said if they were able to just make small talk that it would significantly make a difference. Now however, in a more intense situation the officer might have to be actively looking for opportunities to agree with someone, and when possible. So, especially when emotions are high, and you are in the position where you have to be disapproving of their actions, right? You still have to be a police officer; you still have those responsibilities. But finding anything that you can agree with would help that person feel less alienated.

Now turning to negative politeness. This one is a little trickier since Negative "face" is concerned with the desire to not be restricted. And as we know, restricting, giving orders, and warnings are all part of the job for a police officer. So, how can police officers avoid or at least repair a negative FTA?

One very simple strategy is to apologize. Even though the officer is in the right when giving an order, an apology for having to do it will go a long way. Another way to soften the effects of a negative FTA, is to simply state the FTA as a general rule. This has to happen because of X" or "it is the law."

And finally, don't assume you know the other persons wants or needs. We can avoid directly addressing this by using hedges. Hedges are words like. So, hedges are words like suppose, perhaps or maybe. Instead of saying "you're confused" say something like, "maybe your confused." This sounds more like you are guessing and trying to be helpful, rather than simply applying your observation and telling the addressee that they are a certain way.

Now let's talk a little bit about why using politeness is so important in police and community interactions. Politeness sounds great and all, and honestly a lot of these strategies seem pretty basic. But what kind of practical uses do they have. Like I mentioned earlier, many studies have linked the use of politeness and accommodation to higher levels of trustworthiness and compliance. In one such study by Christopher Miller, Tammy Ott, Peggy Wu, and Vanessa Vakili, they found that politeness improved compliance rates up to 34%. They also found that Politeness significantly improved the affect, trust, and perceived competence that participants had toward the directive giver.

This has huge implications for police communication since many issues spring from non-compliance. As many of us our aware, in recent years the public's trust in the police has declined, leaving many people hesitant to corporate and support the police. Attitudes toward a person or in this case an organization or group have a significant impact on people's actions toward said person or group. Even before someone interacts personally with a member of the group, in this case a police officer, if they have these preconceived attitudes and beliefs, such as "I don't feel as though they have my best interest in

mind" or maybe they don't think that that person should have that type of authority that they do, they will most likely feel less inclined to comply.

So, as we discussed before, FTAs are going to certainly happen in a police and community interaction. And are most likely expected to happen, especially if the individual has a negative outlook on police. So, when the officer actually interacts with that person and uses some of the strategies we've previously discussed, such as agreeing when possible, taking time to explain, apologizing when appropriate, these things will cause that person to reevaluate their behavior.

Brown and Levinson addressed this and said that "when an observer hears politeness near what was expected given prior beliefs, then there is no need to re-examine assumptions and all proceeds nominally." So, this means that if the officer comes up and acts in a way that coincides with what that individual was expecting- maybe the officer was very robotic, maybe they were very direct and stern- it reinforces that person's negative attitude toward the police and perhaps gives them the go ahead to challenge them. However, on the flip side of that when the officer uses more redress, politeness, maybe is more accommodating then expected, then re-examination of assumptions is warranted. Now perhaps that individual feels the need to change their behavior in accordance with the situation and may feel more willing to give compliance.

Outro

So, throughout this episode we looked at Brown and Levinson's politeness theory and Goffman's Face theory and discovered the various applications they have in Police communication. We also learned that politeness isn't just about using nice words, but that it can have a strong impact on trust and compliance.

Thanks so much for listening and as always be kind and keep learning.