



Saving Face: Disfigurement and the Politics of Appearance

By Heather Laine Talley

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Winner, Body and Embodiment Award presented by the American Sociological Association

Imagine yourself without a face—the task seems impossible. The face is a core feature of our physical identity. Our face is how others identify us and how we think of our ‘self’. Yet, human faces are also functionally essential as mechanisms for communication and as a means of eating, breathing, and seeing. For these reasons, facial disfigurement can endanger our fundamental notions of self and identity or even be life threatening, at worse. Precisely because it is so difficult to conceal our faces, the disfigured face compromises appearance, status, and, perhaps, our very way of being in the world.

In *Saving Face*, sociologist Heather Laine Talley examines the cultural meaning and social significance of interventions aimed at repairing faces defined as disfigured. Using ethnography, participant-observation, content analysis, interviews, and autoethnography, Talley explores four sites in which a range of faces are “repaired:” face transplantation, facial feminization surgery, the reality show *Extreme Makeover*, and the international charitable organization Operation Smile. Throughout, she considers how efforts focused on repair sometimes intensify the stigma associated with disfigurement. Drawing upon experiences volunteering at a camp for children with severe burns, Talley also considers alternative interventions and everyday practices that both challenge stigma and help those seen as disfigured negotiate outsider status.

Talley delves into the promise and limits of facial surgery, continually examining how we might understand appearance as a facet of privilege and a dimension of inequality. Ultimately, she argues that facial work is not simply a conglomeration of reconstructive techniques aimed at the human face, but rather, that appearance interventions are increasingly treated as lifesaving work. Especially at a time when aesthetic technologies carrying greater risk are emerging and when discrimination based on appearance is rampant, this important book challenges us to think critically about how we see the human face.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Interested in the question of inequality and gender relations, Talley's most compelling chapter is on a dual analysis of surgeons' justifications for facial surgery and various studies concerning transsexuality and bodily gendered expectations."-*Sociology of Health and Illness*

"*Saving Face* with its fluent prose, compelling case studies, and intellectual depth, offers an important milestone in research toward a better understanding of the dialogue between the body and society, revealing the ways ideologies are embodied, are emblazoned on, and sculpt our appearance."-*Gender & Society*

"*Saving Face* can be read as an intervention into beauty culture and liberal feminism's championing of it, while also striving to shake up contemporary beliefs about ugliness, disfigurement, and the ways in which more and more people are battling 'social death.'" -*PopMatters*

"As a book about face work, Talley contributes to the growing literature on the sociology of the body and embodiment. She focuses less on the face itself and instead hones in on the ways facial interventions become so meaningful. Her analyses are timely and cutting edge."-*American Journal of Sociology*

"*Saving Face* provides a highly interesting look at the role of the human face in society. It is impossible to see another face in the same way after reading this book. The author raises fascinating questions about whether we should intervene through surgery to 'correct' disfigurement. A complex book for a charged subject done with intelligence and balance."-Lennard Davis, author of *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*

"Talley has a talent for moving between sound empirical findings and subtle theoretical conceptions of the meaning of having at least a normal if not actually beautiful face in contemporary society. Particularly outstanding about the author's work is her insistence on analyzing the meaning of being ugly in a society that valorizes the value of being beautiful."-Rosemarie Tong, author of *Feminist Approaches to Bioethics: Theoretical Reflections and Practical Applications*

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