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Extending public relationship-building through the theory of politeness

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ABSTRACT

For more than thirty years, relationship-building has been recognized as central to public relations, and yet, exactly *how* practitioners go about building and maintaining relationships at the micro level has been insufficiently explored in public relations scholarship. Politeness, or a lack thereof, is ever-present in all communicative interactions, affecting the formation and development of relationships. There is therefore value in extending our understanding of how these relationships are impacted by (im)polite communicative acts. Principally, politeness attempts to balance participants' face needs or needs for self-esteem through employing various strategies, and this article attempts to explicate the theory of politeness for public relations work. It concludes that an understanding of the fundamentals of politeness theory and strategies enables practitioners to be more effective at building relationships within and across communities, avoiding potential pragmatic failure.

1. Introduction

For more than thirty years, relationship-building has been recognized as crucial to public relations. Scholars such as Zaharna (2016) asserted that in public relations, "'relations' is literally the latter half of its name" (p. 1), and, indeed, there has been recognition in scholarship that knowledge of, and skills in, relationship-building are key success indictors for practitioners at all career levels (Global Alliance, 2018; Manley & Valin, 2017). However, a thorough conceptualization of 'relationships' in public relations is still missing (Huang & Zhang, 2015), and exactly what relationship-building may look like at a practical interpersonal level in public relations remains largely under-explored. One of the few studies that attempted to shed light on the nature of public relationships at an interpersonal or micro level (cf. Ihlen & Verhoeven, 2015), is a study by Theunissen and Sissons (2018). In their video ethnographic research of the practice of public relations in New Zealand, Theunissen and Sissons identified not only that relationship-building was integral to practicing effectively, but that *politeness strategies* were explicitly employed to build and maintain these relationships. They subsequently proposed that politeness was integral to the development and maintenance of public relationships. Effective public relations practitioners, they argued, are well-versed in applying these strategies during their interactions with clients, colleagues and journalists.

This paper aims to broaden our understanding of public relations work by discussing politeness theory and its applicability to public relationships. It proposes that, contrary to popular perceptions of public relations practitioners being overtly confident and at times arrogant, pompous, even brash (Dennison, 2012), effective practitioners employ 'softer' or politer approaches in developing and maintaining relationships. Though the theory of politeness is hardly new—having been studied, debated and dissected in over forty years in subject areas such as linguistics, interpersonal communication and sociolinguistics—the idea of politeness as a

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competency in public relations work is new. A library search, for instance, results in over 30,000 peer reviewed articles published on 'politeness theory' but none linking it explicitly to the subject area of public relations.

Influential seminal theories include those of Brown and Levinson (1987), Fraser (1990), Lakoff (1975), and Leech (1983) with the aforementioned being regarded as the most influential (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016). Unlike Lakoff (1975) and Leech (1983), who followed a conversational-maxim approach, Brown and Levinson (1987) and Fraser (1990) incorporated Erving Goffman's notion of 'face' (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016; Fraser, 1990) in an attempt to explain politeness beyond basic conversations.

Based on her gender-focused research (McConnell-Ginnet, 2017; Thorne, 1976), Lakoff (2017) proposed that there are certain inherent linguistic rules that need to be followed in order to be polite, namely 1) don't impose (i.e., stay clear of other's business and if you must impose, ask permission first), 2) give options (which includes using hedges) and 3) make the other party 'feel good' (i.e., be friendly). Lakoff's theory has been criticized for various shortcomings, such as focusing on the speakers rather than the audiences, not explicating why only some rules apply in certain situations, and inadequately considering the broader social context (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016).

Originating from the same tradition as Lakoff's, Leech's (1983) theory focuses on the narrow linguistic interaction between participants (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016). The theory proposes a set of six politeness maxims, namely tact, generosity, approbation (praise), modesty, agreement and sympathy (Leech, 1983). The *tact maxim* prioritizes the others' needs, interests and wants, and avoids expressing negative beliefs to the other party. The *generosity maxim* maximizes the implied or expressed benefit to the other while minimizing expressed benefit to oneself. The *approbation maxim* dictates that one should avoid expressing criticism of the other—such as correcting the other interlocutor—while expressing praise for the other. The *modesty maxim* is linked to the approbation maxim by proposing that one should minimize self-praise while emphasizing dispraise of the self. The *agreement maxim* simply suggests that interlocutors should aim for agreement and avoid disagreement while the *sympathy maxim* aims to avoid opposition between interlocutors and maximize sympathy (En & Lan, 2012; Leech, 1983).

Fraser (1990) labelled his theory the 'conversational-contractual view' (CC) and proposed that participants in the conversation enter with an initial set of "rights and obligations" (p. 232) that will initially determine the expectations that each bring into the conversation. Thus, his theory is based on the notion of a *social contract* (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016). Fraser explained that,

> Being polite does not involve making the hearer 'feel good', á la Lakoff or Leech, nor with making the hearer not 'feel bad', á B & L. It simply involves getting on with the task at hand in light of the terms and conditions of the CC. […] Sentences are not *ipso facto* polite, nor are languages more or less polite. It is only speakers who are polite, and then only if their utterances reflect an adherence to the obligations they carry in that particular conversation. (Fraser, 1990, p. 233).

According to Fraser (1990), politeness is *anticipated* and its purpose is to adhere to the notion of a social contract unlike Brown and Levinson's view that politeness is aimed at minimizing potential threats to 'face.' Both, however, have in common that there is concern for the other party (Fraser, 1990) but Brown and Levinson's (1987) is certainly the most influential theory; it is archetypal of the 'face-saving' approach in traditional politeness research (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016). As will discussed later, they believed humans to attempt to balance and maintain negative face (autonomy) and positive face (solidarity) during interactions. In doing so, they identified five key strategies: 1) forego the act, 2) do the act off-record, 3) use positive politeness, 4) use negative politeness, or 5) do the act bald-on-the record.

Brown and Levinson (1987) believed their model to be appropriate across various linguistic and cultural barriers; they saw 'face' as a universal notion. Not all scholars agree, however, and it is particularly this aspect of their theory that has received numerous criticism over the years for being too western oriented (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016; Feng, 2015). Given the findings by Theunissen and Sissons (2018), however, that 'face-saving' was commonplace in effective public relations work in New Zealand (an English speaking country in the Asia-Pacific region), Brown and Levinson's theory is worth exploring as contributing to our understanding of public relationship building, complemented by insights from more recent works from the burgeoning field of socio-linguistics, such as that from Watts (2003).

Following an interdisciplinary approach, this paper will begin by defining politeness and its role in conducting face-work (the maintenance of self- and another's esteem) before discussing norms and strategies of politeness, based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory. Throughout, examples of both the off- and online world will be given to demonstrate the applicability of politeness in public relationship building and public relations work. It concludes that entry-level practitioners should be educated in strategies and norms of politeness as well their effect on relationship building to enable them to build stronger relationships with various publics. Further, it proposes that the theory of politeness should be applied to extend our theoretical understanding of public relationships in the context of public relations work.

2. Defining politeness

In 1990, Fraser commented that,

> At first blush, it might seem obvious that politeness is simply a well understood concept that pervades human interaction, and that the task of those interested has been relatively straightforward. Not so. While the existence of politeness or the lack thereof is not in question, a common understanding of the concept and how to account for it is certainly problematic. […] Remarkably, many of the writers do not even explicitly define what they take politeness to be, and their understanding of the concept must be inferred from statements referencing the term. (p. 219)

More than twenty years on, scholarship appears to be no closer to finding a theoretical definition that adequately describes 'politeness' (Culpeper, Haugh, & Kádár, 2017). Culpeper et al. (2017) proposed that the reason for this is the "research questions that drive the field are diverse, encompassing a whole range of different theoretical and methodological stances" (p. 2). It is this research that has led to the rise of 'politeness theory' as "a set of linguistic theories that relate linguistic action or behavior to social behaviors" (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016, p. 1537) whereby the focus is on minimizing potential difficulties that might develop during interaction (Watson, Wilson, Drew, & Thompson, 2016). Simply put, communicative behavior—whether verbal or non-verbal—is considered polite when it does not offend other people (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016). Politeness is therefore essentially about showing consideration for others (Wang, 2014), and 'politeness theory' is a catch-all phrase for a group of linguistic theories that all attempt to link linguistic behaviors to such social behaviors (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016). In other words, it is a phenomenon that links language and social context and is central to all social interactions (Holtgraves, 2002). Language and culture are, after all, inseparable (Jie, 2010; Świątek, 2017), and polite communicative behavior serves as a tool to curtail risks in the development and maintenance of relationships across the boundaries of language and culture.

Politeness can be understood as different from politic behavior, which Watts (2003) described as ritualized social behavior that reproduces social norms. Politic behavior is taken-for-granted behavior in a specific context or, as Davies, Haugh, and Merrison (2011) stated, 'unmarked' and 'appropriate' for that context. It concerns itself with the institutionalized maintenance of respect or honor. In public relations practice, the simple act of greeting, thanking someone for their time, turning up to meetings on time, not cancelling last minute, inquiring about someone's health or family prior to engaging in business talk, may be seen as politic behavior. In themselves they are not 'polite,' and may even be regarded as insignificant. However, *how* this is done, constitutes polite behavior (Watts, 2003).

In their review of politeness theories, Al-Hindawi and Alkhazaali (2016) used the term 'underpoliteness' as an example of Watts' (2003) politic behavior. They described underpoliteness as referring to "linguistic behaviors that do not necessarily involve the kind of social disharmony or disequilibrium in societal relationships that are conditions for impolite or rude behavior" (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016, p. 1538). In other words, underpoliteness may, on the surface, transgress the norms of politeness but the action has no malice, such as where a speaker uses a false impolite or offensive act to 'grease' the wheel of interaction, such as cursing. Underpoliteness can also be the result of the negotiated context (Al-Hindawi & Alkhazaali, 2016), the relational structure or *situated evaluations* as discussed later in the article.

Politic behavior, Watts (2003) proposed, is "that behavior, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction" (p. 20); it is behavior that is subject to specific institutionalized rules. On the other hand, polite behavior is a "marked extension or enhancement of politic behavior", which can be likened to a "social tip" (Watts, 2003, p. 29). Though norms of politeness do exist and strategies of politeness are both intuitively and formally adhered to, polite behavior is 'more' than merely ritualistic communicative behavior. Watts used the example of queuing in a shop—a behavior that is not normally designated 'polite' *unless* it is violated in some way, such as someone pushing to the front of the queue. The act of queuing is therefore not polite behavior but rather politic (Watts, 2003).

Essentially, politeness involves communicative *choices* participants make to minimize potential *face threats* (Lam, 2011) or communicative acts that, "by their nature run contrary to the face wants" of a person (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 65). For example, a social media user commenting on a post generally does not desire to be called derogatory names nor does a customer want to be ignored by a sales person. Both these communicative acts can be regarded as 'face threatening acts' or FTAs that, in some way, violate norms of what is regarded to be civil and appropriate.

Based on their research of impoliteness in the workplace, Francis, Holmvall, and O'Brien (2015) concluded that norm-violating or uncivil behavior may be seen as a form of "unfair interpersonal treatment" (p. 192). When combined with inferences as to why the other party was impolite, the impolite treatment may result in a negative emotional and reciprocal reaction 'in kind.' Indeed, incivility violates relational rules and destroys trust (Molaei, 2014), making it difficult to build and maintain relationships or to engage in genuine dialogue with individuals and communities.

In today's western society, the notion of 'face' has become emblematic to societal respect or self-esteem. It is "a metaphor for individual qualities and/or abstract entities such as honor, respect, esteem, the self, etc." (Watts, 2003, p. 119). These qualities remain important resources for achieving success and are relevant for public relations' understanding of relationship-building, dialogue and persuasion. Self-esteem needs, for example, can act as drivers for relationship-building (Berko, Rosenfeld, & Samovar, 1997) while respect (or positive regard) is integral to dialogic communication (Bowen, 2010; de Bussy, 2010). 'Face,' however, is a fluid notion and must be continuously attended to during interaction (Sias, Gallagher, Kopaneva, & Pedersen, 2012). Thus, practitioners must be aware and consciously employ appropriate strategies of politeness that address all parties' face needs and wants.

Much of what we understand to be polite or civil has to do with "how people manage their public identities" (Jones, 2015, p. 457) or fulfil their self-esteem needs (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Brown and Levinson (1987) described face as something that can be "lost, maintained, or enhanced" (p. 61). Having borrowed the notion of 'face' from the sociologist Erving Goffman, Brown and Levinson believed that 'face' or public identities can only be ratified by other members of society. Accordingly, face is *earned*; it can only be given by others (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holtgraves, 2002), which suggests that there is an ever-present and inherent risk that it can also be withdrawn (Watson et al., 2016). The withdrawal of face can negatively affect a person's potential success as a member of that community (Locher & Watts, 2005), and therefore, members of a community have a vested interest to maintain their own as well as others' face (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Watts, 2003). Fundamentally, then, politeness is cooperative in nature, working at creating and maintaining a social (Holtgraves, 2002) or moral order (Jay, 2018). To fail to apply appropriate strategies of politeness is to lack consideration for another's self-esteem needs or 'face wants.'

Though, arguably, such cooperation is not entirely selfless, it contributes to creating a sense of community akin to the communitarian perspective of public relations. The latter proposes that human beings have a moral responsibility to others, promoting a sense of community, without necessarily gaining any personal reward (cf. Griffin, 2012; Taylor & Kent, 2014), and are “persons-in-relations who live simultaneously for others and for themselves” (Griffin, 2012, p. 387). It is, in the vein of Kent and Taylor’s (2016) *homo dialogicus,* an approach where the value of others is recognized.

Seen from this perspective, impoliteness and incivility can lead to an unstable community marked by a lack of mutual regard and respect. Brown and Levinson (1987) postulated that the absence of a polite attitude will not simply be read as the *absence* of that attitude but rather as the expression of an *aggressive* attitude. Analogous to Herzberg’s motivational hygiene factors, politeness in some form is expected to be present in interaction. Thus, while its presence will not necessarily enhance public relations work, its absence will most certainly be detrimental, and it is in a public relations practitioner’s best interest to be familiar with norms and strategies of politeness to ensure that relationships with relevant publics are built and sustained.

2.1. Norms of politeness

From a young age, members of a community learn how to behave and speak politely according to certain norms or standards (Shahrokhi & Bidabadi, 2012). These norms evolve and change over time and from community to community, setting boundaries for interactions, which are reproduced through communication exchanges, forming patterns of behavior that are regarded as expected and fitting to the social interaction (Watts, 2005). Standards of what is deemed to be polite are therefore culture-bound and specific to communities and cultural groups; they are driven by the context and situation. But, while *how* we enact politeness may differ between communities, being able to orient ourselves towards others’ tacit face needs through communicative choices is universal (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Świątek, 2017).

Norms of politeness are developed around a ‘model person,’ that is, an able and balanced member of society who thoughtfully works towards maintaining their and others’ face needs (Schnurr, 2013). Though the idea of a model person has been criticized by, among others, Watts (2005) who suggested that it moves politeness and the enactment of politeness away from “real interaction and real people” (p. xxxi), it does remind us that our communicative actions are judged against a set of norms. Not only do we engage in (im)polite and (un)civil behaviors but we *observe*—and judge—the behavior of others. In 2017, for example, the grandson of the founder the US-based National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR), Brian France, caused uproar among the association’s fans because of his impolite behavior at an awards ceremony in Las Vegas. In what was described as “awkward and rude behavior,” the then-NASCAR CEO and chairman “abruptly handed Martin Truex Jr. his NASCAR Cup championship ring before walking off without a handshake” (Weinstein, 2017). The millions of fans expected France to, at the very least, formally congratulate the winner by shaking his hand. When France did not, they were appalled and responded by widely tweeting their disgust.

In another example, the Hong Kong Taxi Council introduced a Taxi Courtesy Campaign in an effort “to reduce misunderstandings between drivers and passengers, diminish unnecessary impoliteness and make passengers feel at home,” thereby improving the taxi industry’s reputation (Cheung, 2018). The latter campaign is an example of how perceptions and reputations can be improved by focusing on behaviors of both parties that were deemed impolite, such as abusing the driver, making unreasonable demands or overcharging passengers. One could therefore argue that *observing* politeness is as important as *enacting* politeness; uncivil behavior affects not only the participants but also those who are onlookers.

In 2013, the French public transport network, SNCF, published an online manual to improve civility among public transport users (Samuel, 2013). The manual was divided into four categories: ‘helpfulness,’ ‘courtesy,’ ‘manners’ and ‘politeness,’ thereby clearly distinguishing between manners (etiquette), courtesy and politeness. While some of the suggestions were presented with humor, such as using a handkerchief not only “to wave someone off on the platform” but to use it to keep germs to themselves (Samuel, 2013), the manual reiterates the importance of politeness as integral to community cohesion. Guillaume Pepy, the head of SNCF, pointed out that “Impolite behavior generates a feeling of anxiety and discomfort” and viewed impolite behavior as ‘ruining’ French commuters’ daily lives (Samuel, 2013).

By violating the rules of politeness specific to a community, one is evaluated as ‘aggressive’ and ‘uncivil,’ and therefore not ‘part of the group’ or an outsider. For public relations this may result in weakened personal influence and/or ability to perform functions on behalf of the organization, such as building relationships with journalists or other publics. The value of understanding the norms (of politeness) that govern various interactions should therefore not be underestimated. Familiarity with the accepted norms of politeness for a specific situation and context is important for public relations practitioners to succeed in a community by being able to apply the appropriate strategies of politeness and avoid misunderstanding. One such an example is discussed by Mersham, Theunissen, and Peart (2009, p. 66, parenthesis added) in regards to public relations practices in New Zealand:

> Māori often hold values related to the use of space and time. The values are more obvious on a marae [meeting place] where, for example, physical distance is maintained between visitors and hosts until certain rituals have been completed, paving the way for a closer relationship. Traversing the space prematurely can cause offence and create unease. Space allows any risk from an encounter to be assessed before a commitment is made.

Not adhering to protocols is not only seen as impolite but may cause offense, making it difficult, if not impossible, to build strong relationships. While the adherence to rituals may be seen as ‘politic’ rather than ‘polite’ (Watts, 2003), the absence of observing such protocols will most certainly be noted as lacking politeness.

2.2. Strategies of politeness

In their critique of politeness theories, Al-Hindawi and Alkhazaali (2016) pointed out that there are many different politeness theories—all attempting to develop a systematic understanding "for the commonsense notion of politeness" (p. 1537).

Brown and Levinson (1987) postulated that human beings essentially have two primary face needs: negative face and positive face, having borrowed the notion of 'face' from Goffman as discussed earlier. *Negative face* refers to the desire for independence and not having one's actions interfered with by others while *positive face* refers to the desire to be needed in some way by other members of a society or to be included (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Because politeness is inherently relational in nature (Locher & Watts, 2005), deciding which strategies to employ will depend on the existing relationship between the parties (Brown & Levinson, 1987) as well as the message content (Lam, 2011). Brown and Levinson (1987) identified five key strategies to deal with potential face-threatening acts which can be placed on a continuum of politeness (Holtgraves, 2002): 1) don't do the act at all (e.g., say nothing), 2) do the act off-record so there is room for interpretation (e.g., "*The client will probably ask for the report*," 3) do the act on-record with positive politeness to express solidarity (e.g., *"I can help you finish the report"*, 4) do the act on-record with negative politeness to extend distance and autonomy (e.g., "*If you have the time, could you finish that report?"* and 5) do the act bald-on-the record without any redress in the most direct and concise way possible (e.g., *"Finish the report"*).

The choice of strategy will depend on the choices made by participants with the first choice being whether to go ahead with the face threatening communicative act or to *forgo it* altogether (Brown & Levinson, 1987)—the politest strategy of all five (Holtgraves, 2002).

The second choice involves the participant choosing whether to go off-the-record or not. *Off-the-record politeness* attempts to avoid explicit imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987) by leaving it to the interpretation of the addressee whether the act was polite or not. Because there are many possible interpretations of that specific communicative act, the speaker can easily distance themselves from the meaning or intent of the act (Holtgraves, 2002).

In the case of *bald-on-the-record*, the communicator explicitly conveys the intent of the act, resulting in the least polite strategy (Holtgraves, 2002). A mother may, for example, instruct her child to 'go to bed.' There is little intent to be polite; she may do so because she holds the most power in the relationship. Indeed, the strategy and the level of politeness chosen for a particular interaction carries information about the participants' status as well as their relationship (Holtgraves, 2002). For example, an extremely deferential participant may be perceived to be lower in status whereas a higher status participant may be inclined to engage in more bald-on-the-record communicative acts because of a lack of fear of repercussions.

Situated between bald-on-the-record and off-the-record strategies are two further strategies: positive politeness and negative politeness. According to Holtgraves (2002), positive politeness is marginally politer than negative politeness. *Positive politeness* strategies attend to positive face (connection, belonging) through emphasizing common ground, expressing sympathy, cooperation and appreciation (Davies et al., 2011) or *solidarity* (Brown & Levinson, 1987). *Negative politeness* strategies attend to negative face, that is, where there is a focus on the participant's autonomy and rights, extending 'distance' (Davies et al., 2011). Brown and Levinson (1987) referred to this as the expression of *constraint*.

Given that each relationship is unique with an inimitable relational structure (Theunissen & Sissons, 2018), and it often depends on a third party's value judgments (Locher & Watts, 2005) as to what is regarded as impolite or uncivilized, deciding on the appropriate strategy is not always straightforward. Indeed, what one person may perceive to be rude, another person may see as perfectly polite (Coe, Kenski, & Rains, 2014). As Jay (2018) pointed out, some people are more sensitive to the use of swearwords, for example, which he described as comprising "several semantic categories: taboo words, sex acts, body parts, disgusting body products, religion, name-calling, slurs, animal references, ancestral allusions, and slang" (p. 109). To some, the word 'shit' may be offensive whereas others may use the word as a means to show their solidarity, thus attending to positive face.

Consequently, what is deemed polite or impolite are *situated evaluations* that arise in and through the interactions at that moment (Davies et al., 2011), and it is these evaluations that determine the level of politeness appropriate for a specific communicative encounter. Indeed, impoliteness is generally characterized by *unnecessary* disrespectful behavior for a specific context (Coe et al., 2014), such as displayed by the NASCAR CEO in the earlier example. The CEO's behavior was not as extreme as theft, but his behavior was certainly disrespectful of those present at the ceremony. In this case, a politeness strategy that would have explicitly acknowledged the winner's recognition within NASCAR's community (positive face) would have been more appropriate and respectful to not only the winner but those attending the awards evening (the audience).

Online, impoliteness can manifest through a range of behaviors, such as name-calling, casting aspersions, lying (either directly or by implication), using vulgar language, and pejoratives (Coe et al., 2014). Notwithstanding such blatant uncivil behaviors, some communicative acts are by their very nature face threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For example, requests for assistance can be an imposition and may interfere with the other party's independence (negative face), or the inability to comply with such a request may express little regard for the recipient's feelings (positive face). In such cases, effective communicators employ strategies that aim to minimize potential problems in the communication process.

When choosing a politeness strategy, participants weigh up the desire to communicate specific content, the efficiency or urgency of that content, and the desire to preserve the others' face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). For public relations practice, considering these factors shifts the focus towards the importance of the relationship and the need to preserve that relationship by explicitly recognizing the needs or wants of the other party—a *homo dialogicus* approach (Kent & Taylor, 2016).

In 2018, the animal rights activist organization PETA sent a letter to the Parish Council of a village in Dorset, United Kingdom, to change the village name from 'Wool' to 'Vegan Wool' in order to be kind to the sheep (Wool they or won't they? PETA ask Dorset, UK, village Wool to change name to Vegan Wool, 2018). PETA offered 'cruelty-free' woolen blankets to households should they agree. Though most villagers thought the request to be amusing, some took offense as the name did not come from 'wool' but from the ancient term for well, or 'welle.' Not only was the request inherently face threatening as it threatened the villagers' independence as a community and their right to choose their own name (negative face), but most likely the activist organization chose to place emphasis on their desire to communicate the request as a publicity stunt, and paid little, if any attention to community's desire to preserve face. Considering the nature of the request, PETA could have opted for the politest of Brown and Levinson's five politeness strategies, namely not to appeal for any name change.

All interactions are organized into *preferred* or *dispreferred* approaches (Brown & Levinson, 1987), which means that some approaches are preferred in everyday interactions. For example, agreement is usually preferred to disagreement as it can be seen as impolite to disagree (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Thus, parties would lean towards expressing agreement even though, as Sifianou (2012) suggested, disagreement can be an indicator of a strong relationship and can even be seen as sociable. In cooperative interactions, such as online forums, team work, and other community-related work, *positive* politeness strategies have been found to be more prevalent than *negative* politeness strategies (cf. Kavanagh, 2016; Vinagre, 2008). Examples include expressing gratitude "Thank you for stopping by" and solidarity markers "I really felt for you" (positive politeness) or hedging an assertion or a request (negative politeness) (Kavanagh, 2016). In the practice of public relations, hedges such as 'might' or 'should' to soften statements are frequently used (Theunissen & Sissons, 2018). The use of self-repairs as opposed to the 'repair' or correction of another is also common. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) self-repairs, the acceptance of requests or offers instead of refusals, and listening are preferred strategies in ordinary interactions. Difficulties are encountered if parties unintentionally opt for dispreferred strategies, leading to, amongst other things, pragmatic failure.

3. Pragmatic failure

Because the norms of politeness are established within a specific community, and thus differ between communities, there is a risk that those who are unfamiliar with a community, its norms and its use of language, will fall short of the required standards of communicative (and linguistic) behavior. Recently, for example, the Coca Cola Company set up a vending machine for their product in New Zealand, cleverly linking the languages of Māori and English with their greeting: "Kia ora, Mate," ['hello, friend']. Unfortunately, the word 'mate' (death) also exists in Māori resulting in the unintended greeting 'hello, death' if read solely in Māori. The effect resulted in numerous sarcastic tweets from those who had observed the communication; the unfortunate link between sugary drinks, obesity and death did not pass them by ('Hello, death:' Coca-Cola's te reo marketing blunder, 2018). In this case the communicative act of combining the two languages led to 'pragmatic failure.'

Pragmatic failure results from a lack in communicative competence where the communicative act is not appropriate for that specific social context (Jie, 2010). Often, community members transfer the norms from their own language culture directly to another culture, even though these norms may differ from the target culture's (Chejnová, 2014).

Although much of the research regarding cross-cultural politeness is limited to language cultures, and more specifically, international second-language speakers, the principle of pragmatic failure can be applied across various cultures and various contexts. Thomas (1983) highlighted that cross-cultural pragmatic failure is not limited to interactions between native and non-native speakers, but across regions, ethnicities and status. She described cross-cultural pragmatic failure as resulting from "any communication between two people who, in any particular domain, do not share a common linguistic or cultural background" (p. 91), and may therefore include groupings such as managers and workers or lecturers and their students. Or, in the example above, between The Coca Cola Company and its New Zealand consumers.

The more diverse the publics, the greater the potential for pragmatic failure, which may result in being unable to successfully build relationships with and within a community because it may lead to negative evaluation and a loss of esteem in the host community. The failure to match the other group's standards of politeness may be detrimental to social advancement in that community (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To prevent such failure, a skilled communicator should have both linguistic and pragmatic competence. Thomas (1983) referred to this communicative competence as "levels of knowledge" (p. 92) ranging from grammatical knowledge to social competence.

Those who share a language or cultural backgrounds develop similar processes for reasoning and prompts for interaction, especially in face to face interaction (Baumer & Van Rensburg, 2011). However, according to Baumer and Van Rensburg, in computer-mediated interaction, these prompts are often not shared, and politeness cues are becoming increasingly vague. Indeed, according to Chejnová (2014), norms of politeness have become 'freer' in computer-mediated environments. Adding to this that one person's 'polite' is another person's 'impolite,' doors to flaming, trolling and name-calling are opened when people engage online. Such uncivil behavior affects the quality of online discussions (Molaei, 2014), and could affect the potential for relationship-building as well as for dialogic and persuasive communication because of a breakdown in trust and respect.

To complicate matters, in the context of the Internet where English is still the most common language used on forums, blogs, postings and websites—albeit only marginally with 25.4% of all language use being English (Statista, 2018)—misunderstandings are likely to ensue as native and non-native speakers engage in discussions. Native and non-native English speakers encode and decode messages very differently, applying their own cultural understandings to the communicative act (Baumer & Van Rensburg, 2011). According to Baumer and Van Rensburg, "Native English speakers tend to become content with the idea that the English language and culture are omnipresent and understood around the world" (2011, p. 36). They believed that English has a distinct form of politeness, which may be seen as discourteousness towards those who are assumed to belong to 'out-groups,' or groups with which the native English speaker does not identify. For example, while in most cultures, it would be impolite to call other persons derogatory names, such as 'idiots' or 'morons,' the *extent* to which it is tolerated differs across cultures. In Indonesian, for instance, the expression of 'less' (*kurang*) is more commonly used as a polite negative in contrast with the more relaxed western attitude towards insulting others (Molaei, 2014). Molaei (2014) wrote that, instead of referring to someone as 'stupid' or a 'liar,' Indonesians would refer to such a person as 'less smart' or 'less truthful.' Equally, it would be impolite to visibly show anger, to refuse an offer by bluntly saying 'no,' or to openly express disagreement (Molaei, 2014). Anything less would be seen as behavior that “lacks culture or sophistication” (“uncivilized”, 2001, p. 805). Understanding such nuances in cross-cultural communication is crucial for effective public relations work and integral to developing, for example, the skill of “applying contextual, cross-cultural and diversity considerations” (Global Alliance, 2018).

Kavanagh’s (2016) research into the use of emoticons among Japanese and American online users showed that emoticons “served to channel and emphasize a politeness strategy and to clarify the pragmatic and polite intention of the comment writer” (p. 56). He found that, because of language differences, Japanese users had a much wider variety of emoticons from which to choose and used these liberally in their communication. Since American users were limited in the number of available emoticons, they used fewer to convey their polite intentions, and the meaning of these emoticons had to be deduced from the context. In both cases, however, the emoticons tended to favor *positive* face, that is, the expression of solidarity and community.

In further research, involving Turkish student-professor computer-mediated communication, Burgucu-Tazegül, Han, and Engin (2016) found that students’ e-requests commonly favored direct strategies of politeness, asking direct questions and producing a ‘want’ statement. Students generally supported these requests by giving reasons, justifications or explanations, but engaging in *few mitigating strategies*, which resulted in “directness and impoliteness” (Burgucu-Tazegül et al., 2016, p. 111). Openings and closings in emails (greetings) served as positive politeness strategies by expressing solidarity, but unlike Burgucu-Tazegül et al. (2016), Kavanagh (2016) found these markers to be absent in student emails. Burgucu-Tazegül et al. viewed the directness of communication as impolite. In her research on politeness in student emails, Chejnová (2014), however, pointed out that in Czech culture direct requests are perfectly polite—more so than in Anglo cultures. Indeed, in Germanic cultures it would be appropriate to address issues of concern in meetings, to challenge viewpoints, and to openly disagree. Directness is valued, but so is politeness.

For public relations practitioners being culturally aware and understanding the differences in communicating in both on- and offline environments is important when constructing messages to build relationships. Understanding basic norms and expectations across various media, such as emails, social media posts, and face-to-face communication, and being able to apply this understanding is crucial for public relations work. And yet, it has been taken-for-granted that all practitioners are familiar with these courtesies and politeness strategies.

4. Politeness and relationship-building

A well-functioning, democratic society requires civil discourse (Hopp & Vargo, 2017) and dialogue where diverse views are heard and respected. However, a by-product of dialogue is often disagreement because it “can expose differences as well as similarities” (Theunissen & Wan Noordin, 2012, p. 11), and where there is disagreement, conflict and impoliteness are likely to follow. Indeed, Hopp and Vargo (2017) believed that impoliteness is a normal bi-product of wide-ranging partisan discussions—especially in heterogeneous communities because these members do not share the same norms of politeness, and often “lack the fundamental social tools (i.e., trust, credibility, mutual feelings of obligation)” (p. 370) to engage in civil and polite behaviors.

Besides destroying trust (Molaei, 2014), incivility devalues differing opinions, lowering the views of the audiences (Coe et al., 2014), and thereby undermining relationships and a sense of community. Not only is civility necessary to ensure that relationships are maintained during inevitable periods of disagreement (Strachan & Wolf, 2012) but politely expressed views have a greater chance at being accepted (Molaei, 2014), linking politeness to not only relationship-building and dialogue but also to persuasion.

Incidentally, a significant portion of the examples in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) original work contains examples where ‘facework’ was meant to bring about a persuasive effect (Świątek, 2017). According to Świątek, the presence of these examples demonstrates that politeness phenomena are an “inherent dimension of communication that has evolved together with other aspects of communication” (2017, p. 49). Politeness and persuasive communication, Świątek argued, are both relational in nature, and indeed, the same could be said about dialogue. *Inclusion*, characterized here by positive face and positive politeness strategies, is indeed an influential rhetorical activity that increases feelings of powerfulness, affecting emotional state and making participants more amenable to being influenced (Theunissen, 2015). While it is not suggested here that politeness theory is akin to rhetorical theory, Świątek’s view that there are parallels to be drawn, is a compelling reason for public relations practitioners to develop a greater awareness of strategies of politeness to fulfil their role as relationship managers.

In their investigation into click speech and the spiral of silence, Pang et al. (2016) concluded that uncivil discussants were perceived as more ‘dominant’ in the discussion (as opposed to being ‘amicable’), effectively preventing those with opposing views from speaking up. They stated that “regardless of the levels of fear of isolation and opinion congruence, participants generally prefer a civil to incivil [sic] environment for opinion expression” (Pang et al., 2016, p. 904). Indeed, the presence of impoliteness and incivility communicates a lack of respect for others, and creates an environment where participants may become reluctant to participate in discussions, or to be persuaded by differing opinions. Name-calling, vulgar language and pejoratives devalue the voices of individuals (Coe et al., 2014). Oftentimes, however, impoliteness is not as obvious as these uncivil behaviors may suggest.

In their research on emails in the workplace, Francis et al. (2015) identified grammatically correct emails that had appropriate headings in the subject field and started and ended with a greeting as representing politeness. They wrote that the lack of these courtesies violated the norms of respect in a workplace because they ignored the demands that are placed on the recipient(s) of that email. They further added that email senders who paid attention to the norms of formal emails were perceived as competent, friendly and likeable, which was similar to Morand’s (1996) assertion that superiors who were polite were perceived to be more agreeable and less dominant, thus softening the formal power they held.

In this vein, Lam (2011) proposed that leaders who wished to create trust, should minimize ‘aggravating moves’ (moves that could be perceived as face threatening acts) by using mitigating strategies when issuing a directive. Theunissen and Sissons (2018) identified similar politeness behaviors enacted by public relations practitioners in an attempt to minimize potential face threats during interactions with colleagues and clients. They found that effective practitioners not only *planned* their interactions but *employed politeness devices* such as repairs during interactions to mitigate perceived face threats. Indeed, skilled communicators are aware that certain requests, messages or behaviors may potentially threaten face (respect), and carefully consider their strategies in managing these situations. They are also aware that different channels or media require different strategies. Studies in sociolinguistics have shown, for example, that face-to-face communicators hedge more than electronic online groups (Kavanagh, 2016).

Theunissen and Sissons (2018) highlighted two key examples where practitioners needed to convey messages that could have been potentially face threatening: one to a colleague and one to a client. In each case the public relations practitioners considered how to approach the addressee and rehearsed *what* they would say prior to the meeting and potentially *how* they would convey it. In the case of the client, they adjusted their strategy by employing politeness devices during their meeting in an attempt to minimize the face threat and to preserve the relationship. These examples support Chejnová's (2014) findings that control over editing, planning and performance afforded 'actors' in a communicative interaction the opportunity to create "socially desirable messages" (p. 179). Hence, the importance of *planning, editing* and *reciting* prior to a communicative interaction—either face-to-face or written—should not be under-estimated. Employing politeness strategies may aide practitioners in generating 'socially desirable' or polite messages, preserving the face of the participants, and assisting in building relationships with organizational publics and workplace colleagues. In explaining the relevance of their research on maintenance of relationships through politeness for public relations practitioners, Sias, Gallagher, Kopaneva, and Pedersen (2014) wrote:

> Simply put, practitioners may help employees maintain their friendships and strengthen their relationships with other employees by developing communication methods perceived as polite and considerate of their coworkers. This also may enhance work team identity.

5. Conclusion

Meaning is embedded in language, and consequently, shared norms can be deduced from the language used and in individual communicators' choice of words (Held, 2005). Thus, the use of (im)polite language is not only determined *by* the context, but also *creates* a context (Davies et al., 2011).

The theory of politeness holds implications for public relations practices and our understanding of relationship-building in particular. It provides a range of potential avenues to explore: from adding to the skillset of practitioners as communicators to the potential of creating an environment for relationship-building and dialogue. To be effective, public relations practitioners should be familiar with politeness as a phenomenon *and* as a communicative practice with various cross- and multicultural contexts.

To ensure that relationships are built and maintained, communicative acts require planning, reciting (prior to participation) and repair (during participation) to safeguard respect and mutuality. Doing so requires a higher level of interactional and communication competency than has been acknowledged thus far in public relations scholarship. Suggesting that a practitioner must be skilled at 'relationship-building' is therefore inadequate as it implicitly takes for granted abilities that are not innate but can be, and should be, taught.

Incorporating politeness as a skillset or competency into the practice of public relations suggests that more attention should be paid to interpersonal communication or the micro level of public relations practice. Like a ripple in a pond, what a practitioner does at the micro level spills out to the organization and ultimately to society. Politeness theory principally moves the focus away from merely achieving a desired change in attitude or behavior to one that is more substantive—one where a public's face or the respect they have earned in a society is recognized. It prompts us to reflect on how actions and messages are perceived and what impact these may have on society. Thus, it could be incorporated into a theory of reputation management.

Strategies of politeness allow us to consider the challenge of maintaining distance in a relationship vs. moving closer by acknowledging that both are integral to expressing consideration for others' wants and needs.

Furthermore, pragmatic failure could potentially be explored as hindering relationship-building, dialogue and persuasion in social media. Perchance the fact that publics share a working knowledge of a language, such as English, is not enough. We might also need to consider others' sociolinguistic use and how it affects the manner in which they interpret messages. Politeness theory and the presence of pragmatic failure reinforces the need for cultural competency not only in face-to-face interactions but also in mediated communication. Cultural competency in public relations is not a luxury; it is a requirement for effective public relations work in a global environment.

Overall, acknowledgement of the need to train entry-level practitioners in practical relationship-building skills through familiarizing them with the theory and application of politeness should form part of the public relations program. Only *then* can we truly engage, and represent, the diverse voices that make up our various communities and move towards a richer enactment of relationship-building and maintenance while contributing to a robustly functioning society that acknowledges and 'hears' these diverse voices through dialogic practice.

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