

# The Impact of Third Party Presence on the Motivational Concerns Underlying Linguistic Politeness Behavior in English-speaking Intercultural Contexts

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## Abstract

This paper reports the impact of third party presence on the Vietnamese motivational concerns underlying their politeness behavior in English-speaking intercultural workplace. Data are collected by means of diary-type record sheet. Twenty-four Vietnamese speakers of English working in non-government-organization offices in Vietnam reported noticeable incidents of their interaction with Westerners (Anglo-culturalists). Data have shown that the presence of a third party influences Vietnamese motivational concerns, especially the concern for face and for association rights. Based on the findings, implications for intercultural communication are provided.

**Keywords:** face, imposition, intercultural communication, third party presence

## 1. Introduction

### *1.1 On the Notion of Third Party Presence*

Although the effect of third party presence on communication was investigated in the early 60s in medical contexts (e.g., Taietz, 1962), this term was left undefined until the 80s. Goffman (1981, 1983) was among the first to define this term. In Goffman (1983), third party presence is represented in the notion of listeners as “bystanders”, which refers to people in sight and/or sound of the participants of the encounter, but not currently the ratified participants themselves (p. 136). From this definition, it can be inferred that third party presence can be used to refer to 1) people who are present at the scene of the encounter and witness and/or hear what is going on in the encounter, but do not have an official “participation status” (p. 137) (e.g., over-hearers); or 2) people who are present at the scene of the encounter as official participants of the wider context of interaction but are currently not directly involved in the encounter at the point of reference (i.e., the unaddressed participant, e.g., the rest of people present in a meeting where at times the chairman just directs his talk to one person). The term “third party presence” in the current chapter includes both meanings: the over-hearer and the unofficial participant.

Goffman (1983) also remarks that the presence of a third party person / people should be considered the rule, not the exception, since in daily life much of talk takes place in the presence of person(s) who are not “ratified participants and whose access to the encounter, however minimal, is itself perceivable by the official participants” (p. 132). Despite this recognition, as reviewed below there is only a limited amount of research in relation to third party presence in communication in general and politeness in intercultural communication in particular.

### *1.2 The Role of Third Party Presence in Communication*

The influence of third party presence on communication has been primarily researched in health contexts (e.g., Aquilino, 1993; Taietz, 1962; Lamb, 1985; Bradburn et al., 1989; Pollner & Adams, 1994). One of the earliest references to the influence of third party presence in the research literature was found in Lamb (1985). This research shows that the presence of parents has more influence than the presence of the child’s sibling on the behaviour of the child, and that the behaviour of any parent towards their child is also affected by the presence of the other parent. Lamb (1985) refers to this phenomenon as “second order effect”. Taietz (1962) found that in interviews the expression of elderly parents’ attitudes about living with their children is significantly more positive in the presence of their children than when they are interviewed in the presence of their spouse. In the same vein, respondents tend to make more favourable assessments of their marital relationship and provide more sensitive information in the presence of their spouse (Aquilino, 1993). However, Bradburn et al. (1989) and Pollner and Adams (1994) demonstrate the opposite: in Bradburn et al. (1986) there is no consistent difference in responses to sensitive questions (e.g., drug use) between people interviewed in isolation and those questioned in the presence of the others. In the same vein, Pollner and Adams (1994) show that in interviews of health contexts, the American patients / respondents are not influenced by the presence of

others, typically their spouse or their child, when they report symptoms, as well as when they perform on a cognitive impairment test. Similar results were also found in Silver, Abramson and Anderson's (1986) research, where the presence of the others was found not to consistently affect the respondents' description of their physical symptoms.

In terms of politeness behaviour, Arosson and Rundstrom's (1989) study is one of the first investigations of whether politeness is affected by a third party presence in medical interviews: specifically, how can the doctor balance the need to clarify children's natural physical disorders (which are closely connected with contact with pets) in the presence of their parent(s) on the one hand, and the need for politeness on the other? How can their strategies handle their institutional authority (i.e., their right to ask questions as a doctor) in such a way that parental authority is not threatened? The results suggest that doctors can actually talk to parents through children. That is, doctors can exploit the third party presence when they examine children as patients. In this sense the speaker's move can be seen as direct or indirect, depending on addressee type: e.g., the doctor's recommendations with respect to pet keeping, food habits, and so on, telling the child "you should not play with the cat any more", are directly sent to the child / the patient, but the message "you should keep the cat in" is at the same time implied [i.e., indirect] to the parent. Any utterance should be analysed sequentially, since when doctors see that respectful indirectness does not work they tend to phrase their requests in an increasingly direct form. Despite evidence from research in the medical field about the role of third party presence in communication, we have not found any further substantial literature with regard to politeness on the role of third party presence in general communication contexts, especially in intercultural communication.

### *1.3 Third Party Presence from a Confucian View*

In the Confucian *Analects*, the impact of the presence of a third party on one's behaviour is addressed in the descriptions of Confucius' change of speaking manner in accordance with the presence and absence of his superior. For instance: "at court, when speaking with Counsellors of lower rank he was affable, when speaking with Counsellors of upper rank, he was respectful. In the presence of his lord, his bearing, though respectful, was composed" (X, 2). The role of third person presence is clearly documented in the Vietnamese literature, where one person can have different roles, and thereby behaves differently towards the same person, depending on the absence or presence of a third person. For instance, it is a common practice for a woman who had become a king's wife to behave towards her father or parents in the presence of other royal family members very differently from the way she behaved towards them in the absence of others. This Confucian practice can also be seen in the Chinese classic *Hong lou meng* (Cao, 1791) (meaning "the dream of the red mansion"), which is one of the two most popular Confucian-based novels (Phan, 2006). In one of the scenes described in the book, the emperor's concubine came to visit her own family for the first time since she married the emperor, escorted by imperial officials. When she arrived home, in the presence of the imperial officials, her whole family received her with formal rituals in the family hall. Her father, a high-ranking official in the royal palace, knelt before her and kowtowed, since his daughter now was higher in the official hierarchy than him. Only when the welcoming ceremony was over and all of the other imperial officials left her

house did the emperor's concubine kneel down and kowtow to her father. A similar practice was observed in many Vietnamese dynasties. This example shows that not only the change of setting but also the presence / absence of a third party can have a role in Confucian cultures. Specifically one's role toward the same person can change according to the presence or absence of other people.

#### *1.4. Face and its Conditional Existence*

Starting from Goffman's (1967) concept, face is well developed by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) in their face-centred model of politeness face. Face in this model is expressed in the individual's want to be approved of, and the individual's want to be free from imposition. In other words, the desire to be loved, supported, and admired, and the desire to have full freedom in doing what one wants, have become the key explanations in Western politeness behavior. As confirmed by various researchers, it is the harmony of individual behaviour with the judgment and acceptance of other people, rather than the accommodation of individual desires, which is emphasised by Confucian face (Mao, 1994; Matsumoto, 1988; Yu, 1999, 2003). In Vietnamese culture, the popularity of the phrase of *mặt dày* (thick-skinned face) shows the constant Vietnamese consciousness of the possible negative judgment of society on their behavior (Pham, 2007). The concern for public evaluation which can result in face loss leads to the fact that since young age people are taught to conceal things that are vulnerable to criticism from the public, as seen in proverbs such as *đóng cửa bảo nhau* 'one should criticize each other only within the family, if one has to do so' (literally, teaching each other indoors), or *tốt khoe, xấu che* 'displaying good things and covering bad things' (literally, display good, hiding bad). The strong Vietnamese orientation toward face protection (Pham, 2014a,b) and awareness of possible social disapproval, leads them to conceal expressions of their behaviour which they think may incur social criticism, and damage their face or the face of the community they belong to.

#### *1.5 Theoretical Framework for Data Analysis*

In order to uncover the possible patterns of underlying concerns of Vietnamese politeness behaviour in Vietnamese-Anglo-cultural interactions, the present study is based on the list of categories proposed and tested by Spencer-Oatey (2000, 2002, 2005). Spencer-Oatey (2000) suggested a list of people's concerns in interactions. This list of categories was first tested against the empirical data found in Spencer-Oatey's study of the Chinese motivational concerns in relationship management with Anglo-culturals. Later this list was more developed by Spencer-Oatey (2002, 2005), and has been employed by various researchers to analyse their intercultural data. Spencer-Oatey's list of concerns that people have in interactions expresses two motivational sources: the concern for face and the concern for rights / obligations.

Face has two interrelated aspects:

1. *Quality Face*, referring to peoples' desire to be evaluated positively in terms of their personal qualities like competence, abilities and appearance. This is in line with Brown and Levinson's (1978, 1987) notion of positive face.

2. *Social Identity Face*, referring to the “desire for people to acknowledge and uphold our social identities or roles, e.g., group leader, valued customer, close friend. *Social Identity Face* [original emphasis] is concerned with the value that we effectively claim for ourselves in terms of social or group roles, and is closely associated with our sense of public worth” (Spencer-Oatey, 2002, p. 540).

Although the context of both the present research and Spencer-Oatey’s (2002) study is intercultural interactions, unlike Spencer-Oatey’s work, where the participants are Chinese non-native speakers of English in the target culture (Chinese in Chinese-Vietnamese interaction in Great Britain), the Vietnamese participants in the present research are non-native speakers of English in interactions with Anglo-cultural in their own home culture (i.e., Vietnamese-Anglo-cultural interactions in Vietnam). There was a need to modify the original list of categories to better capture the Vietnamese motivational concerns for their politeness behaviour in interaction with Anglo-cultural. Furthermore, the availability of a considerable amount of evidence in the data collected suggested that the category of *Social Identity Face* should be divided into 2 subcategories: *Social Role Identity Face* and *Between-Group Face*. The former refers to the original *Social Identity Face* that Spencer-Oatey proposed, and in this instance it is closely associated with the Vietnamese’ sense of their public worth in their local context of the intercultural workplace. The later emphasizes the orientation towards the difference in-group cultures. An example of the *Social Role Identity Face* is when a Vietnamese as a coordinator of a foreign-sponsored project claimed that he hoped that his role as project co-coordinator would be appropriately acknowledged (with his image as somebody of relatively high seniority). An example of the concern for *Between-Group Face* is seen in the situation where a Vietnamese staff member claimed in a conflict situation that he tried not to react as strongly to his Anglo-cultural colleague as he would to his Vietnamese colleague in a similar situation, because he wanted to maintain the positive image about the Vietnamese and Vietnamese culture in the mind of his Anglo-cultural counterpart. The notion of *Between-Group Face* used for data analysis in this study partly relates to the notion of “collective face” in that face can be considered as the possession not only of an individual (as shown in “my image, my face”, but also as the property of a collective group (as in “our face”, “the face of our family / country”). The notion of *Between-Group Face* in the present research emphasizes the Vietnamese sense of the cultural and/or ethnic difference between them and their Anglo-cultural counterparts, and hence their sense of their national / ethnic face in intercultural communication.

The concern for right / obligations has two interrelated aspects: the *Equity Principle* and the *Association Principle*.

The category of *Equity Principle* consists of:

- *Cost-Benefit considerations*, which refer to people’s concerns that they should not be exploited or disadvantaged. That is why a “costly” request should be worded in a different (i.e., more polite) way compared with a less costly request.
- *Fairness and Reciprocity*, which refers to people’s concern that cost-benefit should be fair and kept thoroughly in balance. For instance, a favour should be reciprocated.

- *Autonomy-Control*, which refers to people's concern that they should have full freedom in their actions and should not unduly controlled or imposed upon (i.e., the negative face concern in Brown & Levinson's model, but not necessarily a face concern in Vietnamese culture (Pham, 2014b). For example, in the workplace the boss should only make "work-related" demands on employees.

The *Association Principle* is comprised of three components:

- *Involvement*, the concern that one should have appropriate amounts and types of activity involvement with other people. For instance, colleagues should socialize with each other apart from work matters (e.g., visiting or telephoning each other socially on a regular basis).
- *Empathy*, referring to the concern that people should share appropriate interests, feelings and concern with others. For example, existing staff should show concern for new staff, or the boss should show concern for subordinates. In the present research this category is extended to include the concern of the Vietnamese staff in NGO offices for their Anglo-cultural colleagues and/or boss, as an extension of the concern by the host for guests (i.e., some Vietnamese think that since their Anglo-cultural colleague is a guest in their country, the Vietnamese should therefore behave in a more caring way and should be more flexible in their judgment of culturally inappropriate behaviour).
- *Respect*, referring to the concern that people should show appropriate respect for each other. For instance, younger people should pay respect to elders.

## 2. Research Methods

### 2.1 Participants

Twenty-four Vietnamese speakers of English working full-time in English-speaking intercultural contexts are the participants of the present study. These people work with Anglo native speakers of English (specifically British, Americans and Australians) in various offices of non-government-organization, foreign-funded projects in Vietnam. The participants include 15 males and 9 females, aged from 28 to 46. They have at least 5 years of work experience at the time of the study. They are in different positions in their jobs, ranging from secretary, officer and consultant to programme / project coordinator or director.

### 2.2 Research Instruments

The research employed a diary-type record sheet as a principal instrument to collect data. The participants were asked to report noticeable incidents related to their interaction with Westerners in intercultural workplace contexts. Each participant was asked to complete at least two record sheets. One type of sheet was to record the most noticeable event with a particularly negative effect, explicitly explained as interactions with Anglo-cultural native speakers of English that made him / her feel particularly annoyed, insulted, embarrassed and/or humiliated. The other was to record the most noticeable event with a particularly positive effect, explicitly explained as interactions with Anglo-cultural native speaker(s) of



English that made him / her feel particularly happy, proud and/or satisfied. Each record sheet comprised 2 sections: information about the participant and information about the recorded event.

The participants were also requested to provide information about their gender, age, the length of their employment, and the frequency of working with people from English-speaking cultures. The main section of the record sheet has 5 subsections, including: 1) The setting where the participants were asked to give information about the place and the time of the occurrence; 2) Information about the other people involved (specifically gender, age, nationality, the relationship with the participant, the length of acquaintance, and the intensity of the relationship according to the participants' subjective evaluation); 3) The report of the occurrence; 4) The participants' immediate reactions and feelings and 5) The reasons for the participants' reactions and feelings. For some sections, where a clarification of the relevant information was needed, some examples and/or prompts were provided. For example, for the section "The relationship with you", prompts such as "colleague" and "subordinates" were given.

Follow-up semi-structured interviews were implemented to understand in more depth the incidents where the participants as Vietnamese working in intercultural contexts reported their act of imposing on their Anglo-cultural counterparts.

In the corpus of 201 authentic incidents, there are 42 incidents in which the informants confirmed the influence of third party presence on how they felt or reacted in the reported incidents. Given that third party presence was not originally an independent variable of the study, this number of 42 incidents is worth a careful analysis. Drawing on emerging evidence from the data corpus of the present study, this special section is dedicated to an elaboration of the effect of third party presence on the fundamental motivational concerns underlying the Vietnamese politeness behaviour, especially on their decision to perform or not perform imposition acts on Anglo-cultural in intercultural communication contexts.

### **3. Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of 42 third party presence-associated incidents in the present study shows that third party presence has a close connection with 2 main groups of Vietnamese motivational concerns in intercultural communication, namely *Face* and *Association Rights*, and hence on their (non)- imposition acts on Anglo-cultural in intercultural communication.

#### *3.1 Third Party Presence and Face Concern*

As Pham (2014b) maintains, the Vietnamese consciousness of the conditional existence of *Face* on public evaluation and judgment makes the Vietnamese constantly aware of the presence of other people. Among 42 incidents in which third party presence was reported to have a role in how the incident reporter felt or reacted, 6 portray situations in which the presence of a third person / people was described as enhancing the sense of *Face*.

It is the strong emphasis on *Quality Face* that makes the Vietnamese highly appreciate situations when Anglo-cultural attend to this aspect of face of the Vietnamese, as seen in the

following positive incident:

[1] (1)

We [the administrative staff of the project] had an important meeting with a representative of the Vietnamese side. Nevertheless, the programme interpreter was absent due to her sudden illness. Normally the secretary would do the interpreting job for the programme interpreter but unfortunately she was off to Switzerland for one-week study tour several days before that. Therefore, I was suddenly asked to take her place and do the interpreting for the meeting. I was not prepared at all since it was not until the morning of the meeting did I know that I would do the translating job. I had no problems with the technical terms since we use terminologies everyday but I had hardly done the oral interpreting for other people before so I was very nervous. However, I tried to calm down to do the job as well as I could. When the meeting came to an end, while the [Anglo-cultural] coordinator was saying something to summarize the main points of their discussion, suddenly he stopped to thank me for my help and compliment me on my translation. I was proud and happy. [...] We [the Anglo-cultural coordinator and I] worked in the same project so it would be reasonable for him to thank me later when only we [people who work in the same project] were with each other. I knew that I could not do as well as a professional interpreter but the fact that he thanked me in front of strangers [people who are not project staff] makes me feel that he did appreciate my ability. It really enhanced my face [originally “*làm tôi nở mặt*”, literally meaning “making me spread face” or “bringing lustre on my face”].

In [1] (1) the Vietnamese employee appreciates the Anglo-cultural act of publicly acknowledging her help and recognizing her ability in translating. This appreciation is enhanced since the act of thanking and complimenting took place in the presence of a third party. This makes the acknowledgment of the Vietnamese help and ability a public recognition, and hence enhances her face. This is understandable, since the Vietnamese orientation towards *Face* gives them a strong desire to gain public recognition of their ability and concurrently to enhance their Quality Face (Tran Ngoc Them, 2001).

The conditional existence of *Face* in the evaluation of the public as a third person / people means that *Face* can only be maintained and promoted by public approval. In this view, the presence of a third party can strengthen the *Face* (e.g., achievement, success) a person has. This is well illustrated in Vietnamese concept of *cái danh, cái tiếng [để đời]* (lit., ‘name and fame live on’) (Tran Ngoc Them, 2001), referring to the fact that one’s good qualities and dignity (i.e., *Quality Face*) can last forever, even after one’s death, only if they are known to the public. Vietnamese sayings such as *một miếng giữa làng bằng một sàng trong bếp* meaning ‘humble public recognition is worth more than huge fame within the family’ (lit., ‘a piece in the village is equal to a bunch in the kitchen’) also emphasize the importance of public admission of one’s achievement, i.e., *Face* (also Brown & Levinson’s (1978, 1987) concept of positive *Face*). In this sense, third party represents the wider public and its presence is considered as the witness of the public recognition of one’s *Face*.



On the other hand, the fact that *Face* maintenance depends on public judgment also leads to the fact that the presence of a third person / people can increase the sense and/or the seriousness of *Face* loss felt by the *Face* loser. In other words, a person may feel that their *Face* loss becomes more serious in the presence of other people. A consideration of the third party presence-associated incidents shows 12 cases in which the informant claimed a connection between their sense of *Face* loss and the presence of a third person.

The following incident was reported by a female participant who worked as a secretary for an NGO office. The participant's description describes a conflict between her and her Australian colleague, who insisted on asking her to do some copies for him while she was extremely busy:

[1] (2)

I don't remember exactly what he [the Anglo-cultural colleague] said to me but basically he asked me to do some copies for him. [...] There were several Vietnamese people present]. My [Anglo-cultural] immediate boss was also there. On that day, I was extremely busy so I asked if he could wait for later as I had more important things to do then. However, he insisted on asking me to do some copies for him. His face just went red and he seemed to shout at me, in front of other people. I had never felt so challenged before, especially in front of other colleagues. They may not be watching but they must have been listening. [...] I can't remember exactly what I said to him in return [when he shouted at me]. It happened so quickly and I was furious but I did say that he didn't have the right to shout at me since I was not his secretary. At that point, he seemed to calm down and said something like it was his fault and he was the one who shouted first and he offered his hand for a make-up handshake but I was too angry to shake his hand. He is neither my immediate boss nor my direct supervisor. He does not have the right to shout at me, to raise his voice at me, especially in the presence of other people. He is just a colleague like me. Except for my boss everybody else in the office is equal and what he asked me to do is not listed in my job description so he does not have right to impose it on me. If I could do it [do the copied] for him I would do it as a favour not because I was ordered to do it. He should not think that since he comes from a different [Anglo-cultural] culture, he can shout at us, Vietnamese.

In extract [1] (2), 4 concerns were coded: *Autonomy-Control*, *Social Role Face*, *Fairness*, and *Between-Group Face*:

The concern for *Autonomy-Control* is expressed when the participant argued that she should not be requested to do things that are not included in her job description: "What he asked me to do is not listed in my job description so he does not have right to impose it on me. If I could do it [do the copies] for him I would do it as a favour not because I was ordered to do it". In other words, in her view, it is not polite for the Anglo-cultural to compel her to do things that she is not officially assigned to do in her job, and so she has the right to turn his request down.

The concern for *Social Role Face* is shown when the participant felt that as a secretary, her job is to work for her direct boss, her immediate supervisor, who is the most appropriate person to

give her instructions. When ordered by someone who is not included in this role-driven domain, she felt her role was challenged, especially in the presence of on-lookers: “I had never felt so challenged before, especially in front of other colleagues. They may not be watching but they must have been listening. He is neither my immediate boss nor my direct supervisor. He does not have the right to shout at me, to raise his voice at me especially in the presence of other people”.

The concern for *Fairness* is quite frankly expressed in “He is just a colleague like me. Except my boss everybody else in the office is equal” and “If I could do it [do the copies] for him I would do it as a favour not because I was ordered to do it”. This comment shows the subject’s belief that except her boss, every colleague in her office is equal in terms of work rights and obligations, and so it is unfair to give orders to somebody at the same rank. In making requests, equals should only ask each other for favour, and when a request is repeatedly made without consideration for the requestee’s wishes and feelings, it will be registered as, over-demanding and thereby impolite. Furthermore, the subject’s comment that if she could do the copies for her Anglo-cultural boss it would be an act of doing a favour, also expresses the orientation towards favour and emotional debt represented in Confucian communication, in contrast to the Anglo-cultural cost-benefit consideration.

The concern for *Between-Group Face* is manifested in “He should not think that since he comes from a different [Anglo-cultural] culture, he can shout at us, Vietnamese”. This I/we *versus* he/they perspective shows the participant’s concern for her collective Vietnamese image. The fact that the person who compelled her to do things regardless of her reaction is not Vietnamese made her aware of the different groups / communities they belong to, and made her think that when her *Role Face* is challenged, her *Between-Group Face* is also affected. In addition, this whole incident shows a close connection between the presence of a third party and the participant’s sense of face loss.

This example, on the one hand, shows that it is not appropriate to try to force one incident into one code of concern, and that it is unnecessary and impossible to identify which concern is stronger than the others. In fact the motivational concerns intermingle and are closely interconnected. On the other hand, it also suggests that the motivation that underlies Vietnamese-Anglo-cultural interactions is a complex construct which cannot readily allow identification with any single concern.

As seen in [1] (2), the presence of her colleagues at the scene of her interaction with an Anglo-cultural colleague made her feel that her *Role Face* was seriously threatened when the Anglo-cultural insisted on asking her to do some copies for him in spite of her refusal: “I have never felt so challenged before, especially in front of other colleagues. They may not be watching but they must have been listening. [...] He is neither my immediate boss nor my direct supervisor. He does not have the right to shout at me, to raise his voice at me, especially in the presence of other people”. Similarly in another incident, the Vietnamese interpreter reported she felt a loss of *Face*, not only to herself and to the Anglo-cultural she was interacting with, but also towards her friend, when she was told by an Anglo-cultural superior to stop talking due to her concern that although her friend was not physically present

at the place of the interaction, he could hear what the Anglo-cultural superior told her: “I [...] felt a loss of face since my friend [at the other end of the phone] could hear it [what the Anglo-cultural superior told me] and [might] think that I did something inappropriate”.

The presence of a third person can be interpreted as another element that has an influence on the Vietnamese choice of politeness strategies, specifically on their choice of the non-imposition strategy. The following encounter shows how the presence of a third person influences Vietnamese politeness behaviour:

[1] (3)

[...] It was when our current [Anglo-cultural] boss just took the position and started working with us [the Vietnamese staff member]. In a meeting with us [existing Vietnamese support staff members] to discuss ways to implement the first project since his appointment, after he had finished speaking he asked if we [the Vietnamese supporting staff member] had any questions about what he had said. I had quite a few questions [He is from Scotland so his English was so strange to us] but did not raise them. First it was a public setting in the presence of other people, so it was not considerate to waste others' time just because of your own problems, and it would also be a face loss when everybody else understood it but you did not. Second, I did not know him well enough to do so. Third, he was my boss and it is not appropriate to question my boss in such a place. [...] Later after the meeting I asked other [Vietnamese] colleagues of mine to clarify what seemed unclear to me in the meeting. That helped me a lot and some other [Vietnamese] colleagues of mine also did the same. Some time later in another meeting, our [Anglo-cultural] boss said that he knew some of us asked each other instead of himself when we had inquiries and commented that that way we could get misleading or incorrect information and that could do harm to the implementation of the project. He emphasized that we [the Vietnamese juniors] should talk to him when we did not understand anything. I know it would be more helpful to do it that way, but it is not easy to question someone in the presence of other people. And he did not know that here [in Vietnam] that is the way we do things. We have been working like that since the start of the programme and nothing wrong has happened.

Brown & Levinson (1987) claim that the use of each (non)-imposition strategy is tied to social factors, especially the relationship between speaker and hearer, including *Power Difference* and *Social Distance*, and the potential offensiveness of the utterance content (p. 2). However, the situation described in [1] (3) portrayed a situation where the Vietnamese employee's decision not to ask his boss for an explanation or repetition is due to the presence of a third person / people, in addition to the factors of *Power Difference* and low relationship closeness (*Social Distance*). Fukushima (2000) shows that *Power Difference* (P), *Social Distance* (D), and the weight ranking of the act (R) do influence the choice of politeness strategies. But as Haugh (2005) puts it, the question is not so much “whether or not these variables are important in relation to politeness, but whether it is these variables alone that can count for choices of politeness strategy (as Brown and Levinson claim)” (p.

162). The interpretation of the Vietnamese person involved in the interaction suggests that neither *Power Difference* nor *Social Distance* factors alone can decide whether the Vietnamese would perform the act of imposing or not. In fact, the presence of third persons can also play a role in their decision.

As we have seen, the Vietnamese consciousness that *Face* might be lost or compromised in the presence of a third party can also influence their reactions towards the Anglo-cultural they are interacting with. There are 13 cases in the total corpus of 42 third party presence-associated incidents in which the informant reported that their reaction was to prevent a *Face* loss in the presence of other people. A typical example can be seen in the situation where the Vietnamese planning advisor decided to make a statement about the estimated time needed to implement a project, even though he did not have a factual basis for his statement. In his interpretation: “However, you cannot not answer, since they [Anglo-cultural] ask you officially in the meeting with the presence of many people, and they are all waiting for your answer. [...] There are situations when you cannot not answer though you are not so sure. As a planning advisor, I would have no face left if I did not answer”. The public setting of the meeting with the presence of other people who are his supporting staff member was one of the factors that made him give an answer even when he was not so sure. In other words, the concern that *Face* can be lost in the presence of a third party caused the Vietnamese advisor to violate Grice’s Quality Maxim. Likewise, in other incidents the Vietnamese reported situations where they “had to impose on the Anglo-cultural” (e.g., to make a decision which was in conflict with the Anglo-cultural decision) due to the concern that they would lose *Face* if they “let them [Anglo-cultural] win” in the presence of their supporting staff members. For incidents of this type, Goffman’s (1983) comment does not seem to apply. His position is that “once the dyadic limits of talk are breached, and one admits bystanders and/or more than one ratified recipient to the scene, then ‘subordinate communication’ becomes a recognizable possibility: talk that is mannered, timed, and pitched to constitute a perceivably limited interference to what might be called the ‘dominating communication’ in its vicinity” (Goffman, 1983, p. 133). The bystanders in these situations indeed do not motivate the Vietnamese, especially those in a higher position than Anglo-cultural, to minimise the degree of imposition of their acts; but rather to increase the imposition in the strategy they employ.

On the contrary, as mentioned before, the consciousness for the connection between third party presence and *Face* loss can also be among the factors that cause the Vietnamese not to perform imposition acts as they would otherwise wish. In the data collected, there are 11 cases in which the Vietnamese reported their restraint from expressing their views in the course of protecting *Face*.

### 3.2 Third Party Presence and Association Rights Concerns

A considerable proportion of the incident data also suggests a close relationship between third party presence and the Vietnamese concern for *Association Rights* (i.e., showing *Respect*, *Empathy*, and *Involvement* apart from *Face* concern in their interaction with Anglo-cultural. Specifically, in 11 cases the presence of a third person / people is found to strengthen the

Vietnamese sense of group membership and the need to protect group membership, and hence cause them modify their behaviour. In other words, it makes them aware that they and the Anglo-cultural in interaction are being watched by a third party. This reminds them that whenever necessary, it is their responsibility to show to the third party that they and the Anglo-cultural are on the same side, and have a good relationship. Apart from the concern for *Face*, this is the main reason that leads the Vietnamese to make the decision that they will not perform imposition acts or delay doing them in the presence of a third party.

The awareness of the possible negative judgment of the unintended audience thus helps strengthen the sense of group membership and the need for group membership protection and harmony maintenance. From a very young age, children and family members are taught to “adopt a united front *vis-à-vis* the outside world, whatever their internal differences might be” (Pham, 1999, p. 18), and to keep their affairs away from outsiders. Among common sayings are teachings that suggest people to *đóng cửa bảo nhau* ‘keeping internal affairs indoors’ (lit., close the door and talk to each other) as seen in *khôn ngoan đã đáp người ngoài, gà cùng một mẹ chớ hoài đá nhau* ‘it is wise to fight against outsiders not insiders’ (lit., it is wise to deal with outsiders together, chickens of the same hen should not fight each other). The need for maintaining harmony is taught as a basic moral lesson: “one time restraint means nine time goodness”, “thinking seven times before speaking out” (Le, Howard, Nguyen & Lilleleht, 2007). This leads to the Vietnamese act of restraint from their wish of self-expression to protect within-group membership.

#### 4. Conclusion

Our analysis of a corpus of 42 incidents reported by the Vietnamese working in intercultural workplace contexts has shown that a third party presence may have an impact on their motivational concerns for politeness behavior, especially on their concerns for *Face* and for association rights. This on the one hand, helps confirm the claim that *Face* has a conditional existence (Pham, 2007, 2014b). A person’s face can be gained or lost to the other people present other than just to the person(s) directly involved in direct, intermediate interaction. On the other hand, it suggests that in intercultural contexts, third party presence needs to be taken into consideration for more effective communication.

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