

**The Influence of Culture on the Perception of Politeness:**  
**An Investigation of front-line Staff at a mid-priced Hotel Chain in**  
**New Zealand**

By

Géraldine Bengsch

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This thesis is supervised by

Dr. Donna Henson

Dr. Linda Beamer

## Abstract

This case study examines the key factors in the perception of politeness in a hotel front-line environment. The area of front-line communication has been mainly addressed in research by business and hospitality scholars, and although politeness has been researched extensively in communication contexts, the two areas have not been interconnected by researchers. Courtesy, however, is an essential aspect of customer satisfaction. The multi-cultural context of the tourism industry presents a number of communication challenges for its actors. As a result, miscommunication that is referred to in hospitality studies as ‘service failure’ is a frequent occurrence.

The study draws its data from two main data collection methods: a qualitative focus group discussion at one hotel and a quantitative survey of front-line staff at all of the hotels belonging to the chain. Documents and informal interviews with higher ranked managers of the organisation were used for triangulation purposes.

The findings indicate that front-line employees prefer to base their communication on their individual perception of politeness when interacting with guests. National culture appears to be a strong motivator for front-line communication. Corporate culture is demonstrated to become of higher relevance later in a given conversational sequence. Results also reveal that front-line staff prefer to find ways to forgo face-threatening situations. If this is not possible, active repairs have to be made to re-establish the necessary and required level of politeness.

In this study, the organisation provides employees with few guidelines in the form of intercultural training and lets staff employ trial and error techniques to develop the necessary behaviour patterns by themselves. Behaviour appears to be strongly influenced by stereotyping and prejudices. However, not only employees are prone to using stereotypes when interacting with customers, but staff members feel that they are judged on superficial terms by the guests as well. Overall, behaviours also appear to differ depending on the nature of a guest’s visit to the hotel. International tourists appear to be more forgiving than business travellers in situations where politeness levels are not adhered to.



## Declaration

**Name of candidate:** Géraldine Bengsch

This Thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the Unitec degree of Master of International Communication.

### CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I confirm that:

- This Thesis represents my own work;
- The contribution of supervisors and others to this work was consistent with the Unitec Regulations and Policies.
- Research for this work has been conducted in accordance with the Unitec Research Ethics Committee Policy and Procedures, and has fulfilled any requirements set for this project by the Unitec Research Ethics Committee.

Research Ethics Committee Approval Number: 2008-905.

Candidate Signature: ..... Date: March 30, 2010

Student number: 1271366

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*Journeys, like artists, are born and not made.  
A thousand differing circumstances contribute to them,  
Few of them willed or determined by the will.*  
- Lawrence Durrell

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## Abbreviations

FTA	Face-threatening act
H	Hearer
S	Speaker

## CHAPTER 1

The concept and usage of ‘common courtesy’ or, rather ‘politeness’, has attracted a large amount of research and generated a vast amount of literature. Politeness research has been often limited to finding an ultimate and universal model to explain the mechanics involved in the process of communicating politely (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This research project addresses the notion that ‘politeness’ or ‘courtesy’ is often regarded as a matter of ‘common sense’ by the general public. The project explores this idea of ‘common sense’ and examines how individuals (for research purposes front-line staff of a New Zealand hotel chain) experience politeness in their work environment. It is a study of ‘perceptions of politeness’ and its contributing factors. The study focuses on discovering patterns that act as motivators for polite or courteous behaviour. Furthermore, the research also looks at factors in the workplace that are experienced by the communicating individual to be of higher importance than the notion of face. The study draws on past research on how politeness is enacted and integrates key ideas into an explanation of how politeness is experienced by the interacting parties.

The hospitality industry or tourism in general, provides an interesting interface for communication research. In today’s world, the intercultural interaction possibilities are endless. As time is more and more occupied by work and other chores, leisure becomes increasingly important for individuals (Craik, 1997). An increase in mobility and decreasing costs for transportation means that more people take the time to visit foreign countries and, thus, have the opportunity to explore different countries and to experience cultures that might be slightly or highly different to their own (Rojek & Urry, 1997). Williams and Shaw (2000) state that it is globalisation that intensifies the linkages that exist between places. In a hotel environment, the front-line staff interacts the most with customers which means that they have to ensure not only that information is transmitted, but also that this is done in a way that complies with courtesy expectations of different cultures (Kyriakidou & Gore, 2005).

Due to these different expectations, misunderstandings are very likely to occur. Robertson (2003) points out that the front-line environment in any business is unique and in most cases distinctively different to the management and administrative divisions. Robertson proposes that there are a number of key characteristics that can

help in understanding the front-line work place. Thus, he notes that front-line staff have very defined job roles and are in extensive interaction with the customers or the public. Furthermore, there is a very hierarchical management structure and any communication follows this chain. Generally, the front-line environment has rather junior positions and mostly non-professional staff, even though the personnel often receive structured training when they are first employed.

All these aspects put front-line employees into an interesting position in the hotel environment and make them a group worthwhile to be researched. Even though the setting of the proposed research is in the tourism industry, or more specifically in a hotel context, the findings could be relevant for any kind of front-line staff that deal with international customers. The study focuses on communication techniques that front-line staff use as well as the effect of national and corporate culture on communication contexts in relation to the employment of polite behaviour, or as it is more commonly referred to in the hospitality industry, courtesy.

### Purpose and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to investigate the theory of politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987) as it relates the corporate culture of a hotel to the front-line hotel staff for communication at a mid-priced New Zealand hotel chain (referred to in this thesis as “Panorama Hotel Group”). Today, most of the research that has been done in a tourism or hospitality environment, dealing with intercultural or cross-cultural issues has been conducted from a marketing perspective. Even though hotels and also businesses in general have discovered that communication is essential for the success of a business, research has yet to follow this trend (see literature review). This proposed study will therefore attempt to theorise how front-line hotel staff deal with cultural differences concerning expected courtesy and aspects that could be improved with regard to intercultural communication skills.

A focus on politeness can be explained by looking at the number of authors that have analysed and evaluated Politeness Theory in different scenarios over the years (e.g. R. Y. Hirokawa & Mickey, 1991; Johnson, Roloff, & Riffey, 2004b; Kellermann & Shea, 1996; Meyer, 2003; S. R. Wilson, Kim, & Meischke, 1991), ranging from politeness behaviour between males and females, to behaviour between strangers and friends, as well as the behaviour between managers and employees, to

name but a few. Johnson (2007) encourages future research on the nature of politeness in different scenarios. An investigation of courtesy as it occurs in service encounters, between employees and customers, represents therefore an addition to communication research on the one hand and to hospitality business and tourism research on the other. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (2006) point out as well that there is a need in today's politeness research to address issues that arise in work situations that extend past cultural borders.

Lashley (2002) also notes that there is currently a shift in the level of employed courtesy in the hotel industry. Panorama hotels provide an excellent context for this research, as the hotels are all situated in the same country and there is a limited number which is, however, large enough to conduct a thorough research. Moreover, even though the Panorama group is united in its aim to provide affordable accommodation whilst providing superior quality and service, the group stresses the individualism of each and every hotel that belongs to the network. This ensures that there is a common ground to start the analysis from, but it also means that there is a range of different perceptions of politeness in its communication contexts in the individual hotels. Also, Panorama Hotel group caters for multi-cultural customers with a multi-cultural workforce in a New Zealand setting and context.

## Context

Forecasts of the World Tourism Organization predict that the number of international tourist arrivals in the ten main tourist destinations will have gone up from 625 million a year in 1999 to 1.6 billion by 2020. By that year, travellers will spend over US\$ 2 trillion annually. Without a doubt, tourism is the world's leading industry ("The globalization of tourism," 1999). Technology and communication surely play a great role in this development.

According to Lanfant (1980), international tourism is a relatively new challenge that will bring changes to contemporary societies (see also Lashley, 2002). Lanfant defines international tourism as "a person crossing national frontiers to stay for a limited period, and for other than professional reasons, in a foreign country" (p. 14). She argues that tourism is "the product of will" (p. 15) which is encouraged at an international level by organisations such as the International Monetary Fund, the United Nations, the World Bank and Unesco among others. Due to the great

economic possibilities, international tourism has been encouraged, with developed countries as the primary beneficiaries. However, developing countries have been encouraged to welcome foreign visitors to generate income and therefore aid development in the long turn. Yet the equation has proved not to be as simple, as tourism merely creates a new interdependence between the Western nations on the demand side and the Third World countries on the supply side (Lafant, 1980). As a consequence, tourism will remain a privilege for a minority of the world's population – only 7 % are predicted to go abroad in 2020 ("The globalization of tourism," 1999).

Overall, foreign travel is becoming cheaper and cheaper, making travelling to other countries affordable - to most Westerners at least. Lull (2000) states that even countries that are against Westernisation and globalisation use today's technology and media to organise their protest. He argues that the interchange that takes place among people of different backgrounds and nationalities will enrich society rather than leading to one "global culture" (R. Robertson, 1992).

As early as 1980, Lafant describes a growing trend of 'tourist integration' (p. 30). According to Lafant, tourists no longer come to a country to merely relax, but rather to interact and to communicate with the locals. This leads to a commercialisation of culture, as the visible signs of social identities are marketed on a large scale. Lafant notes that these activities are believed to help maintain or to recover the cultural identity of a given society. On the other hand, Graddol (1997) explains that tourism had a great impact on English usage. Yet, Graddol also points out that tourism has started to involve more and more people from non-English speaking countries who travel to non-English speaking countries. This trend, he says, will either lead to more foreign learners of English or a local language will be used as a lingua franca in these countries (Graddol, 2006). Language is therefore yet another factor that will certainly change communication patterns in tourism.

All of these factors lead to an intriguing context that has attracted scholars from a wide range of disciplines and which will be discussed further over the course of this thesis.

## Objectives and Aims

“Service encounters are everyday interactions between the customer and the server whereby some commodity (information or goods) will be exchanged”.

(Ventola, 2005, p. 19). In a hotel, it is the front-line staff that provide most of the vital information and help or assistance to the customers. As customers are in most cases unlikely to only come from the same country, it seems imperative that receptionists receive intercultural training in order to deal adequately with the hotel’s customers.

As tourism is becoming a larger and more influential sector of the economy, research in this area has encompassed a considerably broader scheme. Researchers agree that service quality has a great impact on the performance of businesses in the hospitality sector (e.g. Antony, Antony, & Ghosh, 2004; Davidson, 2003; L. Douglas & Connor, 2003; Maxwell, Watson, & Quail, 2004). However, scholars tend to focus on the opinions that they can obtain from customers or on the opinions they derive from interviews with top-level managers. Little research seems to focus on the performance of staff that execute the rules set up by the management and employed with the customers (Kong & Jogaratnam, 2007).

Overall, the aim of this research project was to bring a communication angle to a subject that has been largely studied from a business point of view in the past. The project was designed to explore implications of prevailing stereotyped understandings of service quality as it relates to courtesy or politeness. Furthermore, the study examines the usefulness of a communication perspective in the presented context.

## Research Questions

The purpose of the research leads to the following research question:

RQ: How does culture influence the perception of politeness that occurs in nonverbal and verbal behaviour when responding to requests in a hotel front-line environment?

Culture is assumed to be stable and politeness is presumed to be understood according to an individual’s background. Cultural differences are likely to lead to

different perceptions of politeness (Beamer, 1992; J. H. Want, 2003). Request situations are assumed to require a judgment of a number of different factors to run smoothly (Johnson, 2008).

The basic framework that will be used in answering the question is politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Principles of the theory, like the assumption that the essentials of politeness are universal across cultures will be examined in the process of this research.

The direction of the research will follow a number of sub-questions, such as:

- How can effective and appropriate polite communication between tourists and front-line staff be defined?
- To what extent does corporate culture enhance or inhibit the choice of communication strategies?
- How rigid are rules that prescribe behaviour towards customers?
- What is the most commonly used form of politeness?
- Do front-line staff make innovative decisions in the absence of direction from corporate training?
- How does the perceived need for politeness vary amongst staff members and situations?
- What is the basis for the judgment of ‘polite’?

## Methodology

The project is based on a case study approach. A New Zealand chain of mid-sized hotels agreed to participate in the project. Data for this study was gathered using a triangulation of methods, as is common for the type of outlined project. The study employs mainly methods of qualitative nature. Data was obtained using a focus group discussion and a subsequent survey, based on the emerging themes from the focus group, as the main sources of information, with documents and informal interviews as means to enrich the data. Participants for the focus group were recruited from staff at the Auckland hotel. For the subsequent survey, all of the 16 hotels were invited to participate in this project and to distribute the questionnaires to their front-line employees. The obtained data was analysed to answer the questions outlined above.

## Delimitations

This study analyses the perception of intercultural politeness in the setting of a New Zealand organisation, from the perspective of front-line staff.

## Thesis Outline

In this study, the overall nature of the research project is presented and a context for the study is provided. Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on Politeness Theory and adjunct areas. Methodological considerations, including the research design are presented in Chapter 3. The chapter also provides in-depth information on the choice of the case study approach. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study that were obtained from the different data sources. The next chapter, Chapter 5, discusses the findings in regards with the literature and the research questions. Chapter Six concludes this thesis with information on the research questions and discusses the implications of the results, further limitations and future research directions.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

The following chapter reviews the literature that is of importance for this research project. The first part examines cultural considerations and defines national and corporate culture for this thesis. Next, misunderstandings that can be caused by culture are presented. In the following, front-line staff and their work environment are put into context. The second part of the chapter presents underlying theories of the research project, starting with a review of Brown and Levinson's (1987) original publication and proceeding to related theories. The last part of the chapter considers subsequent politeness research and concludes with implications for the study.

It has to be kept in mind that politeness research has not only attracted communication scholars, but rather researchers from a broad number of distinctive disciplines, including linguistics and pragmatics, social psychology, anthropology and sociology (Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 2006). This study is set in an international communication context and the literature used relies therefore on previous research undertaken in this particular field. Due to the fact that this research project not only looks at 'national culture', but also includes current understandings and usages of 'corporate culture', the relevant literature has also been derived from management and business sources. Arguably, another highly important area of advances in politeness research has been undertaken in the field of linguistics and semantics. However, this would introduce a completely different approach for this presented project. Therefore, literature from this particular body of research has been largely omitted. A few seminal works have been included when they were deemed to illustrate a particular point exceptionally well.

### Cultural Considerations

The review of the relevant literature regarding this research topic shows that even though there is a great interest among scholars in investigating service encounters by front-line staff in the hospitality industry, most scholars content themselves with Hofstede's findings in discussing aspects of national and corporate culture (e.g. Ang & Massingham, 2007; Bell, 2006; Craig & Douglas, 2006;

Dastmalchian, Lee, & Ng, 2000; Johns, Henwood, & Seaman, 2007; Morden, 1999; Mwarua, Sutton, & Roberts, 1998; Rashid, Sambasivan, & Johari, 2003). Business research on front-line staff is mainly focussed on the standardisation of behaviour that will lead to satisfied customers. The impact of change management and the general improvement of the corporate culture in an organisation has therefore received more attention than the investigation of the role of national culture in guiding employees' behaviour in and outside the work place (Craig & Douglas, 2006; Luk, 1997).

For this project, the difference between national and corporate culture will be defined following Hofstede (1994). Hofstede notes that one major difference between corporate and national culture is that an individual belongs to an organisation for a rather limited period of time, whereas national identity is permanent; he also indicates that the cultural influences that affect management can be distinguished most clearly at a national level. Corporate culture is therefore assumed to be "socially constructed" (Ogbor, 2001, p. 591), whereas national culture is assumed to be an individual's behaviour as learned through general social interaction (Hall, 1982).

### *National Culture*

In a broader context, all forms of cultures can be seen as behaviour systems that are specific to certain populations (Keesing, 1974). Triandis (2003), however, proposes that humans in general have limitations when exposed to diversity. Triandis notes that people can only process a small amount of information and therefore tend to categorise their behaviour, dealing with different kinds of stimuli as if they were all alike. Even when people are made aware of peculiarities regarding their culture, it remains difficult to change the natural behaviour, because it is culture that aids humans to "act or interact [...] in any meaningful way" (Hall, 1982, p.188). Thus, culture is seen as "a pervasive influence which underlies all facets of social behaviour and interaction" (Craig & Douglas, 2006, p. 323).

Leung, Bhagat, Buchan, Erez, and Gibson (2005) propose a view of culture that is broken down to a number of levels: from global to national, to organisational and finally group cultures. Yet, Scholz (1987, as cited in Rashid, et al., 2003) notes that corporate and national culture are two distinct concepts that should not be confused, even though it might be hard to clearly distinguish between national or ethnic culture and the point at which the personal value system of a person starts to

blend with the values that are set forth by a certain group the individual belongs to, even more so as the individual can be part of an infinite number of groups that might require behaviour adaptations to the national, conventionalised forms of conduct.

### *Corporate Culture*

According to Kyriakidou and Gore (2005), views or definitions of corporate culture can be divided into two major groups. One attempts to measure the underlying rational concepts such as strategy, goals and progress, the other one concentrates on the value system of the organisation as it is expressed in assumptions and beliefs shared by its members. However, there is also a connection between the promoted culture of an organisation and the behaviour that employees show in their workplace (Wells, Thelen, & Ruark, 2007). It has to be kept in mind that a company possesses a certain, given, structure that not only influences an individual's behaviour at work, but it also regulates the general process of working. Especially in Western cultures, these structures are generally seen as nonnegotiable and further mark the behaviour that an employee is expected to show in accordance with this internal structure (Pschaid, 1993).

This specific behaviour of individuals in corporate scenarios has been investigated by both researchers and practitioners in the business field since the 1980s. Over the years, corporate culture started to be seen as a major contributor to the success of any company (A. M. Wilson, 1997). As a result, researchers have developed an interest in how corporate culture can aid in guiding employees' behaviour and lead the organisation to increased performance and success (Rashid, et al., 2003). The aforementioned business literature highlights mainly management perspectives of the concept of corporate culture. Communication research by scholars like Ladegaard (2007) underlines the general friction that can be caused by different nationalities that work together in the same organisation. Even though business culture is a well-established concept in the corporate world, business scholars have often "dismissed (it) as vague, undefined, and dis-connected from day-to-day business affairs and as having little impact on the bottom line" (Want 2006, p. 83). In fact, Ogbor (2001) highlights that corporate culture is a socially constructed ideology which can even be used to control individuals in the company, thus, not only regulating behaviour, but in some cases undermining the beliefs held by the

individual. Still, Ogbor suggests that corporate culture is necessary to create a harmonious work place. Ford and Heaton (2001) agree and note that all organisations have a certain culture, no matter if it is managed and taught to employees or not. In hospitality, they argue, the product that is consumed by the customer is largely intangible and the judgement of quality is based on personal perception. Therefore, a strong culture can serve as a means to “fill in the gaps between what the organisation can anticipate and train its people to deal with and the opportunities and problems that arise in daily encounters with a wide variety of customers” (p. 36).

### Communication and Intercultural Misunderstanding

Leech (1974) argues that ‘communication’ can only be regarded as having taken place, when it is assured that what was in mind (A) has been copied effectively in mind (B). Leech called this the “communicative effect” (p. 24). A message bears two distinctive meanings: an intended meaning (what is in the mind of the speaker (A)) and an interpreted meaning (the meaning conveyed to the mind of the listener (B) when he receives the message). Clashes between different interactional styles are therefore prone to lead to intercultural misunderstandings (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989).

When viewed in a corporate context, Cox (1993) argues that intercultural misunderstandings can have a strong effect on different members of the organisation. Majority and minority group members of the same organisation might experience the same job or task in a different way. If the corporate culture identity differs from the national background that an individual would naturally belong to, organisational culture can cause a person to act in a way that can best be described as unnatural. This imposed culture can then mean that behavioural choices can become difficult for the individual interacting in the organisational context. This unnatural behaviour can lead to profound misunderstandings as behaviour might be interpreted according to different cultural values which can show ignorance of different group members. Indeed, having to adapt or comply with a different culture in order to be successful in a job might eventually lead to a loss of identity.

## Front-line Staff

Within the tourism and hospitality literature, Garavan (1997) finds that “quality” is a major concern. Garavan argues that there are two major factors that influence interpersonal behaviour in general and that might account for different perceptions of quality: First, people tend to blame the other person when experiencing difficulties in a communication context and second, people also tend to “put their behaviour on automatic” (p. 71) and forget that they could adapt their communication style. As a result, suggestions on how to improve employees’ behaviour towards the customer have attracted a lot of research interest in the hospitality literature (e.g. Antony, et al., 2004; Butcher, 2005; L. Douglas & Connor, 2003; Lashley, 1999; O'Neill & Palmer, 2003; Smith & Reynolds, 2002).

Staff behaviour is researched from a number of different viewpoints, or rather in different categories that appear to be measurable in some sense. However, the prevailing business angle of the research means that in the end, the vast majority of the research is concerned with customer satisfaction or the improvement thereof (see also reviews by Buttle, 1996; Nitin, Deshmukh, & Vrat, 2005). For the purposes of this study, a number of sub-categories have been devised to identify areas where the importance of the expression of culture and politeness becomes apparent: service quality (e.g. Atilgan, Akinci, & Aksoy, 2003; Buttle, 1996; Maxwell, et al., 2004; Nitin, et al., 2005); staff training (e.g. McColl-Kennedy & White, 1997; Thomas, 1997); and stereotyping (e.g. Osland & Bird, 2000; Paraskevas, 2001; Solnet, 2007).

Clark (1993) finds that staff has to be trained to develop a “sixth sense” in order to apply social skills appropriately. Yet, she noted that many managers seem to think that the desired “nice personality” in their staff is a trait that people are “born” with and nothing they could acquire through training (p. 57). According to Osland and Bird (2000), general cross-cultural training and research is mainly based on what they call “sophisticated stereotyping”. Even though they agree that this framework is helpful, they, like Hall (1990), strongly suggest that students and trainees have to be made aware of the complexities of their own culture first, before they can attempt to understand a different one. Stereotyping can be described as “a perceptual and cognitive process in which specific behavioural traits are ascribed to individuals on the basis of their apparent membership in a group.” (Cox, 1993, p. 88). Cox points out that “stereotyping” might sometimes be regarded as close to “prejudice”; stereotyping

can be described as “a process by which individuals are viewed as members of groups and the information that we have stored in our minds about the group is ascribed to the individual” (p. 88), whereas prejudices are focused on attitudes towards a group of people and the assumed traits that they embody. He suggests that one explanation for why people stereotype might be related to visual and mental efficiency.

McColl-Kennedy and White (1997) indicate, however, that training in hotels might not necessarily take into account the needs that have been identified in hospitality research. They note that the relationship between service provider and customer interaction has also received little attention from scholars. Still, branded service organisations “are selling some form of standardised service to their customers” (Ritzer, 1993, as cited in Lashley, 2002, p. 255). Therefore, these organisations rely heavily on corporate training to provide employees with the knowledge that they sense as being indispensable for their daily work. A strong service culture is therefore understood to be the key in providing the basis of a successful organisation (Lashley, 1999, 2002). On the other hand, it has to be noted that the management cannot simply rely on feedback from customers in order to judge perceived service quality. Just because a guest does not complain does not automatically mean that the service rendered was satisfactory. Indeed, the more polite a customer, the less likely it is for this specific person to voice a complaint. Yet customer feedback is invaluable for the development of the organisation, therefore it is imperative for the management to create suitable channels of communication that can be used for customers to voice their opinion, without necessarily focussing on minute detail, but also providing a way, so that customers do not have to return the written suggestion directly to a staff member (Lerman, 2006).

Many researchers (e.g. González & Garazo, 2006; Kong & Jogaaratnam, 2007; Lee, Nam, Park, & Lee, 2006; McColl-Kennedy & White, 1997; Nickson, Warhurst, & Dutton, 2005) name courtesy as one of the key essentials for the interaction between employees and customers. Bargiela-Chiappini and Harris (2006) also note that interpersonal behaviour in the workplace and the nature of politeness are “affected by specific situational and institutional norms and practices” (p. 7). Traverso (2006) distinguishes ritual acts that occur in a social encounter from other acts by attributing them a pure symbolic value that does not serve a pragmatic value. In a service encounter, Traverso continues, a request would have a functional value,

whereas thanking for a favourable outcome would have a symbolic one. However, she says, ritual sayings like “please” can also be used to express a functional value.

Overall, in today’s society, Lakoff (2005) notes that there is a change in behaviour in politeness from two main domains, a ”public” and a ”private” differentiation of courtesy to favour the private, more intimate and ’true’ form even in public settings. Lakoff coined this movement “Niceness”, suggesting that it is now a main expectation in polite behaviour and not longer limited to the personal or intimate sphere of one’s self. Indeed, she continues, especially in public roles, Niceness is fast becoming one of the most important criteria to judge acceptability. Aspects of the private self are therefore projected onto the public self, by applying interpersonal politeness, mainly positive politeness, in a symbolic form. Traditionally, this form of behaviour was designated for communication settings with closer relations. This is not a completely new concept as scholars like Hinde (1997) have already emphasised earlier that in an interaction, it “is not the objective quality of what happens, but how that quality I perceived by each participant” (p. 77). This perception, Hinde concludes, is based on a number of expectations, which can be different on a number of levels. She underlines that expectations are not only influenced by cultural differences, but also how participants rate previous interactions, present conditions and anticipations for future communication contexts. Furthermore, perceptions of the perceived quality might change during a particular exchange and are therefore subject to constant review by the interacting parties.

### Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory

The basic assumption of Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) Politeness Theory is that politeness might be seen as something universal, as they describe human beings as rationally-behaving subjects whose ultimate goal is to maintain face. They divide the notion of “face” into “positive face” (the desire to have one’s actions approved by others) and “negative face” (the desire to remain unimpeded by others). As a result, most interactions become quite naturally what they call “face-threatening-acts (FTAs)”. The general framework proposes that the speaker has a set of different levels of politeness at his or her disposal when choosing a strategy for conducting FTAs, like making a request, depending on the estimated risk of face loss. If the speaker decides to do the FTA, it can be conducted *on record*, which means that the

speaker expresses an intention unambiguously. If the speaker decides to go *off record*, an intention might be implied by the hearer, the speaker, however, cannot be held accountable for it. The meaning, thus, becomes negotiable due to linguistic means such as the use of metaphors, rhetorical questions or understatements. *On record*, an act can be done *baldly, and without redress*, which means that a request or suggestion is expressed in the most concise and straight forward way possible. This method will only find an application if (a) interests of urgency or efficiency overrule the importance of face; (b) the face threat is extremely small or evidently small in the hearer's interest; or (c) the speaker holds a very superior position over the hearer. In all other situations, a form of *redressive action* is used in order to minimise or counteract face damage. Two forms can be distinguished: *Positive politeness* is directed towards the hearer's positive face, meaning that the speaker makes sure to treat the hearer as a member of an in-group which assures that the FTA is not understood as a negative evaluation of the hearer's face. *Negative politeness* is thus, oriented toward the hearer's negative face. This is achieved through the employment of linguistic and non-linguistic actions. FTAs can be then redressed with apologies for interfering with the hearer's basic want or concern to remain unimpeded; or by adjusting the distance between speaker and hearer, as to provide the addressee with a safe way out of the situation without losing face.

Figure 1 presents the decision sequence for an individual that is involved in a FTA situation.

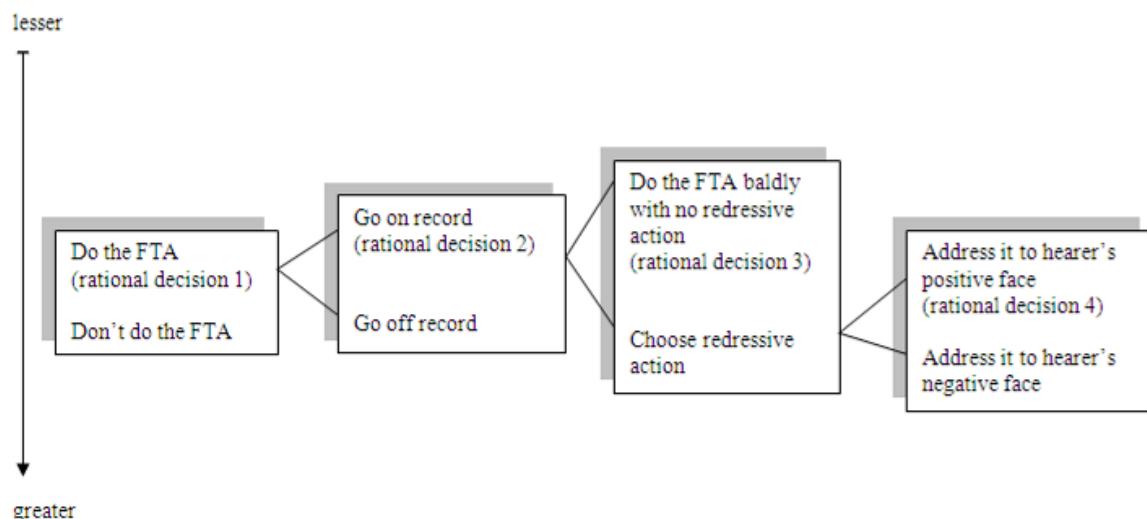


Figure 1: Brown and Levinson's Model of Politeness (see Watts, 2003, p. 87)

Brown and Levinson suggest that there are a number of social determinants that affect how a speaker perceives the estimated risk of face-loss in an interaction: (a) social distance: a symmetric dimension that measures similarity and difference between speaker and hearer which is generally based on stable social attributes; (b) relative power: an asymmetric dimension that defines how much the hearer can impose on the speaker, defined by two sources: material control and metaphysical control; (c) absolute ranking: “a culturally and situationally defined ranking of impositions” and how they are considered to cause a hindrance in the maintenance of facework (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 77)

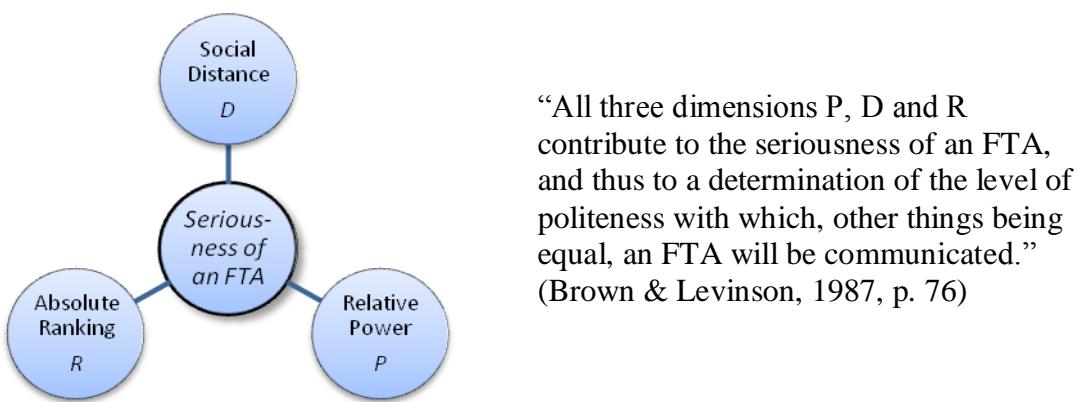


Figure 2: *Factors in Estimated Risk of Face-loss* (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

Meyer (2001) points out that negative politeness is the most conventionalised means for conducting FTAs in Western cultures. Still, the selection of one strategy over another depends on what the speaker deems to be appropriate, which is ultimately dictated by cultural background. Overall, sociological variables determine “the seriousness of an FTA” (p. 74). Watts (2003) notes that facework “involves the maintenance of every participant’s face for the duration of the social interaction (...),

it is therefore in the interests of all the participants to reduce face-threatening to a minimum” (p. 86). Watts also underlines that FTAs, according to Brown and Levinson’s theory either are used to make the addressee take a certain action that would normally not be for their own benefit, or to accept an action that would normally have a negative connotation.

### Politeness and Cultural Differences

As the hospitality industry is people-based, it has been argued that people will establish relationships not with the organisation but rather with the people who work there; that is, the front-line personnel they have contact with. Butcher, Sparks, and Callaghan (2002) suggest therefore that there might in some cases be a lower level of politeness than would otherwise be expected in a service encounter to pay tribute to the “quasi-friendship” that develops between guests and employees. Lashley (2002) refers to this current prevailing form of behaviour in service situations as: “Have-a-nice-day” (HAND) culture, arguing, however, that this imposition might go against the preferred behaviour of certain cultures, thus, creating tensions. According to Lashley, the strong emphasis on customer needs is a fairly new development and possibly originated in the United States. Lashley writes: “the Blackpool landlady of the 1940s and 1950s was not renowned for hospitality and friendliness” (p. 256). Today, he continues, front-line staff have to manage their emotions, which in most cases will require an ever present smile. Overall, the behaviour of the employee needs to match the behaviour that guests expect the staff member to display. This might be at odds with the employee’s real feelings, but is required by the company script of service conduct. Other researchers, like McKechnie, Grant, and Bagaria (2007) suggest that these nonverbal cues and actions, like listening behaviour, could provoke misunderstandings.

Misunderstandings can also result from standardised communication formulas. Hwang (2008) points out that linguistic meanings of greetings, requests or apologies can greatly differ in different cultures and languages. Hwang emphasises that polite conversation in English can often be confusing to speakers of other languages who do not always realise that certain speech acts are only parts of phatic communication and do not require an actual answer. Examples can be found in rhetoric questions such as “How are you?”, “Can I help you?”, “Have a nice trip!” or the extensive use of

“Sorry” and “Excuse me” for trivial matters. She concludes that “native speakers are incorporating new experiences and new realities into their language every day. (...) The ability to relate to people from other cultures is achieved through understanding the functions and symbolic values of their ways of speaking” (p. 45).

Overall, speech acts are highly complex and are also highly sensitive to a number of social variables including gender, age, power or social distance. In request situations, refusals, especially for non-native speakers for a given language, are extremely complex in that they “require not only long sequences of negotiation and cooperative achievements” (p. 196), but will also need to incorporate face-saving strategies that will rebalance the noncompliant component of the speech act (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008). O'Driscoll (2007) notes that the nature of face can be described as “situation-specific”, as face only exists in situated interactions. But even then, O'Driscoll continues, what is considered a good self-image or personal self-esteem differs highly between cultures. Haugh (2003) draws a further distinction by arguing that politeness also includes how people communicate that they think well of others and at the same time do not think too highly of themselves. Social norms in different countries, but also among individuals of the same culture, Haugh continues, lead to different expectations of politeness.

Baxter and Montgomery (1996, as cited in Arundale, 2006) suggest that the back and forth as it is present in everyday communication can be understood by classifying the types of interaction into three dialectics: (a) openness/closedness with one's partner; (b) certainty/uncertainty about the relationship; and (c) connectedness/separateness from them. However, Arundale (2006) warns that these suggested different aspects of face differ greatly across cultures. Hence, House (2006) summarises today's state of cross-cultural studies by pointing out that it has been shown that “it is misleading to assume that a particular linguistic form or structure is ‘inherently polite’ (p. 260). Furthermore, context and motives are highly important as they greatly influence how and what communicators say (K. M. Douglas, Sutton, & McGarty, 2008).

When immersed into a foreign culture and a foreign language, “learners need to acquire the rules of politeness of the target culture and to develop interaction skills” (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004, p. 588). Proficiency levels of learners can therefore be quite different and Félix-Brasdefer suggests that learners often “lack the pragmalinguistic knowledge necessary to mitigate a face-threatening act, such as refusals or requests,

by means of various expressions of epistemic modality, including lexical or syntactic mitigation." (p. 590) This becomes even more important when considering that practically any given message will contain a certain amount of implicit meaning, information that is not articulated verbally. This does not create a particular problem in many situations as long as the implied meaning is shared by the communicating individuals. Shared understanding of cultural norms or common sense can then indeed render a conversation a lot simpler and efficient (Feng & Burleson, 2008).

### Conventionalised Speech Acts and Politeness

In order to be perceived as 'polite', communicators use a number of variables to decide whether they are treated with the expected level of courtesy. In language usage, a number of conventions become apparent that previously experienced behaviour is compared to in order to develop a response: "The function of social politeness is mainly to provide a framework of standardised strategies for getting gracefully into, and back out of, recurring social situations." (Janney & Arndt, 2005, p.23). Or in a more precise way: "Politeness is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction" (Lakoff, 1975, p. 64). Looking at the realisation of these speech acts, Leech (1974) notes that language serves a number of different functions. In relation to this project, the main functionalities in polite conversations are: (a) expressive: language used in relation to originator's feelings and attitudes; (b) directive: language targeted at influence listener's attitude or behaviour; and (c) phatic: language employed to keep communication lines open and relationships in good repair (p.47-49). Speech acts that have the potential to be perceived by the listener as face-threatening are likely to be caused by a negative evaluation of a given statement that is likely to carry a negative semantic load (Boxer, 1993).

The way that a hearer perceives a certain interaction and the appropriateness thereof is largely due to the relationship that the interacting parties are in. Lakoff developed a 'model of interaction' that suggests that there are a number of relational considerations for the employment of politeness, depending on the affective state in any given relationship.

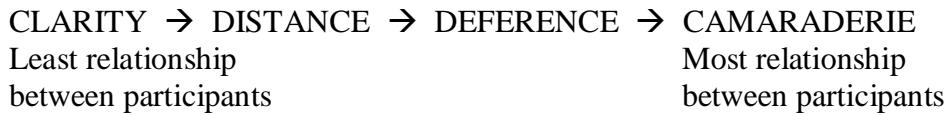


Figure 3: *Lakoff's Model of Interaction* (see also Holmes, 1990, p. 253)

Here, distance is used a means to avoid imposition; deference contains options; and camaraderie as the use of friendliness. The model shows that a lesser degree of familiarity is considered to provoke interaction that is focused on clear communication, whereas a close relationship favours camaraderie for an interaction. This however, is blurred in a hospitality context where research has shown that often a more casual style of interaction is preferred, even though there is a distinctive lack of an establishment of a close relationship in the traditional sense (Lashley, 2002).

### Challenges to Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory

Leech (2007) emphasises that Brown and Levinson's seminal work still remains the starting point for many politeness researchers, however since the first publication, it has been the cause for a lot of controversy. While business research (eg. Clark, 1993; Want 2003) still seems to rely solely on the seminal work by Hofstede to explain and negotiate phenomena across cultures, communication research has realised that there is a need for research to progress past the “one-fits-all” concepts of Hofstede or Brown and Levinson to explain culture and behaviour from more specific points of views (e.g. Arundale, 2006; Haugh, 2005; Locher, 2006; M. Stewart, 2008; Ting-Toomey, 1994; Yabuuchi, 2006). Haugh (2005) suggests that this current trend of evaluating dimensions of politeness in individual cultures might lead to a better understanding of the underlying fundamentals of the notion of politeness which could eventually lead to the development of a single, unbiased framework of politeness or discard of this possibility once and for all. Socialization, Arundale (2006) points out, is more than a general knowledge of how to behave in a certain situation in an unfamiliar cultural context, but it is rather dominated by “the everyday, contingent recreating of accountable action, not by passively internalizing widely shared patterns for ritual behaviour” (p. 198). Arundale suggests that even though the

cultural scripts can be learned, it is a distinctive skill of knowing how to actually employ this knowledge in a conversational context. Having a univalent theory might therefore not be the final answer to intercultural miscommunication.

Watts (2003) agrees with this presumption, but points out that while it might be impossible to design an universal model to describe Politeness, “in all human cultures we will meet forms of social behaviour that we can classify as culturally specific forms of consideration” (p. 30). In fact, “cooperative social interaction and displaying consideration for others are universal characteristics of every socio-cultural group” (p. 30). Overall, Watts suggests that some form of politeness will always be present in normal interaction and generally goes unnoticed; only deviation from the norm, like over-politeness and impoliteness will be noticed.

This is backed up by Fraser and Nolen (1981, as cited in Watts, 2003) who point out that “on entering into a given conversation, each party brings an understanding of some initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least for the preliminary stages, the limits of interaction.” In her research, Kasper (2006) found that the person asking a question, or leading a conversation uses the recipient’s response to decide which turn the conversation will take. By making a “preparatory move” (p. 329) in the conversation that acts like a warning for the recipient (e.g. “I would like to ask you...”), the speaker is able to understand the hearer’s attitude towards this particular issue and decide whether it is “safe” to pursue this topic. Overall, communication and conversation follow certain interactional preferences: greetings – greetings; question – answer; summonses – responses; initiations – responses; assessment – agreement (Bousfield, 2007, p. 7).

Other researchers take a fairly extreme point of view. Xie, He, and Lin (2005) attack Brown and Levinson’s politeness model, or rather the concept of it being universally applicable, saying that “the adoption of their model with little or no modification may sometimes, if not often, lead us to misleading conclusions. What is even more serious is that the social reality we intend to truthfully reflect may turn out to be one that is *misrepresented*, if not *distorted*.” (p. 434). Thus, by utilising the model to understand a social phenomenon, it would be likely to misunderstand the event, instead of explaining it. Also, Xie, He, and Lin challenge the notion that politeness is “something that is good, sincere, and with no hypocrisy” (p. 435). This intuitive assumption, they suggest, comes from the idea that in ideal social interaction every participant interacts in a truthful manner. However, other researchers have

suggested that in reality language is often, and maybe ultimately, used for deception and telling everything but the truth (e.g. Aitchison, 1996; Burgoon & Floyd, 2000).

Unlike Xie, He, and Lin (2005), Fukushima (2004) is a lot more specific with her critique of the prevailing state of politeness research. Fukushima points out that many Asian scholars that have harshly criticised Brown and Levinson have indeed misinterpreted the model. She still agrees that it has weak points as it takes into account only sentence-level politeness and also omits the hearer from the politeness equation. Her research therefore moves into the direction of behavioural politeness, or how politeness is evaluated when manifested in behaviour. LaPlante and Ambady (2000, 2003) dedicate their research to the nonverbal aspect of polite interaction. LaPlante and Ambady feel that there is a shortage of research on this particular aspect of politeness even though some researchers, including Brown and Levinson, have noted that politeness may be expressed through nonverbal cues alone.

In the end, the area of politeness research far from exhausted. Different and maybe even extreme approaches will certainly keep the interest in this topic alive. Scholars will therefore contribute to the refining of the understanding of ‘Politeness’, no matter how they approach this topic.

### Implications for Research

Overall, the review of this part of the literature suggests that even though researchers are somewhat aware that communication is important in providing superior service to hotel customers, business and tourism researchers fail to see the value of communication theories that could be used to advance research in that area (e.g. Lee, et al., 2006; Lerman, 2006; Nadiri & Hussain, 2005; Ventola, 2005). Saee (2006) attempts to close this gap by summarising in one book all major communication theories that might be relevant to the tourism industry. However, the usefulness of this approach is disputable due to the obvious simplifications made. Also, a single publication that dares to draw on more than Hofstede’s accepted point of view on cultural considerations in the business world is unlikely to convince scholars of the value of the extensive wealth of knowledge that other well-known authors have produced in the field of communication. As one reviewer puts it: “[Its] utility is seriously compromised by a consistent reliance on out-dated data” (Simpson, 2008, p. 1039). This “out-dated data” that Simpson refers to are the basis of the

seminal publications by well known communication researchers that originally proposed a theory that have since been critically examined and evaluated in the field. As Saeed (2006) attempts to utilise the vast majority of prevailing intercultural communication theories, Saeed hardly includes any publications that have challenged these original publications over the years. To a reviewer with a business research background, “the value of analysis is seriously diluted by the vintage of its statistical underpinnings” (p. 1038), but for a reader with an understanding of communication research, it is self-evident that all of the cited theories are still very much alive and researched in the field. However, it is also easily understandable that a book that attempts to introduce all of the major communication theories and use them in a single project will not have the capacity to provide detailed information on the subsequent research on any particular theory. Despite these apparent weaknesses of the book, Simpson (2008) still notes that the publication “is not without value” (p. 1039), even though Simpson regrets that it is overall presented in a somewhat misleading way and may therefore be ignored by its target audience. Yet, Saeed’s text clearly shows that there is potential for the incorporation of communication theories, such as Politeness Theory, into tourism and business research. Indeed, the review of the literature has shown that scholars have looked at similar problems from different angles, always depending on their research background. Considering that scholars have been attracted to the same issues and problems, here namely service quality and employee behaviour, even though they have largely failed to consider study advances in adjunct areas of research, it can be assumed that there is a large potential to conduct further studies like the investigation undertaken here. Also, Kong and Jogaaratnam (2007) highlight that past research has also largely overlooked the relationship between customers and front-line staff and implications that this interaction has for perceptions of the involved parties. This interpersonal – and here also intercultural – relationship between two human communicators is therefore destined to be of interest for the application of a communication context.

This study is therefore designed to take into account the different factors that have influenced past research on Politeness and hospitality. The resulting methodology is presented in the following chapter and presents implications for conducting research in this area. The methodological considerations extend to issues that were found to be of relevance in this literature review.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter presents the methodology that has been devised to undertake this study in alignment with the existing literature and past research. The chapter starts with general methodological considerations and introduces the use of triangulation for this project. Then the case study approach used for the project is discussed. Next, the employed methods of data collection are introduced, examining the usage of a focus group discussion, a survey, documents and informal documents. After this, the actual participants and sample are discussed, followed by the organisational context. The chapter then moves on to the research procedure and is presented according to the methods used. The chapter finishes with the consideration of ethical issues and general limitations of the study.

### Methodology

It has been suggested that paradigms used in social sciences which serve as a model or framework for what is to be investigated might lose popularity at times, but unlike in natural science, the models are seldom completely abandoned (Babbie, 2007). Yet, research questions and the accompanying assumptions differ greatly in the quantitative and the qualitative paradigms. The assumption in the quantitative approach relies on the fact that there is only one reality which is objective and apart from the researcher, leading to the assumption that the researcher is also detached from the study which is reflected in the language and the research process. In the qualitative approach, reality is said to be subjective and multiple with a researcher who interacts with the objects of the study, which again is then reflected in the use of language and the research process as such (Creswell, 1994). Pizam and Mansfeld (1999) state that it is not the researcher who decides on a paradigm, but rather the problem itself that will prove to be more susceptible to one or the other approach.

The review of the literature has shown that past research on politeness has often been conducted using a questionnaire (e.g. Johnson, et al., 2004b; Kellermann & Shea, 1996; Lerman, 2006; Meyer, 2001). Smith and Reynolds (2002) point out that questionnaires using a five to seven point Likert scale are hugely popular among scholars investigating front-line service environments in the service industry. The

combination of methods for this study have been applied in this area of research (e.g. Ladegaard, 2007; McColl-Kennedy & White, 1997). To ensure reliability, the current questionnaire is based on previously tested scales developed by Johnson (2007, 2008) who has conducted extensive research on Politeness and the refusal of requests. Still, Lerman (2006) notes that there is no established scale to measure politeness to be found in the literature. His research design was therefore based on the original face-threatening acts as described by Brown and Levinson. As this research attempts to examine this very theory, the questionnaire design also incorporates this approach.

Creswell (1994) introduces a model that he calls “the dominant-less dominant design” (p.177). A researcher bases the study on one dominant paradigm and uses the alternative paradigm as complement. Thus, this project uses a quantitative approach method, in this case a survey, as one of the main elements and combines it with a qualitative component, namely a focus group to enrich the data Creswell argues that the advantage of such an approach is that the research is presented with one consistent paradigm, while still using the other one to explore further a certain detail of the study. At the same time, it has to be taken into account that the use of both paradigms can turn a relative simple study into something that is too expensive, time-consuming, and lengthy and, thus, could extend beyond the limits and the scope of a dissertation or thesis (Creswell, 1994).

Overall, there are number of concerns when deciding on a methodology. Pizam and Mansfeld (1999) note that until recently, imagology or national stereotypes have been neglected in tourism studies. Pizam and Mansfeld point out, however, that researchers now have started to investigate the differences in tourists of various nationalities which affect their expectations regarding issues like politeness. They suggest that empirical measurements have been used to compare the behaviour of tourists of different countries. Yet, researchers like Peabody (1985, as cited in Pizam & Mansfeld, 1999) have argued that it can be highly misleading to make generalisations about people and nations, and the general assessment of any national characteristics tends to be often biased by ethnocentrism. Peabody points out that quantitative methods might not be able to dispel these objections, because of the stereotypes that could falsify the findings. However, previous research on relationships of national and corporate culture has used this approach, especially for pilot studies to generate a number of implications that are then suggested to be

researched in more depth and detail in following projects (Bhaskaran & Sukumaran, 2007; Solnet, 2007).

It can therefore be argued that a combination of methods is necessary and appropriate for this project. Not only has previous research underlined positive and negative aspects of both approaches, but the number of participants is also relatively limited. Bryman (2004) suggests that there are a number of distinct features for quantitative and qualitative data (see Table 1). The triangulation process of this project seeks to bridge the differences between the two approaches and to gather enough relevant data from a limited population or a low response rate.

Quantitative	Qualitative
Numbers	Words
Point of view of researcher	Point of view of participants
Researcher is distant	Researcher is close
Generalisation	Contextual understanding
Hard, reliable data	Rich, deep data
Artificial settings	Natural settings

Table 1: Quantitative vs. Qualitative Research (see also Bryman, 2004, p. 287, 288)

Bryman (2004) also notes that it is necessary to conduct research in the social world through the perspective of the population that is being studied, keeping in mind that they can give their own, personal reflections on the social world.

### Case Study Approach

When considering all of this information, it can be argued that this leads to a case study approach, as the size of the organisation suggests that inference to the general population of hotels from the collected data might not be possible. Yin (2003) defines a case study as an “empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). Yin (1991) also notes that a case study approach can be used when “a “how” or “why” question is being asked

about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (p. 20).

It has been argued that purely quantitative research designs might be useful “for examining relationships between inputs and outputs in organizational work” (Miller, Dingwall, & Murphy, 2004, p. 326). However, a purely positivist approach is unlikely to provide any answer to *how* or *why* questions. A qualitative approach, on the other hand, can cope with “unanticipated factors” that might occur in the course of the research and might even reveal information that the organisation did not expect to be of any importance (Miller, et al., 2004). “Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world.” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3).

Researchers, like Tracy and Baratz (as cited in Ting-Toomey, 1994), suggest that in order to study face and related facework, a case study can be used as an approach which would call for qualitative methods that are to be “applied to naturally occurring interactions” (p. 293). They note that if this investigation is done well, the findings might even change the way the interaction is taking place in the future. However, they continue that the case study approach in researching intercultural face issues is yet to be verified and the scope has to be broadened. In order to achieve a widened perspective, they suggest that individual cases should be linked to each other so that specific theories for can be developed for connected contexts as opposed to the current trend to attempt to create overly general theories.

The essence of a case study, the central tendency among all types of case study, is that it tries to illuminate a decision or set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result (Schramm, 1971, as cited in Yin, 2003, p. 12).

Hakim (2000) indicates that qualitative research can be very easily combined with other research methods, due to its “unstructured and exploratory character” (p. 40). Hakim suggests that there is often a strong overlap with case study research. Case studies, she underlines, are “a useful design for research on organisations and institutions in both the private and public sectors” (p. 68). She points out that case studies can be differentiated from other types of qualitative research due to their focus

on a social unit rather than on the individual in the group. She also notes that qualitative research is often connected with surveys, saying that these can be carried out before the use of other methods to serve as an exploratory tool to gather information of greater depth to add to results of a quantitative survey. Thus, Hakim concludes, case studies are the most flexible of all research designs. The inclusion of a variety of data collection methods then ensures “a more rounded, holistic study than with any other design” (p. 58), or at least, it can “provide a richly detailed ‘portrait’ of a particular social phenomenon” (p. 58).

Burns (2000) agrees that the main strength of a case study approach lies in the use of multiple sources. Indeed, Burns continues, a study that only uses one source can only be described as poor, as the different methods make for a more rounded presentation of the actual case. He points out that the suggested triangulation of methods results in “converging lines of inquiry, improving the reliability and validity of the data and findings” (p. 469). For this approach to research, it is absolutely vital that the researcher “maintains a chain of evidence” (p. 469), so that the reader is able to follow the collected evidence from the research question to the conclusion or the other way round. He concludes that sampling in a case study tends to be non-probability based as it is the case itself that presents the sample. He cautions that reliability, however, cannot be established in the traditional accepted sense, as is the same with external validity. Triangulation is therefore vital to insure internal validity. Yin (2003) agrees and also points out that a development of theoretical propositions in a case study approach will greatly assist in data collection and the following analysis.

Yin (1993) emphasises that the usage of theory is essential for being able to generalise the results obtained from the research. However, Yin underlines that here “the term theory covers more than causal theories. Rather, theory means the design of research steps according to some relationship to the literature, policy issues, or other substantive source. (...) Good use of theory will help delimit a case study inquiry to its most effective design.” (p. 4). He concludes that if these steps are followed and “expert knowledge of prior research and careful hypothesis development precede actual experimentation”, this “approach produces case studies that can be part of a cumulative body of knowledge rather than just isolated empirical inquiries” (p. 27). Hakim (2000) underlines that surveys can be used and adapted in design for almost every discipline in the social sciences. Hakim points out that it is less well known that

a survey can not only be used to study the point of view of an individual, but can be used to conduct research on organisations. Surveys here, she notes, can be used to study anything from the social structure or climate to the culture of an organisation. Overall, “the definition of the case is not independent of interpretive paradigm or methods by which cases operate. Seen from different worldviews and in different situations, the “same” case *is* different. And however we originally define the case, the working definition changes as we study“ (Stake, 2000, p. 449).

## Methods of Data Collection

### *Focus Groups*

Focus groups have been employed as an effective research method for almost 50 years. Greenbaum (2000) suggests that there are a number of factors that contribute to the effective usage of this research tool. The moderator has an authoritarian role to guide the discussion, Greenbaum points out. Face-to-face interactions, he continues, provide not only verbal but nonverbal cues as well that can be used to further the discussion. Group discussions also hold strong group dynamics that an effective moderator can use to create reactions and interactions. As the name suggests, he continues, the members of a focus group are expected to focus or concentrate their attention on a singular topic for a set amount of time. This, he notes, is beneficial for the participants as well, as they get to be actively involved in a topic that might be vital to their working environment. As there is a certain number of people involved in the interviewing process, people might feel more secure talking about certain subjects as they can relate to the feelings of other members of the group.

Fern (2001) notes that even though focus groups have been around since the late 1970s, they were originally only employed in marketing research, before later finding their way into research of other disciplines. Fern points out that the understanding of how this research tool might be employed has become relatively broad over this period of time as well. He suggests that focus groups can be used to apply theories in order to “understand phenomena so that we can generalize beyond the specific applications under study” (p. 4) or that the focus might be in an applied setting where the researchers “typically do not concern themselves with generalizing beyond the populations relevant to their specific applications” (p. 4).

This study applies the Theory of Politeness by Brown and Levinson; therefore it can be argued that the main goal of a focus group would be the application of an actual theory in order to confirm existing models and hypotheses. Fern, however, proposes another subdivision for types of focus groups according to group tasks: (a) exploratory; (b) clinical; and (c) experiential, each with an effects application and a theory application side. Exploratory focus group tasks are concerned with the development of new ideas, identifying needs and expectations or generating new theoretical constructs and models. Clinical focus group tasks try to unveil motives or uncover prejudices and biases, or on the theoretical side try to explain feelings and behaviours.

For this study, an experiential or phenomenological focus group task can be identified, as the main focus of the discussion lies on uncovering every-day behaviour that is shared by a certain population. Fern suggests that the general research purpose for experiential tasks differ from the tasks of the two previously discussed groups. Applied experiential tasks can be used to observe the “natural attitudes” of focus group members that have been drawn from a predetermined population (Calder, 1977, as cited in Fern, 2001). These attitudes, or behaviours, are what the individuals have in common with each other and can be evident in shared life experiences, preferences or intentions. Focus groups can here serve to gain a better understanding of individuals’ language, knowledge and experience to then evaluate strategies, concepts and habits. Calder (1977, as cited in Fern, 2001) notes that the researcher in experiential research is more interested in identifying shared life experiences, which he calls “intersubjectivity”, or ”the common-sense conceptions and ordinary explanations shared by a set of social actors” (p.358, as cited in Fern, 2001). Finally, Fern (2001) concludes that experiential focus groups are used in two ways for theory application, namely triangulation and confirmation. Fern notes that there are four tasks for experiential groups: (a) sharing of lifestyles and profiling of participants; (b) eliciting, which refers to extracting shared attitudes and feelings; (c) understanding about how people feel and talk; (d) evaluating of reliability, validity, and generalisability of the findings (p.176).

Foulkes (1964, as cited in Fern, 2001) identifies four factors that guide an effective discussion. (a) social integration: opportunity for equal participation of all group members; (b) mirror reaction: realization of participants that others share similar beliefs and anxieties; (c) condenser phenomenon: activation of “the collective

conscious and unconscious” that makes the discussion easier; and (d) exchange: sharing of information and explanations (p. 14). The ultimate rate of success for the focus group depends on the qualitative judgement of the researcher, as represented by type, quantity and quality of information produced in the focus group. The output of a focus group is also affected by group cohesion. Fern (2001) suggests that there are a number of different characteristics that can be found in both homogeneous and heterogeneous groups: (a) cultural value orientation; (b) social status; (c) age; (d) gender; (e) race/ethnicity; and (f) personality (p. 15). These factors are especially important in this research project, as culture and different perceptions are the main research objective.

The focus group discussion process is affected by the amount of personal information that is shared within the group, also referred to as self-disclosure (Chelune, 1978, as cited in Fern, 2001). Fern (2001) points out that self-disclosure is highly important for focus groups as research has shown that focus groups can provide more intimate information than personal interviews.

According to Pizam and Mansfeld (1999) focus groups are a widely used technique in conducting research in tourism related studies. They define a focus group as a discussion with “six to ten people (...) who share certain characteristics that are relevant to the study problem” (p. 346). Collis and Hussey (2003) point out that focus groups incorporate both interviewing and observation methods. Even though Collis and Hussey note that focus groups are generally associated with a phenomenological methodology, they emphasise that this methods is used widely for the development of questionnaires in pilot studies within a quantitative paradigm. Group interaction, they argue, can aid in obtaining information and insights that go beyond what could be learned in an one-on-one situation, as the dynamics found in a group could encourage participants to voice their opinions.

### *Survey*

A *survey* or *interview* approach can be defined as a “method, in which self-report techniques, including questionnaires and interviews are used to generate the required data” (T. D. Stewart, 2002, p. 71).

Research that has been conducted in the hotel industry also suggests that personal interviews with members of the sample group can be used to follow up the

questionnaire and to ensure firm responses (Min & Min, 1997). This employment of a questionnaire could be described as a modification of the group distribution approach as it is presented by Collis and Hussey (2003), where the participants are gathered in the same room to fill out the questionnaires at the same time. However, in this case, the manager takes the researcher's role and explains the survey (using provided guidelines) and distributes it. Collis and Hussey (2003) suggest that this method assures a high number of usable questionnaires. Also, it will be more likely to obtain a higher number of responses.

### *Instrumentation*

Researchers who have investigated social and cultural influences on service encounters frequently used a combination of open-ended questions that generate qualitative data and questions designed to indicate a level of agreement using a five- or seven-point Likert scale (e.g. Butcher, 2005; Warden, Liu, Huang, & Lee, 2003; Winsted, 2000). Bryman (2004) emphasises that it has to be assured that response choices are exhaustive and do not overlap. For sake of later analysis, he suggests that it should also be double checked that the final questions can be indeed categorised later. Lastly, Bryman underlines that a Likert-scale should always contain a category like 'unsure' or 'neither agree nor disagree', so that participants are not forced to answer in a certain way.

Collis and Hussey (2003) suggest that open-end questions provide insight into an individual's behaviour by giving the participant the opportunity to recall a certain specific event that this person perceived as being crucial in understanding the situation, which has been taken into consideration for the construction of the survey. The design of the questions for this study follows research by Warden, Liu, Huang, and Lee (2003) who combine this technique with closed questions to guide the potential responses of the participants. As indicated earlier, the survey also uses scales developed and adapted from Johnson (2007, 2008). Additional measures included standard demographic questions, including sex and age as well as more specific measures that have been shown to be relevant to the perception of politeness, including ethnic origin and English as first or second language (Lerman, 2006). The general layout of the questionnaire also included clear information for the participants on how to fill in the survey (Bryman, 2004).

The combination of open and closed questions was chosen as both represent certain advantages and disadvantages. Closed questions tend to be preferred by quantitative researchers, as they are less time consuming for the participants, but also for the later analysis. However, open questions allow respondents to formulate their own, maybe unusual, answers. This allows for responses that the development of the questionnaire did not anticipate. They can also be used for testing knowledge of participants on a particular subject. Still, methods of coding for this rather unstructured data have to be devised when constructing the questions (Bryman, 2004).

### *Documents*

Documents or artefacts “endure physically” and can “thus be separated across space and time from (their) author, producer, or user” (Hodder, 2000, p. 703). Contemporary societies and organisations have developed an elaborate system of self-description. Any type of organisation is highly dependent on paperwork and employees are involved in the production and consumption of written records about their place of work. In order to understand how an organisation works and how people interact in them, researchers cannot ignore this kind of information. Organisations produce an increasing amount of material that is concerned with self-representation. This could include annual reports or financial accounts. The documentary reality today extends towards the digital world as well, and other resources might now include websites or promotional videos (Atkinson & Coffey, 2004). Prior (2004), thus, notes that documents have effects and might vary in function depending on circumstances. Prior argues that the content cannot be seen as “fixed”, but rather as “situated” (p. 91). Therefore, “the analysis of content, production and use form three of the corner points” that a researcher might implement in the research strategy (p. 91). The internet and its use today can be defined on a number of different levels: (a) a medium for communication; (b) a network of computers; and (c) a context of social construction. Overall, “the shape and nature of Internet communication is defined in context, (and) negotiated by users (...) to suit their individual or community needs.” (Markham, 2004, p. 119).

The main documents that were identified as relevant for the research project are the induction manual staff receive upon starting at the company (now out of print due to company restructuring) and the Hotel Directory which is used by the company

to present itself to the public. This information can also be obtained from the company's website; however the printed material is more extensive. The Hotel Directory and the website represent therefore essentially one document.

### *Informal Interviews*

Panorama Hotel Group pointed out that it might be beneficial for this research to supplement the insight gained from those documents with informal conversations with managers, to clarify corporate goals of the organisation and to talk with front-line managers about common issues. The conversations with these additional employees were only used to clarify any questions and to gain more insight into the organisation.

Kvale (1996) agrees that the use of informal interviews have been long used in social sciences to elicit information from participants. In this study, the information gathered was then employed for the subsequent construction of the questionnaire as this method is a useful measure to obtain background information. Informal interviews can also be used as a means "for the researcher to gain the confidence of his or her informant" (Berger, 2000, p. 112). For this project, informal talks with key managers were also used to establish the relevance of the study in the organisation.

## Participants and Sample

### *Sample*

Silverman (2000) notes that there are a number of considerations that a researcher has to take into account when deciding on a sample for a specific case. Accessibility to the case can be a great influence in deciding on a setting, especially for independent, unfunded research. Silverman suggests that therefore researchers often employ purposive sampling methods as opposed to random sampling. Purposive sampling enables the researcher to choose a case that demonstrates certain features and traits that the researcher would like to investigate (see also Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1997). Yin (1991) also suggests that all individuals that meet a certain criterion for the case that is being investigated should be considered as potential

participants. In this case, the key characteristic that all of the participants share is the work at the hotel reception.

Furthermore, qualitative research is often guided by an underlying theory, therefore a case should be selected that is likely to display the links between theory and natural occurrence: Theoretical sampling has three distinct features: (a) choosing cases in terms of a theory; (b) choosing ‘deviant’ cases; and (c) changing the size of sample during the research (Silverman, 2000, p. 105). This approach ensures that there is a comprehensive logic behind the selection of a certain case. Part of it can include practical considerations like an accessible and safe setting. Other considerations include focusing the research by selecting a case that ensures that the study is concentrated on a sample that displays characteristics of an adopted theoretical framework. Ensuring that these criteria are met will also help later to generalise from the case to other populations and place the study among similar studies. As a last criterion for theoretical sampling, a case should be selected that does not embrace a theory but rather puts it to a crucial test (Silverman, 2000).

### *Organisational Context*

A New Zealand hotel group of mid-sized individual hotels (referred to as “Panorama Hotels”) was the context for this study. The hotel group is a privately owned company, established by two American business men and friends in the early 1980's. Today, it is one of the major hotel groups operating in New Zealand. Starting out from strategic locations on the major South Island tourism route, the Panorama Hotels chain has expanded throughout New Zealand to most major business centres such as Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin, regional towns including Napier, Blenheim and Gore, and many key resort areas in the Bay of Islands, Queenstown, Fox Glacier and Franz Josef Glacier. Thus, today, Panorama Hotels provides travellers in New Zealand with an extensive network of (16) hotels throughout the country, every single one being “well-appointed, comfortable, competitively priced” (company website). Every individual hotel offers the same high standard of friendly as well as professional service. Target markets include inbound tourism, New Zealand originating corporate, retail and conference business, but also other market sectors such as the sport and wedding markets.

The Panorama Hotels network consists not only of corporate owned but also of managed hotels that are privately owned. To these individually owned hotels who want to take advantage of the benefits of belonging to a hotel chain with a recognised brand name, Panorama Hotels offer management and marketing as well as distribution expertise and the company's infrastructure can help and provide opportunities for independent properties to compete at a more effective level and in turn to help maximise the returns. A franchising structure is one of the most popular to promote growth for a hospitality organisation. Brand awareness, recognition and the resulting loyalty are considered to be key consideration for maintaining market share in a competitive market. However, the franchisor has to keep in mind that even though the growth of the company might be greater, the organisation might face the danger of losing control over standards and operational components of the franchise (Go & Moutinho, 2000).

Gay and Airasian (2003, as cited in Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) suggest that for small populations that include less than 100 people or other units, the entire population should be surveyed. The number of front-line staff at Panorama Hotel amounts to approximately 160; therefore, all of the front-line staff at Panorama Hotels were invited to participate in the survey.

Overall, this organisation provided an interesting case. From a practical point of view, the hotel chain is small enough to be tackled in a research project of this nature, but sufficiently large to obtain a fairly large amount of data. Panorama's advertising scheme: "100% New Zealand owned and operated" (on posters and other advertisement material) suggests a strong branding that provides a corporate umbrella, but is used differently by the individually managed hotels.

To summarise the key points of this case, the organisation, which is "100% New Zealand owned and operated", was founded by Americans and is today one of the largest hotel groups in the country. It consists of company owned and franchised properties. The hotels cater for both international tourists and business guests. Communication interaction is set in a New Zealand context, carried out by a junior, multi-national front-line team. All of these variables contribute to a unique organisational setting for this study.

## Research Procedure

### *Focus Groups*

The focus group was held at Panorama's hotel in Auckland. The discussion group was organised together with the front-line manager of the hotel. It had to be ensured that the focus group would not cause an inconvenience for the hotel operations, as Panorama had agreed that the discussion could be conducted during working hours to provide an incentive for employees to take part in the project. Employees were therefore not specifically selected, but presented a typical composition of front-line staff at a given shift.

The conduct of the focus group broadly followed the procedures proposed by Greenbaum (2000). Before the start of the actual discussion, the group was briefed on: *research objective*; the *role of the group* for the research; and *key characteristics* that the participants share. This was followed by necessary administrative details, before the actual data collection started. The discussion started with general topics and moved on to subsequent discussion sections that provided not only key information but were also used to guide the remainder of the discussion session, before participants were invited to make final comments and the discussion was concluded (Greenbaum, 2000).

The focus group discussion was about an hour long and the conversation was taped to facilitate the analysis. The discussion was semi-structured (see Appendix for discussion schedule) and the participants were encouraged to comment on and challenge each other's answers. Merriam (2009) notes that there are different types of questions and the type that is chosen has a high relevance for the data that is eventually collected. Overall, Merriam points out that it is equally important that a question is asked in a way that is familiar to the participant, but also in a way that yields useful data for the researcher. A number of different question types suggested by Patton (2002, as cited in Merriam, 2009) were included in the questions for the discussion to elicit data for this specific project: (a) Background/demographic questions; (b) Experience and behaviour questions; (c) Opinion and values questions; and to a lesser extend (d) Feeling questions; as well as (e) Knowledge questions.

The discussion started with general introductions and information on the protocol for the event. The participants then completed an exercise (Singelis, 1994,

269f) that was mainly designed to help them understand the area of the research a bit better and also to create a starting point for the subsequent discussion. Greenbaum (2000) notes that this kind of “first thoughts and overall rating” type of exercise is a frequently used tool for focus groups that can serve a number of different purposes: (a) it gives the moderator a sense of the group’s level of awareness of and familiarity with the items included in the exercise; (b) it communicates an overall attitude toward the item/category that can be used by the moderator to stimulate discussion among the participants; and (c) it provides a few words or sentences that describe why the person feels the way he or she does. This can be helpful to individuals when they give their views to the group and can be useful to the moderator as reminder material when he or she is writing the final report of the sessions (p. 161-162).

The conversation developed along the scheduled guidelines with an occasional digression to topics that had not been anticipated, but that turned out to be important to the members of the organisation. The main goal of the focus group was to gain insight into the organisation and to gather information that would be relevant for the construction of the survey (see section on Survey/Questionnaire). At the end of the discussion, the participants were asked to write down incidents that they had talked about during the conversation as well as other incidents that they identified as being ‘typical’ for their work. According to Greenbaum (2000), this type of “write-down” exercise “is one of the most important tools for a moderator, both to stimulate discussion among the participants and also to minimize (or perhaps eliminate) negative group dynamics” that “force all the participants to get involved in the discussion” (p. 147).

### *Survey*

The questionnaire and a covering letter were posted to the participating hotels as agreed upon with the management. This technique has led to successful data collection by researchers like González and Garazo (2006), who, after obtaining permission from the individual hotel managements posted their questionnaires to the participating hotels. It would have been inappropriate to try to conduct the survey via email, because due to the working environment of front-line staff, the participants are unlikely to have access to their own computer in the company. Again, due to the nature of the front-line work and the low hierarchy of the employees, the

questionnaires were not directed personally to each and every staff member, but rather to the manager of the reception. The co-operation of these managers was therefore crucial for the conduction of the survey. Panorama Hotel group has assisted with the distribution and collection of the questionnaires.

Each pack sent to the individual 16 hotels included a covering letter from the organisation, printed on original letterhead paper in order to ensure that the survey was regarded as official communication that had been approved within the organisation. This was done to avoid the possibility that the survey was regarded as “spam”. With the company’s covering letter, the envelope also included a letter composed by the researcher, introducing the research project and the procedure. The covering letter asked the general manager, if they consented for their hotel to participate, to pass on the survey pack to the front-line manager. This pack was comprised ten copies of the questionnaire and a covering letter that were placed in individual blank envelopes, together with a covering letter directed at the front-line manager, containing instructions on how to distribute and collect the responses. The pack also contained a return envelope with paid postage to be posted back to the general manager of the hotel at the Auckland venue and collected from there by the researcher. This again was done to prove the authenticity of the research project to the participating hotels.

### *Documents*

Company documents, like the company website, staff induction manual and the hotel directory, were utilised to provide background information and organisational context for the study. The printed documents were obtained from the hotel and analysed informally to inform the study.

### *Informal Interviews*

The research included a number of informal interviews with managers at different levels of the organisations to ensure that the research design and the organisational reality were in alignment. Meetings were held with the Marketing Director of the hotel chain, General Manager of the Auckland hotel and the Front-line Manager of the Auckland Hotel.

## Data Analysis

### *Focus Groups*

Kvale (1996) proposes an outline for the analysis of qualitative data as related to interviews in different steps: (a) participants *describe* their daily experiences; (b) participants *discover* new relationships by themselves during the course of the interview; (c) the moderator *condenses* and interprets the meaning for further discussion; (d) the transcribed version is *interpreted* by the researcher. This step has a number of further steps that have to be considered: first, the gathered material has to be *structured* by means of transcription and the aid of computer programs; next, the data has to be *clarified*, by eliminating non-essential information: finally, the *analysis proper* develops meanings and understanding from the prepared data.

Kvale describes different ways of going about the final analysis of the data. As this project already involved data triangulation, the method of analysis utilised was an Ad hoc meaning generation. Kvale notes that this is also probably the most frequently used form of data analysis. It is “an ad hoc use of different approaches and techniques for meaning generation” (p. 203). The researcher can read the entire transcript to gain an overall first impression and subsequently revisit certain parts and apply quantifications or deepen the interpretation of certain statements, create visual diagrams, turn texts into narratives, to name but a few options.

Kvale (1996) points out that there are a number of issues when analysing and quantifying gathered data. First, categories have to be developed qualitatively to then execute a quantification of the data. Next, the differentiation of these qualitatively devised categories has to be quantified and lastly, it has to be decided when a complex phenomenon that the researcher encounters can or cannot be quantified. For this, he underlines, it is virtually impossible to develop an exact number or scoring system. Silverman (2000) also underlines that there is virtually no use in counting just for the sake of counting when analysing a document if there is no underlying theory to justify the numbers. Overall, Kvale (1996) notes that the researcher’s understanding of a theory will greatly influence how the interview is finally analysed. Additionally, Collis and Hussey (2003) suggest that due to an increasing use of mixed methodologies that go along with a greater flexibility in the methods of data

collection, qualitative data can also be quantified. For this study, the qualitative and quantitative elements of the study were used to answer the same research question, thus, the different type of data were analysed into the same categories.

Kvale (1996) emphasises that the reader of an interview report depends on the researcher's selection and analysis as the reader does not have access to the entire transcribed document. Therefore, it is essential that the reader is able to follow the procedures and steps that the researcher undertook in order to present convincing as well as reliable and validated information. To ensure this, Kvale suggests that the question of validity is not viewed as the final step, but instead is used as a means of control throughout the entire process of the research project: (a) *Thematizing*: the validity of the project relies majorly on the theoretical presumptions and the logic that connects it to the research problem; (b) *Designing*: the validity relies on an adequate design of the methods employed for the research project; (c) *Interviewing*: the validity depends largely on the trustworthiness of the interviewee and the careful questioning of the interviewer; (d) *Transcribing*: the validity depend on an appropriate choice of style for converting oral into written language; (e) *Analysing*: the validity depends on the relevance of the questions that were answered in the interview and a logical interpretation thereof; (f) *Validation*: the procedures used to validate the research projects have to be appropriate for the specific study; and (g) *Reporting*: the validity depends on the question whether the presented report is an accurate description and account of the findings. (Kvale 1996, p. 237)

### *Transcribing*

Kvale (1996) describes an interview as “an evolving conversation between two people,” whereas “the transcriptions are frozen in time and abstracted from their base in a social interaction” (p. 166). Kvale therefore argues that “to *transcribe* means to *transform*” (p. 166). In fact, he continues, a transcript is very much an artificial text form that neither follows the rules of speech, nor rules of written text production. Furthermore, the conversation is abstracted from its original context when transformed into a written form. However, this is a necessary step in the research process in order to render the interview accessible for deeper analysis. As transcribing changes the nature of the text, it is essential that the researcher transcribes the text in a form that is suitable for the project.

Due to the nature of this research project, the focus group interview was transcribed verbatim. The transcription of pauses, changes in intonation, laughter, etc were kept to a minimum. Repetitions and fillers, however, were included in the transcript.

### *Survey*

Due to the relatively small number of completed questionnaires, exploratory data analysis, or descriptive statistics, was used to analyse the collected data. Specifically, the responses, were examined to discover mean values and frequencies (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 1997). Descriptive statistics can not only be used to describe sets of data, but can also be used to present findings in other forms including tables, charts or graphs that can greatly aid in revealing patterns and relations that were not apparent before (Collis & Hussey, 2003). Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000) define a measurement as “the process of determining the existence, characteristics, size, and/or quantity of changes or differences in a variable through systematic recording and organization of the researcher’s observations” (p. 83). Measurements of one form or another, thus, are the base of any scientific research. Quantitative measurements use “meaningful numerical indicators to ascertain the relative amount of something” and qualitative measurements on the other hand tend to use symbols or “nonmeaningful numbers” (p. 83). Overall, the data analysis included measures of central tendency, using mainly the arithmetic mean as the basis of analysis in relation to interval variables. It also uses the standard deviation, which describes the average variation around a mean (Bryman, 2004).

Categorization or coding is not purely reserved for research scientists. Indeed, everyone “codes” in order to interpret what we encounter in the world around us (Weitzman, 2000). Scientific coding means that the researcher makes a judgement about certain meanings in a text. The tasks involved in coding are: (a) sampling; (b) identifying themes; (c) building codebooks; (d) marking texts; (e) construction models (relationships among codes); and (f) testing these models against empirical data (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p. 781).

Answers to the open-ended questions in the survey were quantified in order to conduct the data analysis. In addition to answering close questions, participants were asked to also write down their own wording for the described situation. These answers

were then coded into one of Negative and Positive Politeness categories and their sub-categories as detailed by Brown and Levinson.

Due to the fairly low response rate, the use of more sophisticated statistical methods that were initially suggested to be used in order to correlate the relationships between the usage of politeness of front-line staff in request-making situations, communication techniques employed and corporate culture (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005) had to be omitted. Even though this particular project had to forgo independent *t*-tests that find a frequent application in measuring relationships in front-line research, the research still aims to follow methods previously employed in the field (e.g. Garavan, 1997).

### *Documents*

Due to the supportive nature of the documents for the data collection, the procedure for the data analysis was kept fairly informal. Collis and Hussey (2003) note that there is not one general procedure for the analysis of qualitative data. For this study, the documents were not analysed relying on one method, but rather by keeping the principles of qualitative data analysis in mind. The main procedure of analysis here is content analysis.

Content analysis is often referred to as an “unobtrusive method”, due to the fact that there is no participatory effect. Bryman and Bell (2007) refer to it as a “nonreactive method” (p. 319). This method might also be useful when trying to discover traits and behaviour that an actual participant might chose not to disclose when surveyed or interviewed directly. This consideration is particularly true for documents where the author does not anticipate that any type of analysis might be applied to the text at any time in the future (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Therefore, the method is frequently employed to discover recurring subjects and themes in a document. It is therefore used as a tool for “categorisation of the phenomenon or phenomena of interest” (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 310). For this study, the philosophy of content analysis was retained; however, the findings and themes were not really quantified. Coding was therefore not a particular issue as coding schemes were defined by the themes identified in the other data sources. Due to the fact that this project was carried out by a single researcher, without any other person assisting,

other coding related issues, like inter-coder reliability, were not applicable (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

### *Informal Interviews*

The interviews were only used for obtaining background information on the organisation. These meetings were not analysed separately, but were rather used as instruments to guide the research process in this particular study.

### Ethical Considerations

Weston (1997) notes that one of the main tasks for ethics is the resolution of conflicting values. Kvale (1996) points out that a valid research project “involves beneficence – producing knowledge beneficial to the human situation while minimising harmful consequences” (p. 237). For this research project, a number of sensitive issues might have been present. The main one being that the structure in a hotel environment is highly hierarchical. Participants of this study were selected from the most junior positions in the company. It was therefore essential to ensure the prospective participants that an involvement in this project was completely voluntary. It had also to be ensured that no sensitive questions were asked that could have caused a conflict of interests. Participants were also provided with the option to withdraw their contribution should they change their mind after the data collection had taken place. Measures that were taken to ensure can be found in the respective sections of this Methodology section.

Overall, the study was carried out in accordance with the requirements set forth by the UREC policy.

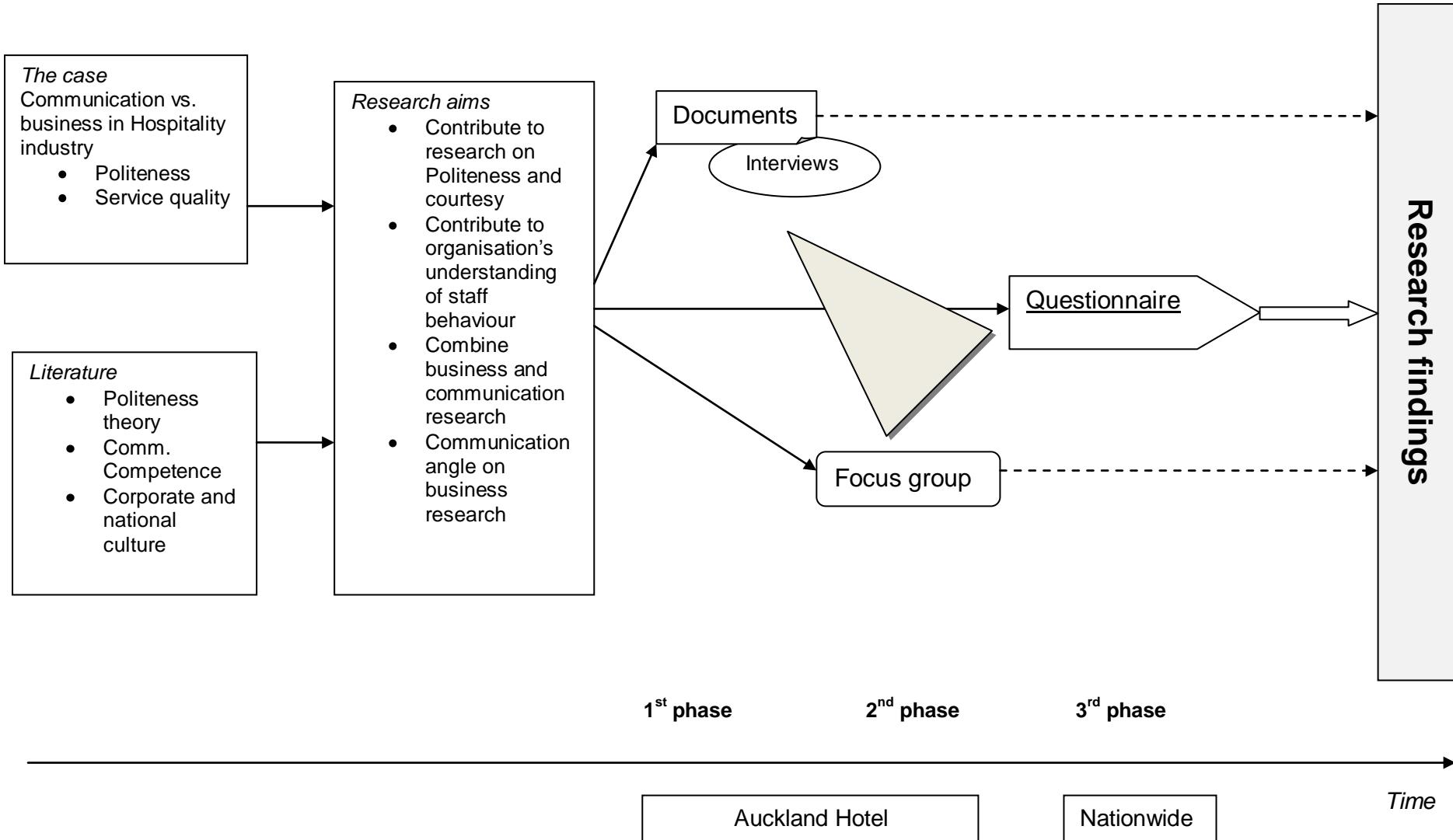
### Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. Due to the case study nature of this research project and the small number of collected responses from the survey, the question of generalisability from the case to the entire organisation or even further generalisability to other organisations arises. Certain findings may therefore not be representative for the entire population and organisation. Overall, however, Silverman

(2000) points out that the same order of findings will be present in any given case. A certain amount of generalisability is present in any data set of case study. Another issue arises concerning the method of sampling. Here, Silverman (2000) suggests that a case is usually not selected on a random basis, but rather because of accessibility. This issue also applies for this study as the thesis nature of the project required an organisation to be willing to participate in the study, and therefore, to grant access to their resources.

The presented study has been conducted by a single researcher. Great care has been taken to document all procedures employed in the research project as well as ensuring that categories have been used in a consistent way. The adherence to the designed procedures is highly important as it can potentially affect the entire study. Scholars suggest that “reliability refers to the degree of consistency with which instances are assigned to the same category by different observers or by the same observer on different occasions” (Silverman, 2000, p. 188).

In the end, when designing a research project, it is necessary to devise the most appropriate approach to the chosen project. This means a general decision between the positivistic and the phenomenological paradigm. Overall, a methodology describes how research questions are asked, thus expressing the significance of the problem investigated. Clough and Nutbrown (2002) underline that “A ‘good methodology’ is more *a critical design attitude* to be found always at work throughout a study, rather than confined within a brief chapter called ‘Methodology’” (p. 31). Thus, the following chapters present the findings and discuss them according to the methodology presented in this chapter.



*Figure 4: Research Design: Data Collection and Analysis*

## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

### Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from both the focus group and the survey. It also introduces relevant information from the company documents that are used as part of the later discussion. Firstly, the findings from the focus group are described. The chapter then presents the findings from the questionnaire, individually addressing close- and open-ended questions. Then, the findings from the company documents, in this case the hotel directory, are described. The chapter is concluded with a brief overview of the three sources and the implications that the triangulation has had on the richness of the data obtained for the answering of the research question.

### *Overview*

The findings suggest that front-line staff possess a strong sense of what is common courtesy in their field of work. This perception, however, can differ quite greatly from individual to individual, and also depends largely on the situation. Overall, individuals' answers indicate strong confidence in their aptitude in dealing with a large variety of customers and situations even though the individual perceptions and opinions differ. A number of key issues and themes appeared in both the focus group and the survey and are analysed in detail in the following chapter.

The accessible documents proved to be of less relevance than anticipated. However, both the information about the company mission and general appearance guidelines found in the staff induction handbook were discussed in the focus group. The documents were used to highlight certain company policies. The sections of interest for this particular project were relatively small, so their usage was fairly limited. However, emerging themes were included in the findings. This was mainly limited to the image that the organisation seeks to project to potential customers and the reality and perception of staff.

## Focus group

### *Demographic Information*

The focus group consisted of four front-line staff members of about equal position in the front-line staff hierarchy, including one front-line staff member from the hotel's restaurant (Reservationist/Receptionist, Duty Manager, Front Office Manager, Food and Beverage Attendant). The group was made up of three females and one male, including one NZ European plus two other native English speakers. Three of the focus group members held a tertiary degree, all of the participants were younger than 25. Half of them had worked in this position for less than one year; the other half had been with the organisation for 1-2 years.

### *Overview*

The main purpose of the focus group was to gather information to construct a questionnaire that could be used to survey the entire population of front-line staff at Panorama Hotel group. It was also used as a means to acquire more relevant background information and to deepen understanding of how staff in this particular environment operate and interact. The focus group was held at the Auckland venue of the organisation. However, it has to be kept in mind that different hotels cater for different customers and therefore different needs. Communication - or more specifically Politeness, issues – are therefore likely to be subject to slight variations between the individual establishments. However, the chain or franchise structure of the organisation conveys an overall coherent corporate identity.

The discussion covered a number of aspects that were relevant for the research project and also covered subjects that the participants identified themselves as important and had not been anticipated and considered before by the researcher. The main topics covered in the discussion can be classed into different categories: (a) national culture; (b) corporate culture; (c) verbal communication; and (d) nonverbal communication. The findings are presented in the following section, according to these categories.

## *National Culture*

### *Attitudes towards Guests*

Participants indicated that their own nationality, but also the nationality of guests can affect interaction and communication. The nationalities in the focus group were not overly diverse and participants said that they would have liked for some of the staff members of other nationalities to have participated in the discussion.

Participants said that they deal differently with rude guests. Participant A said: “You have to *try* though. It’s not because it’s ME, it’s because I’m just there, I’m just that person. It’s hard not to take it personally.” Participant C, however, responded to that: “I don’t take it personally at all; I just assume the customer is an idiot.” Also, participants indicated that they gauge politeness generally by their own perception of a certain interaction: “It just seems so *rude*, to right away be dealing with money, before they even have food...” (Participant C).

Participants also find that generally, they are more likely to go out of their way when guests treat them nicely and appreciate that staff put in an extra effort that might go beyond their general duty or the standard protocol. Participant C underlined: “And then they are happy to get a free coffee, if you show them that you actually *noticed*, you know?! And, like, there are a few people that, yeah, are just ... scammers, they want to just get as much for free as they can.” The other participants agreed and confessed that the more they can relate to a customer and their problem the more likely they are to be of assistance to them.

### *Cultural Differences*

Participants also talked about how people feel more comfortable dealing with someone of their own cultural background: “Like, people will be extra rude to me and then talk to (X) (Chinese) like they’re best friends” (Participant C). This, participant C continued can also mean that people of her own cultural background will be more dismissive about other staff members when talking to her: “[ ] white people will be like ‘oh, the Chinese girl screwed it up.’ She’s wearing a name tag!!”

## *Corporate Culture*

### *Formal Appearance*

A fairly long time was spent talking about the effects of corporate culture on interaction with customers. Participants agreed that certain policies can enhance customer service, but others are more likely to hinder polite communication. Panorama requires employees that are in contact with guests to adhere to an overall conservative and formal appearance, including the wearing of uniforms, conservative hair styles, no visible tattoos or piercings, no to minimal use of jewellery and make-up (Staff Induction Manual). Participant C pointed out that this can be quite challenging at times because of her tattoos “[ ] and every time I go to do the dishes or anything, I can’t keep my sleeve up, because a customer might see it. [ ]”. Still, she continued “I think it’s way better for the customer to see ME like this because then they don’t just think I’m a Punk kid. I’m sure it gives a better impression; it’s just a huge pain”. The other participants agreed: “You feel more professional, more formal [ ] because you’re in this attire.” (Participant A).

### *VIP Guests*

VIP guests (business travellers) are highly important for the organisation according to a number of different sources, namely company documents and informal interviews and the communication process with VIP guests invited a multitude of comments from members of the focus group discussion. Participant B revealed that international tourists require a lot less attention in order to have a positive experience with front-line staff and therefore a pleasant stay in the hotel. New Zealand based corporate guests, however expect a significantly higher degree of grooming in order to feel that they are treated like a valued guest. Participant A and B explained that for returning business travellers, the hotel is like a second home (see also Hotel Directory). “We look after them”, Participant B pointed out, and the hotel keeps electronic notes on what those VIP like and dislike – “so next time they come, all the staff know, everyone knows.” (Participant A). The participants continued that they know when VIP guests arrive, so that even new staff members can greet them with their name, instead of a generic greeting. Participant B also noted that service failure

is easier to reconcile when this important guest is addressed by name which makes the customer feel valued and also means that the guest is less likely to give staff members “a hard time”. Participants agreed that this personalised treatment of corporate guests is very important and just expected by them. Participant B pointed out that the front office uses technology to ensure that the information is there and can be used in guest interaction. Other front-line employees, like restaurant staff, however, are likely to talk to customers without knowing that they are VIPs. Participant C told this story: “We have like a list (in the café), that we know that VIPs are in the hotel, but obviously we don’t know when they come in or anything. In one of my first … shifts, somebody’s ordered *something* and I made it wrong and he’s like: ‘I’ve been coming here for *seven years*.’ And I’m like, I only started here three days ago! Sorry!?! (laughter)”).

### *Staff Training*

Even though participants indicated that their daily work requires that they display a certain expected behaviour, especially when engaged with corporate guests, they reported that they receive little or no training. Training, overall, is limited to learning how to operate the computer software and how to complete daily tasks which they have to check on a designated chart. Job training is based on a comprehensive manual. This, however, does not include the development of “soft skills”, like customer interaction (informal interview with front-line manager). The opinions on the lack of cultural training were divided. Participant B pointed out that most employees hold a hospitality qualification or have at least worked in tourism before. Therefore, staff are likely to have had training on intercultural communication issues in the past, just not at this organisation. Participant A and C, however, said that they would have benefited from training in this area, as they do not have a hospitality background. Participant A said that she had to do a role-play with the front-line manager, though, “to learn how to approach a customer”. Participant C said that she did not get any training, but “it would have helped with things that seem to be common sense to me now”.

### *Corporate Policies and Protocol*

The standardised service, or corporate policy, was also seen as being hugely influential on effective and polite communication with guests. When talking about managers, participant C mentioned that “They (managers) seem more efficient, but they come off more rude”. She explained that there is one common policy that she cannot bring herself to adhere to due to the fact that it seems to be extremely rude to her: “If a guest wants to charge their meal to their room, (the front-line manager), wants us to make sure that they sign everything before they get any of their food. But you can’t really go... to a table, take their order, and then be like: here’s your bill! You know? You have to wait until they eat, and then you’re like: do you want anything else, or else you’re bringing them a bill with every new thing that they... have...”. Participant D, however, stresses that that means that participant C can therefore be seen frequently running after customers that leave the café without having paid. Participant C acknowledged this comment, but argued “I would be sooo mad, if I went into a restaurant and they took my order and then gave me my bill, before my food”.

The employees of the front desk also have one main policy that causes frequent politeness difficulties. Participant A and B explained that the company only used to charge 10 cents of goodwill to customers’ credit cards as bond, but recently, the hotel has increased this to \$300 because people would use fake credit cards or they would “trash their rooms” and disappear from the hotel. Participants agreed that this was a useful amendment of a corporate policy, but “when it comes to us, for dealing our customer service, to the guest, then, it just affects us” (Participant B). Participant A and B observed that it is essential to ensure that the bond is taken upon check-in, because if there is any problem, “... then you’re in the *line*, because, you checked that person in, you didn’t make sure you had enough security, deposit, and then... the person is gone, it’s a loss for the company” (Participant B). Still, even with the bond, they said, it is possible “to be a bit lenient” in cases where a guest does not have a credit card, for example. But participant A underlined “You just have to double-check with the manager, so that *you’re covered as well*”.

On the other hand, participants also mentioned policies that enhance polite customer interaction. Participant A explained that guests that have booked a standard room receive an automatic upgrade when they spend their honeymoon at the hotel.

This is communicated through the travel agent. She also explained that front-line staff can give guests little freebies and upgrades – still, she said, it is always good to ensure that these things are backed up by the manager.

### *Verbal Communication*

#### *Speech Acts*

Participants also expressed a strong concern about the verbal realisation of their customer interaction. The majority of the comments were related to language barriers and cultural differences in the realisation of speech acts. Participant A noted that they have to try to speak slowly and clearly to enhance understanding. This is not only an issue of front-line staff speaking to international guests, but can also affect the multi-cultural front-line team: Participant C (native English speaker) said: “(X) (Chinese) will say the same thing, like four times to a customer and they’re looking at her like, ‘You’re not speaking English’”. This type of language barrier, she continued is also apparent the other way round: “When I talk to Chinese guests and if I’m just trying to put things *simply*, it does sound rude. It sounds like... I’m talking to you like you’re an idiot, and then (X) (Chinese) will have to come and step in and be like ‘No, she just means this’ and talk to her in Chinese to figure it out.”

#### *Cultural Differences*

Participants made comments that suggest that they understand that polite communication is interpreted differently in different cultures and nationalities. Participant C revisits the point made by the other participants that “you have to ask people *nicely* for their credit cards, but the Chinese girls, just go ‘Credit Card?!’”. Participant A agreed, noting that staff members with a different national background approach customers in a very distinctive manner. Participants added that a certain behaviour does not imply rudeness, like in the example above, but that the politeness strategies reflect the individual’s background.

### *Nationalities*

In the end, participants said, that because of the multinationality of the staff, they can often match guest culture and staff culture, because they have learned that guests often prefer to interact with a staff member of their own nationality. Participant B observed that this helps guests to feel comfortable and well understood. Indeed, participant A said: “It’s just a relief for them that someone is helping them out”. Participant C agreed and points out that “There’s always somebody in the hotel, like the other day I had, um, *Spanish* people and I got one of the porters to help me, so one for every different language, practically”.

### *Nonverbal Communication*

#### *Language Barriers*

Participants indicated that they use hand gestures and smiling to try to overcome language barriers. Participant A and B also explained that they try to incorporate examples, like showing the other guest’s credit card evaluation when attempting to explain to a customer that they need their credit card. They pointed out that many tourists think that they are asked to pay something. Then, participant A said that “we show them on the sheet that it says ‘authorisation’ not ‘purchase’. We’re not going to take money from you”. Participant C noted that the nonverbal approach is quite important in the café and can be quite creative: “I just have to mime all the time. Like, I’d ask people crap like how they want their eggs cooked. And I’m like *Scrambled??* (X) draws pictures – that’s a good one, too”.

#### *Staff Role*

Participants also elaborated on the fact that they are required to maintain a certain front when dealing with guests. Participant C found: “When I get mad, I just need to calm myself down and say... smiling on my face.”

## Survey

### *Demographic Information*

From the 16 hotels that the questionnaire was sent to, four hotels decided to partake in the survey and total of 20 answered questionnaires were obtained.

More than half of the sample indicated to be between 15 and 25 years old (15-20:  $n=5$ ; 21-25:  $n=6$ ). The remaining nine were spread out, with three in the category 26-30,  $n=1$  for 31-35, 36-40, 46-50, and >55 respectively and two for 51-55. The genders were represented almost equally in the sample, with nine males and eleven females. The majority of participants indicated they were of NZ European origin ( $n=13$ ) and British origin ( $n=2$ ). The sample also included participants from Thailand ( $n=2$ ) and India ( $n=1$ ); from Argentina ( $n=1$ ) and the Pacific Islands ( $n=1$ ). Almost the entire sample ( $n=16$ ) indicated English as their first language. The remaining participants define Thai ( $n=2$ ), Hindi ( $n=1$ ) and Spanish ( $n=1$ ) as their native tongue.

The majority of participants ( $n=14$ ) noted they were born in New Zealand. All of the remaining participants had been living in New Zealand for more than one year, comprising of a range of time from one year and seven months up to eight years and four months. Other countries that the participants had lived in were Greece ( $n=1$ ), USA ( $n=1$ ) and Australia ( $n=1$ ).

Half of the participants had worked in their current position for up to two years (<1 year:  $n=5$ ; 1-2 years:  $n=5$ ). For the remaining half, six indicated they had worked in the company for 3-5 years, and four had been with the company for over five years. The majority of respondents ( $n=10$ ) worked directly in the front office, in positions such as Front Office manager, Receptionist, Reservationist and Duty guest manager. The sample also included staff in positions of Porter ( $n=3$ ), Café staff ( $n=2$ ) and Managers ( $n=3$ ). A slight majority of participants ( $n=12$ ) had not worked in a similar position before, whereas the remainder ( $n=8$ ) had done so. The numbers were similar in regards to formal qualifications: eleven indicated they hold a formal education relevant to their current position and nine said they did not.

All of the participants had completed High School, seven had some Tertiary education and six hold a Tertiary degree. Lastly, nine participants indicated that they had received cultural training and seven stated that they had not.

### *Presentation of Findings*

The findings from the survey are organised according to the different parts of the questionnaire. Firstly, findings from the close-ended questions are presented in two sections, as they appear in the survey. Themes and notable responses are presented here in an explanatory text. Each description ends with a table that shows the entire range of results. The chapter then describes the results from the open-ended questions.

Respondents were asked to read two different scenarios and answer a number of close- and open-ended questions with the described scene in mind.

Description of Scenarios for Table 1 and 2 (The complete questionnaire can be found in Appendix I):

#### Scenario 1

*New guests have just arrived who are waiting in the reception area for their turn to check in. You have just served a couple who were given a special promotional deal by their travel agent and you hand them some vouchers for the hotel restaurant. The couple waiting behind them have overheard parts of the conversation, and when you are serving them, one of them demands to be given vouchers as well, even though this couple have not received this voucher deal from their travel agent.*

#### Scenario 2

*A guest who has been staying at the hotel for a couple of days comes to reception after discovering that the kitchen in the restaurant has closed early on this day. He is furious and claims that he had not been informed of any changes regarding the opening hours of the restaurant. He demands to be served in the restaurant, as the hotel is at fault for his situation.*

Tables 3 and 4 present the findings for the second main part of the questionnaire. The questions are grouped into two categories, national and corporate culture, to facilitate discussion and mode of comparison.

### *Close-ended Questions Scenario 1 and 2*

The answers to the close-ended questions indicated that front-line staff do not make major amendments in the responses to requests of native and non-native speakers of English. Respondents also perceived ‘polite’ and ‘socially acceptable’ answers on an almost identical level. There was also not a lot of difference between the perception of ‘incompetent’ and ’rude’, even though in most cases, ‘rude’ was perceived to be slightly worse than ‘incompetent’. The individual findings for the different politeness categories are presented in the following sections. General themes are identified together with the most representative means. The complete set of data can be found in Tables 1 and 2.

#### *Scenario 1:*

Politeness Categories:

Bald on-record:

Usually, the bald on-record strategy does not contain any attempts to protect the hearer’s (H) face. This strategy is therefore likely to cause communicative distress. Generally, bald on-record strategies are only employed in situations where the interacting parties know each other very well or in situations where an emergency or other urgent matter is present.

Respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that this category presents a polite answer (mean=1.68 (native speaker) - 2.33 (limited English)), but the category was regarded as a slightly more socially acceptable response (mean=2.21 (native speaker) – 3.53 (limited English)). Staff members were most concerned that a response like that would make them look rude (mean=4.26).

Positive Politeness:

The positive politeness strategy tries to minimise a face threatening act (FTA) by appealing to the hearer’s positive face. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that parties usually know each other fairly well to use this form of redressive action. However, positive politeness can also be used in an attempt to avoid conflict.

The most favoured answer in this category included a solution for the guest (mean=4.05), whereas the answer that did not provide an answer or option was not regarded as polite or socially acceptable (mean=2.42). Again the main concern in both

the related questions was whether that response makes the employee look rude (mean=2.25; and mean=4.05).

#### Negative Politeness:

The negative politeness strategy is directed towards the hearer's negative face.

The redressive actions in this strategy attempts to minimise impositions on H.

Employing negative politeness strategies suggests that the speaker assumes that the utterance could create a great amount of embarrassment for H.

Responses indicated that participants did not agree very strongly that this is a polite answer in both the presented questions (mean=2.84; mean=3.40), but it was presumed to be slightly more socially acceptable, even more so when referring to international guests (mean=3.22; mean=3.50). Overall, the participants neither agreed nor disagreed very strongly that the answer would make the hotel or themselves look incompetent or rude (mean=3.21).

#### Off-record:

Brown and Levinson (1987) describe the off-record strategy as an indirect strategy. Off-record strategies use indirect language in order to minimise any potential imposition on H.

Respondents agreed that this is the least polite and socially acceptable category (mean=1.70) that mainly makes the hotel look rude and themselves incompetent (mean=4.50).

### *Scenario 2:*

#### Politeness Categories:

##### Bald on-record:

Answers were very similar to the responses in scenario 1, although participants agreed even more that it would make especially the hotel and themselves seem incompetent (mean=4.30).

##### Positive Politeness:

Like in scenario 1, the two provided answer possibilities were perceived very differently (mean=1.30 and mean=5.00). Again, the answer option that featured a solution as strongly favoured.

##### Negative Politeness:

Again, one answer was clearly favoured (mean=5.00), although no solution was provided or suggested by the wording, only a strong apologetic note. The other

option was regarded as neither polite nor rude (mean=3.00), though not particularly socially acceptable (mean=2.00). However, respondents agreed that the responses would make the hotel look incompetent (mean=4.00), but they disagreed that the answers would make the hotel or themselves look rude, or make themselves look incompetent (mean=2.00).

Off-record:

Participants disagreed as to humour to be a polite or socially acceptable answer (mean=1.00). Inferring that there might have been an internal problem was agreed upon to represent a polite and socially acceptable answer. Still, both humour and inferring were agreed to make the hotel and themselves look incompetent (mean=5.00).

Overall, answers that implicated some kind of solution to the guest were favoured by the participants in their responses.

### Data Presentation – Close-ended Questions

Scenario 1		<i>Variables</i>		Polite answer		Socially acceptable response		Personal opinion			
				English native	Limited English	English native	Limited English	Makes the hotel look incompetent	Makes the hotel look rude	Makes me look incompetent	Makes me look rude
Bald on record	“No”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	1.68 0.82 19	2.00 1.05 19	2.21 1.18 19	3.53 1.25 19	3.53 1.07 19	3.58 0.83 19	3.58 1.17 19	4.26 0.81 19	
	“No, I can’t do that”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	2.11 0.81 19	2.33 1.08 18	2.42 1.17 19	2.67 1.24 18	3.58 1.22 19	3.89 0.88 19	3.63 1.26 19	3.95 0.91 19	
Positive politeness	“You really should have brought this to the attention of your travel agent.”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	2.42 1.22 19	2.32 1.25 19	2.58 1.30 19	2.42 1.35 19	3.53 1.22 19	3.89 1.10 19	3.63 1.16 19	4.05 0.91 19	
	“I understand that it seems unfair to you. Let me talk to the manager and see what we can do.”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	4.05 1.32 20	4.05 1.23 20	4.00 1.41 20	4.05 1.23 20	2.10 1.41 20	2.10 1.37 20	2.25 1.52 20	2.25 1.45 20	
Negative politeness	“I’m terribly sorry, but I’m afraid there is nothing that I can do in that matter.”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	2.85 1.42 20	2.84 1.21 19	3.11 1.24 19	3.22 1.06 18	3.21 1.32 19	3.21 1.32 19	3.21 1.27 19	3.21 1.36 19	
	“We would need the agreement of your travel agency for this.”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	3.40 1.23 20	3.35 1.18 20	3.45 1.19 20	3.50 1.19 20	2.70 1.30 20	2.85 1.27 20	2.90 1.33 20	2.85 1.27 20	
Off record	“Yes, I know but we have all these “really intelligent rules around here...”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	1.30 0.57 20	1.40 0.68 20	1.45 0.76 20	1.45 0.69 20	4.45 0.69 20	4.50 0.69 20	4.50 0.69 20	4.45 0.76 20	
	“There are quite a few people still waiting to be checked in...”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	1.70 1.30 20	1.75 1.36 20	1.65 1.31 20	1.80 1.40 20	3.90 1.45 20	4.10 1.48 20	4.05 1.43 20	4.20 1.40 20	

Table 2: Findings Scenario 1

Politeness categories		Variable		Socially acceptable response		Personal opinion			
				Polite answer	English native	Limited English	English native	Limited English	Makes the hotel look incompetent
		Mean	SD	1.10	1.95	1.00	0.85	0.92	1.11
Bald on record	“No, this is not possible.”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	0.31 20	1.10	1.95	1.00	0.85	0.92	4.20
	“No, I can’t arrange that”			1.70	1.85	0.93	0.92	10.2	4.25
Positive politeness	“Maybe you could have checked earlier...”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	0.57 20	1.30	1.55	0.94	0.60	0.94	4.60
	“I see that this causes a problem for you. I’ll try to find a solution that might work for you.”			5.00	5.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Negative politeness	“I do apologise, we really should have made sure that the closure was clearly communicated.”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	0.00 20	5.00	5.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	2.00
	“We must have forgotten to inform you of this.”			3.00	3.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.00
Off record	“Ha ha, it sometimes seems to me that they have changed the opening times every time I come to work!”	Mean SD <i>n</i>	0.00 20	1.00	1.00	0.75	1.00	0.00	2.00
	“Perhaps someone should have put up a sign...”			4.00	4.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Likert Scale: 1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=neither disagree or agree; 4=agree; and 5=strongly agree

Mean = Average, SD = Standard Deviation, *n* = number of responses

Table 3: Findings Scenario 2

### *Close-ended Questions: National and Corporate Culture*

#### *Questions related to National Culture*

Respondents agreed most with the statement that they learned polite behaviour in their childhood (mean=4.30) and upbringing (mean=4.20). Respondents also indicated that their behaviour is based on common sense (mean=4.16) and when faced with an unfamiliar situation, they use whatever feels polite to them as the appropriate response (mean=4.10). Front-line staff also agreed (mean=4.20; SD= 0.77; SD=0.74) that they use gestures and smiles to break language barriers, but they indicated that every employee has a distinctive way of dealing with situations (mean=4.11), however they are also sometimes surprised by how other staff members react in a certain situation (mean=3.90). Notably, all of the standard deviation values for the presented cases <1.

Opinions differed most on the perception that a smiling guest is a happy guest (mean=3.75; SD= 1.25) and on whether or not they change their behaviour towards guests based on the customer's nationality (mean=3.58; SD=2.28). Still, respondents disagreed that because of the New Zealand context of the hotel, interaction with guests should be solely based on New Zealand culture (mean=2.7).

#### *Questions related to Corporate Culture*

Respondents agreed very strongly with the suggestion that front-line staff greatly influence a guest's overall perception of the stay at the hotel (mean=4.80; SD=0.41). They also were in line with the thinking that every one of the front-line staff should behave the same (mean=4.45; SD=0.60). Not surprisingly, guidelines and standard procedures were also regarded as helpful (mean=4.25; SD=0.79).

Opinions were more diverse for the remaining aspects. Responses varied on whether or not they have received sufficient intercultural training (mean=3.65; SD=1.04) and they largely disagreed that specific cultural training is unimportant (mean=20.50; SD=1.00). Deviating from company rules (mean=3.65; SD=1.09) and

being rude to a customer because of company policies (mean=3.05; SD=1.22) also yielded mixed responses.

## Data Presentation – General Questions

<b>Table 4: National Culture</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>n</b>
1. When I am faced with a situation that I have not encountered before or that has not been part of my training, I use whatever feels like a polite response to me.	4.10	0.97	20
2. I try to adapt my expression of politeness according to the nationality of the guest.	3.58	2.28	19
3. My behaviour towards guests is based on common sense.	4.16	0.90	19
4. I think that every one of my colleagues has a unique way of approaching the same problem.	4.11	0.74	19
5. I am sometimes surprised by the way that a colleague chooses to deal with a certain situation.	3.90	0.79	20
6. I learned polite behaviour from my childhood.	4.30	0.80	20
7. I use what I learned in my upbringing as a guide to behave politely towards guests.	4.20	0.83	20
8. I smile and use a lot of gestures to break language barriers.	4.20	0.77	20
9. A smiling guest is a happy guest.	3.75	1.25	20
10. If I do not understand a guest, I try to infer the meaning so that I do not embarrass the guest or myself.	3.47	1.09	19
11. As the hotel is situated in New Zealand, I communicate with guests according to New Zealand culture, regardless of my or the guest's own culture.	2.7	1.10	20

<b>Table 5: Corporate Culture</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>n</b>
1. I have received sufficient training to be comfortable in dealing with people from many different cultures.	3.65	1.04	20
2. If I do not know how to solve a situation politely, I prefer to ask a colleague for help.	3.50	1.43	20
3. I sometimes deviate from the hotel's standard response if I feel it would be the right and courteous thing to do.	3.65	1.09	20
4. I think it is appropriate that I might have to adapt my appearance in order to adhere to the organisation's protocol.	3.45	1.19	20
5. I understand certain procedures have to be done, even if they make me seem impolite to a guest.	3.05	1.22	19
6. I agree that the experience a guest has with the front-line staff will greatly influence the overall perception this guest has of the hotel.	4.80	0.41	20
7. I think it is important that everyone behave the same way in the organisation, so that guests always receive the same quality of service.	4.45	0.60	20
8. Having guidelines and standard procedures makes it easier to deal with a wide range of different customers.	4.25	0.79	20
9. I do not think that specific cultural training is important, because I can always ask a colleague for help.	2.50	1.00	20

## Documents

Documents were included in the study as a source of background information and to provide a context for comments made by participants of both the focus group and the survey.

The documents that mainly relate to guest – front-line staff interaction are the marketing materials addressed to the potential customer that is the website and the hotel directory. As discussed earlier (see Chapter 3), the content of the website and the hotel directory is fairly similar, although the hotel directory appears to be more extensive and also more visually appealing. The quotes in the following section are therefore all taken from the hotel directory.

The hotel directory advertises all of the services that Panorama has to offer for potential visitors. The marketing material appears to be aimed at any potential customer and the guest can take a pick of the services that would be of interest for the given purpose of the visit. The directory highlights a number of services and activities: Hotel dining; “local activities and attractions”; “sport and recreation”; “sponsorship”; “conferences and meetings”; and “on business”. This multi-purpose theme is kept throughout the brochure and the individual hotels are presented bearing not only the attractions that are close by for tourists, but also available business facilities. The chain also provides a loyalty incentive for “returning visitors”.

Even though the amount of text is kept to a minimum, the amount of information given is fairly extensive. Hotel features are presented mainly in a checklist format, whereas the “Conference & Event Facilities” seek to convey a distinctive atmosphere for the individual hotels which features apparently trivial information, like the names of conference rooms: “The Kauri Room can host up to 40 people whilst the Pohutukawa Suite is ideal for small meetings of up to 15 people or for small cocktail functions.” (p. 9). All of the hotel descriptions are always accompanied by a full page photograph presenting a distinctive feature of the area that the hotel is located in. Here, the advertising focus appears to be on international tourists as the quotes might read like this: “Our national flower, the Pohutukawa in bloom in the Bay of Islands” (p. 6)

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Introduction

This chapter presents an analysis of the findings from both the focus group and the survey. It also looks at relevant information from the company documents used as part of the later discussion. The chapter begins with the discussion of the findings from the focus group. It then moves on to the discussion of the relevant findings of the questionnaire. Here, the analysis follows a different structure than the presentation of the findings and takes into account that the individual parts of the questionnaire were aimed to represent a complete view of a certain case. The last part relates the findings from the documents to the general analysis. The chapter concludes by relating the individual parts of the individual analysis of the different data sources to each other. Findings that had not been analysed in the corresponding section are incorporated into this last part of the analysis chapter because certain aspects appeared to benefit from a combined analysis.

### Focus group

The analysis of the focus group is presented in the same order as the findings, representing individual parts of the research question that this project is set out to answer. The first part of the chapter analyses issues related to national culture and the second part deals with corporate culture. The last part discusses ‘Politeness as Motivator’ for front-line interaction.

The focus group discussion provided a lot of in depth information on the perception of politeness as it is experienced by front-line staff. The discussion gave participants the opportunity of interacting with each other and to comment on each other’s ideas. The fact that participants were familiar with each other meant that they were comfortable in challenging each other’s responses and also incorporating new ideas into their own perception of their every day work. Like it was suggested earlier in this chapter, participants had the opportunity to share, but also to justify their behaviours which led to a new, evolved level of understanding for the participants. It also gave the participants to interact with the researcher. This meant that it was easier

to convey to these individuals the general importance of the research project. This appeared to be of rather great importance as the informal meetings and discussions with the managers proved that ‘politeness’ or ‘courtesy’ is seen as essential, yet inherently omnipresent. It is an expected behavioural trait, even though it is not given any further thought. Face to face interaction proved to be highly effective when pointing out the importance of thinking critically about politeness, and also inspired a greater understanding and engagement in this particular area of research.

The focus group produced a lot of useful information after only a short period of introductory talk.

### *National Culture*

One part of the research question addresses the influence of national culture on the perception of politeness. This section explores related themes that were investigated in the focus group discussion, differentiated into ‘Attitude towards Guests’ and ‘Cultural Differences’.

### *Attitude towards Guests*

It became evident that front-line staff adapt their behaviour according to the way a guest interacts with them. This is a phenomenon that is largely omitted in Brown and Levinson’s Politeness Theory. Instead, “we approach and know the hearer through the speaker: the speaker infers how the hearer might respond to her or his utterances” (Xie, et al., 2005, p. 452). The focus group discussion has shown, though, that this type of inferring is only true to a certain degree. Even though front-line staff are expected to display courteous behaviour at all times, the rest of the interaction is determined by the response of the guest and how they chose to relate their request to the staff member. If staff members are treated with respect they are much more likely to go out of their way to fulfil customers’ requests, instead of clinging to their prescribed job role. Polite communication can therefore aid in front-line/guest interactions. Here, however, Jameson (2004) also notes that any type of communication interaction bears the possibility of tension. When this occurs, it is necessary to employ conscious communication techniques in order to return to a frictionless interaction. Front-line staff, however, can act as gatekeepers in situations

were tension becomes a communicative problem. “Obviously... the nicer a person is to you; the nicer you want to be to them...” “Yeah, people who are rude and demanding, you’re like, oh, well, screw you.” (Participant C)

In this context of communicating successfully in a potentially tension bearing situation, Fukushima (2004) suggests the term “behavioural politeness” as opposed to “linguistic politeness” (p. 367). Fukushima suggests with “behavioural politeness” an extension to the sentence-level model proposed in Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theory. Instead of focussing on individual utterances, Fukushima looks at subsequent comments that are made in a conversation (see Figure 6). The interpretation of a specific utterance can greatly influence the way a communication progresses, like the following comment by Participant C demonstrates:

“We have like a list, that we know that VIPs are in the hotel, but obviously we don’t know when they come in or anything. In one of my first ... shifts, somebody’s ordered *something* and I made it wrong and he’s like: ‘I’ve been coming here for *seven years*.’ And I’m like, ‘I only started here three days ago! Sorry!?!’ (laughter)”.

In this sequence, Participant C assumed the guest to have the same status as any other customer. However, the guest corrects the staff member on this assumption by reminding her that he has been a long standing customer of the organisation and that he deserves to be treated as such, including a flawless service without having to be explicit about specific orders. Therefore, the evaluation of the guest of the staff’s behaviour did not appear to match what the staff member was trying to transmit by displaying generally courteous behaviour. In consequence, these opposing communication points of different assumptions almost led to an escalation of the situation, as for the waitress, the need to protect her own face is perceived to be of more importance than to continue with extensive professional corporate behaviour (see Figure 5). In order to explain this portrayed behavioural sequence, Fukushima’s (2004) model of ‘behavioural politeness’ can be used. Fukushima’s research attributes the hearer a significant role in the understanding and perception of politeness, as depicted in Figure 5 below. In her model, she proposes a sequence of events that take place in a conversation: Speaker (S) makes a request that is subsequently evaluated by Hearer (H). H then responds to S and this action or utterance is then evaluated by S.

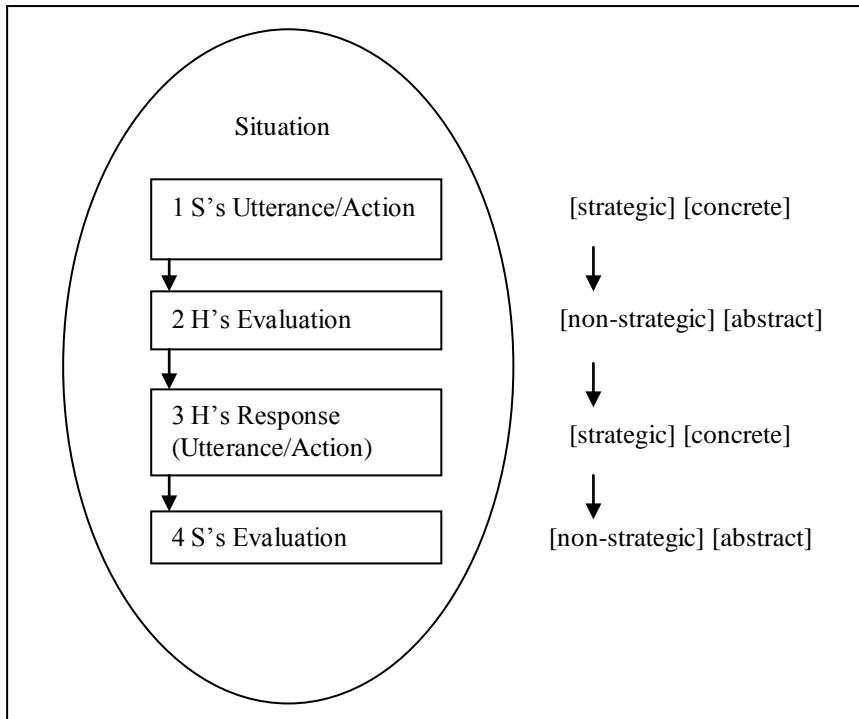


Figure 5: *Sequences in Communication* (Fukushima, 2004, p. 366)

### *Cultural Differences*

The findings suggest that cultural differences have a direct influence on how politeness is perceived and commonly misunderstood. Simple utterances can greatly conflict with politeness work. “Culture clashes derive from differences in speakers’ culture-specific pragmatic knowledge about communicative norms, expectations and values, predisposing them to produce ‘non-aligned’ utterances and misunderstandings” (House, 2006). Different cultures can, thus, cause communication problems, like this example by Participant C shows:

“A lot of the time, (X) (Chinese) will say the same thing, like four times to a customer and they’re looking at her like, ‘You’re not speaking English’. You know, and then you just have to cut in and be like, ‘oh she means this’, and I notice that at the front desk you were saying how you have to ask people nicely for their credit cards, but the Chinese girls, just go ‘Credit Card?!’”

Such a cultural misunderstanding can be taken even further. Waksler (2006) asks the question “what attributions must any actor make to an other in order to

engage in face-to-face interaction with that other?” (p. 417) Waksler examines everyday communication situations that might occur with “problematic” (p. 418) actors. He argues that in these cases a structure that has been taken for granted for face-to-face interaction, like the mere being ‘with’ someone might occasionally be questioned when identifying “interactionally available others”. The author suggests that in order for smooth interaction to occur, there has to be the understanding that the other is maybe not “just like us”, but “enough like us” (p. 426). If the interactor does not find enough relevant connection points, the other will be attributed a “nonperson status”. As noted in the findings, participant indicated that they routinely get attributed a nonperson status when different cultures have to communicate with each other. Participant C elaborates on the previous quote, continuing: “White people will be like ‘Oh, the Chinese girl screwed it up’. She’s wearing a name tag!” (touches own name tag, laughter). She indicated that guests are more likely to remember names of staff members that they relate to culturally in situations like this. Participants also mentioned that they might get ignored by customers if they seem to relate better to a staff member with a similar cultural background to their own. Even though front-line employees supposedly provide the same service to any guest, cultural differences can mean that they are not perceived to be “interactionally available” to the customer.

Culture specific – and misunderstood - behaviour, however, can sometimes be easily demystified. Gu (1990), for example, suggests that modern usage of politeness in Chinese language is still strongly influenced by the classical idea formulated by Confucius. Still, Ji (2000) adds that any politeness strategy that appears to be favoured by a given culture should not be based on individual connotations with certain words. Yet again, this phenomenon of understanding and employing politeness strategies other than one’s own can work in both ways. Ji emphasises that in order for face to be working as a motivator for polite interaction, it is necessary to be viewed by every individual as a type of self-image. Even though an interactant might understand how politeness works in a different culture, it might not feel ‘right’ when the speaker attempts to adapt the own politeness strategy to the foreign version, like this comment by Participant C demonstrates:

“Yeah, and then they just go: ‘Not charging!!’

Not really explaining!! But the same thing I have..., like when I talk to Chinese guests and if I’m just trying to put things *simply*, it does sound rude. It

sounds like... I'm talking to you like you're an idiot, and then (X) will have to come and step in and be like 'No, she just means this' and talk to her in Chinese to figure it out."

Intercultural communication can therefore easily lead to frustration for the interactants. Here, Douglas, Sutton, and McGarty (2008) argue that how communicators choose to relay information in a particular interaction is heavily influenced and motivated by underlying beliefs and stereotypes of an individual, but also by the context in which the information exchange takes place. Indeed, the context might even provide a stronger point of reference than the communicator's original beliefs. Participant C suggested: "I think people are a lot more receptive to people of their own culture. Like, Chinese people to Chinese people, etc. Like, people will be extra rude to me and then talk to (X) (Chinese) like they're best friends. (laughter)". On both sides in the communication situation, those beliefs play a part in how the situation proceeds.

Understanding the different cultural dynamics is an essential skill for front-line staff. Goddard and Wierzbicka (2004) note that cultural scripts can be employed for articulating cultural norms, values, and practices. Cultural scripts can be used by front-line staff to understand culturally charged interactions in order to maintain the required level of politeness. But even when the general understanding is there, courteous interaction is still not guaranteed. Comprehending a situation cannot be regarded as the same as understanding and accepting the turn a conversation might take. Participant A said that she might understand why a customer acts in a certain way, but that she still feels personally threatened: "Yeah, you have to *try* though. It's not because it's ME, it's because I'm just there, I'm just that person. It's hard not to take it personally". Individuals are likely to employ their knowledge on their own terms, so Participant C notes: "I don't take it personally at all, I just assume the customer is an idiot. (laughter)".

Most of the time, researchers have looked at politeness from a private angle. Research has mainly explored personal communication as opposed to public communication. However, in today's society, public "nicety" becomes increasingly important and demanded, because it is not only a behaviour that is expected from friends and family, but also extends to public figures and public interactions (Lakoff,

2005). Participant C says that most guests sincerely appreciate when they are treated especially nice.

“And most of the time, guests are happy if you just give them a small token, something, you know, I’ll be like, sorry, your food took an extra half hour, here, have a free coffee. And then they are happy to get a free coffee, if you show them that you actually *noticed*, you know?! And, like, there are a few people that, yeah, are just … scammers, they want to just get as much for free as they can.”

### *Corporate Culture*

The main research question also addresses the influence of corporate culture on the perception of politeness. This section analyses themes related to this concept. The themes explored are ‘Appearance’, ‘VIP Guests’ and ‘Staff Training’. Again, those are subjects that were discussed in the focus group discussion.

#### *Appearance*

The hotel industry seeks to transmit a certain form of standardised service. In this regard, physical appearance as a form of nonverbal communication can greatly influence how communication is conducted and how ‘polite’ an interaction is experienced in the end.

LaPlante and Ambady (2000) note that messages that are communicated via different verbal and nonverbal channels can be influenced by certain variables that mark differences in individuals such as: (a) sex of receiver/sender; (b) mental health; (c) age; and (d) affective state (p. 212). In the researched context, this is an important issue for front-line staff as the required corporate attire is considered to enhance a professional and polite interaction with guests, like this comment made by Participant C: “And then people don’t have anything to *snap* judge you on, like oh, her shirt, skirt is so short, or she has piercings, tattoos. You know, he dresses like a gangster, or whatever. Everyone has this same … Front”.

A unified and standard corporate dress code that reflects the organisation is increasingly important for the service industry. Researchers have found that the ‘right’

physical appearance and the ‘right’ behaviour for a service encounter is an “aesthetic skill” that employers are looking for in their front-line personnel. Job performance is therefore not the single criterion when evaluating front-line staff (Nickson, et al., 2005).

Front-line employees are, thus, expected to be unified under the corporate expectations. Differences or unexpected attributes will cause guests to reconsider their communication level with front-line staff. Hopkins, Hopkins, and Hoffman (2005) identified numerous factors that are likely to cause different expectations during encounters with front-line staff, especially when domestic customers meet service providers that they perceive to be culturally distant to their own. These factors include: (a) physiognomy; (b) linguistic; and (c) behavioural differences. Hopkins, Hopkins, and Hoffman suggest that individual’s identity cues might be perceived in certain circumstances, contexts or cultures as salient by one of the communicating parties. This has to be taken into account in a multi-cultural workplace and in the articulation of service interactions. Participants of the focus group indicated that guests are likely to judge front-line staff by their physical appearance, like this comment by Participant B finds: “You know some, when they come in; they give a total different reaction to different people, so we do get some people like that. It’s maybe just their own personal thing, just a person who judges by the look and just starts reacting like that.”

### *VIP Guests*

Focus group participants pointed out that returning business customers, VIP guests, have a different status at the hotel to ‘ordinary’ tourists. Participants suggested that VIP guests require more polite interaction than other tourists. For VIP guests, participants noted, the hotel requires staff to pay extra attention to the needs of those guests.

Goodwin and Smith (1990) point out that it is necessary for service providers to understand the difference between ‘friendliness’ and ‘courtesy’, noting that even though individual customers might expect friendliness to different and varying degrees, it can be open to misinterpretation. Discussion participants have apparently experienced this kind of misinterpretation when they assumed the wrong kind of courtesy as the anticipated level of intimacy with a returning guest. Participants noted

that that business guests are likely to reprimand them when the guests feel they are treated in a wrong way, as this short dialogue suggests: “Another thing I’ve found is that certain VIPs... and if I’d treat them like any odd guest that’s when...” (Participant D) “... they get MAAAAAAAAD” (Participant C).

### *Corporate Policy and Protocol*

The service that the hotels provide for their customers follows certain set procedures and protocols. In order to answer the main research question, one of the sub-questions was concerned with the rigidity of these rules.

“Though the bill may be correct and the change exact, it matters how the cashier in the supermarket handles our purchases: a grumpy interaction may not colour the whole day, but it will certainly affect the probability of our return. And the more important the relationship, the more important the qualities of interactions” (Hinde, 1997, p. 77). This quote demonstrates very well the expectations that front-line staff are required to fulfil. However, corporate protocols can make politeness requirements difficult to be adhered to. The following conversation took place between participants that work in two different front-line departments of the organisation. It highlights some difficulties that front-line employees have to take into consideration when judging whether to adhere to corporate policies if they conflict with their understanding and perception of what would be polite:

“They (managers) seem more efficient, but they come off more rude, like for example, if a guest wants to charge their meal to their room the manager wants us to make sure that they sign everything before they get any of their food. But you can’t really go... to a table, take their order, and then be like: here’s your bill! You know? You have to wait until they eat, and then you’re like: do you want anything else, or else you’re bringing them a bill with every new thing that they... have...”

And then you have to say: ‘Do you wanna charge this to your room?’ It just seems so *rude*, to right away be dealing with money, before they even have food... But on the hind side, with the paperwork, if things don’t get signed, than it’s a problem... but... just on the politeness scale... I wouldn’t want to come to a restaurant ...” (Participant C)

“So do you have to charge them straight away?” (Participant A)

“Yeah, I don’t do it... but we’re supposed to.” (Participant C)

“The many times we see you running out the door, chasing after someone with the receipt...” (Participant D)

“I would be sooo mad, if I went into a restaurant and they took my order and then gave me my bill, before my food.” (Participant C)

“Yeah...” (Participant A)

“But... and then there’re so many problems, or if you want to give them any... like, say, their steak isn’t cooked and you want to knock their steak off, well you’ve already done their bill, so you can’t do that... or if they want coffee, then you have to bring them another bill.” (Participant C)

This conversation is a good example of different perceptions of the need to employ a particular politeness structure. It becomes apparent in the above conversation that the same situation can be understood in different ways by individuals that do not have the same background and that further work in a slightly different context. Here, namely the front-line desk and the café. The need of the waitress to avoid a FTA with a customer means that she might have to compromise company policy and cause inconvenience for her own work. To the front-line desk employee, this type of task complication seems to cause too much inconvenience in a simple problem; the negative impact on the work at hand appears to be far greater than the perceived positive effect on the customer. However, the detailed explanation of the waitress offers a new perspective to the front-line staff member that might not have been apparent before. Hinde (1997) notes that this perceived quality of an interaction is very much subject to change through additional experience in the area of service encounters, but also through conversation about a particular event with other involved parties.

Hallier and James (2000) suggest that a group might self-impose certain norms and regulations regarding task reliability because this gives the group a control over certain interests that are not under direct influence of the management: “I think it’s kind of okay, just to give them the bill at the end, to be a bit more lenient, but with *this* policy, you have to take bond, you *have to*, you know? They go and rock ‘n roll in their room and then you can’t claim any bond” (Participant A). Again, participants battle “polite” with “prescribed behaviour” and try to justify their beliefs of what is

right in this particular situation: "And it's really bad, I mean, if you don't take the bond, and if anything happens, I mean, the guest finishes the minibar, or just runs out of the hotel, doesn't pay... then you're in the line, because, you checked that person in, you didn't make sure you had enough security, deposit, and then... the person is gone, it's a loss for the company" (Participant B). Still, even with nonnegotiable rules, front-line staff attempt to incorporate politeness modifiers: "Sometimes, with the bond, you can be a bit lenient, can't you? If it comes under your hand, but you just have to check with the manager [...] So you just have to double-check with the manager, so that you're covered as well" (Participant A). Overall, it has to be kept in mind that customer satisfaction is a major goal of interaction between customer and staff. This means that the service cannot be accidental but has to follow certain rules and guidelines (Chandon, Leo, & Philippe, 1997).

### *Staff Training*

Participants in the focus group had reported out that they had received little to no intercultural training. Research has shown that often staff training is not consisted with customer requirements. Customers, however, increasingly demand more service (McColl-Kennedy & White, 1997). The lack of staff training on intercultural issues is consistent with previous research that has observed that often less training is provided for employees that find themselves fairly low in the company hierarchy (Krapels & Davis, 2000). Yet, for over a decade, service quality has been expected on all price levels (Thomas, 1997).

### *Politeness as Motivator*

The focus group discussion showed that politeness is essential for front-line staff / customer interaction. Indeed, politeness appears to be a very strong motivator for bending and overriding corporate policies. Participants said that they usually enjoy to do extra things for their customers in order to ensure that the guest has an enjoyable stay at the hotel. Corporate rules can sometimes get into the way of doing something nice for a guest, but that managers usually seem to insist on following every protocol, like Participant C explains: "Like... there's a lot of things about managers [...] But like, a couple of things, they seem more efficient, but they come off more rude".

Participant C suggests here that the efficient, protocol obeying manager seems to be rude in comparison to the lower ranked staff members. It appears that face protection and the avoidance of FTAs is one of the highest priorities that especially lower ranked staff try to maintain in the communication with guests. When the complete avoidance of a FTA is not possible, staff use redressive actions extensively in order to minimise face threat. Participant B explains how the corporate policy of memorising names of returning VIP guests can aid in communicating politely with customers.

“[...] all the staff, the front-line staff... first thing we do is like we memorise the name and remember the face. It’s really, really hard because if the guest is coming I’m wishing him by checking him in by his name, he likes it very well and then, if anything mucks up, anything bad happens, I will just go and say ‘Sorry Mr. So-and-so, this is happened from us and you’ll have to wait or you’ll have to do blah, blah, blah.’ And they feel, that’s fine they’re just cool about it. But if they are coming again and again and I just go ‘oh, sorry, Sir, you’re room is not ready, or that is not happening’. Just like ‘Sorry Sir.’ Feeling like I’m coming here for the first time and that’s how their reactions are”.

In addition, explanations are used as an appeal to the guest to gain affirmation that the face threat has been effectively minimised. However, explanations and apologetic behaviour is only truly effective when it is accompanied by a suitable solution for the guest and prompt action by the staff member. Participant B says that it is important to provide options for the guest: “Yeah, they are more happy if you’re offering... some kind of solution, rather than just giving them an explanation.” In the end, the explanation becomes a mere insurance for the staff member, but is not as essential as the tangible alternative presented to the guest. Overall, the hierarchic structure of the front-line environment in a hotel means that staff finds themselves under close supervision for most of the time. The accommodation of bending rules within the job, however, is naturally easier without direct supervision and therefore the loyalties of corporate policies and job reality conflict with the pressing needs for polite appearance. Participant C notes that she can avoid protocol more easily as she does not have a constant supervision: “I just... don’t... for a lot... I guess you guys have to, because the manager is around you all the time, but...”

The strength of face needs as a motivator is strongly tied to the estimated risk that an employee takes when evaluating options for going against corporate policy. Employees demonstrate a strong awareness of their own responsibilities and liabilities. Participant A says that there are different types of risks that an employee might expose himself to by deciding to forgo a certain policy: “I think it’s kind of okay, just to give them the bill at the end, to be a bit more lenient, but with this policy, you have to take bond, *you have to*, you know?” This quotation suggests that face and the urge to accommodate the other’s face needs become decreasingly important when the risk that the staff member would have to take increases. Job security is more important than saving face. Yet the hierarchy of this particular work environment also means that front-line staff can use their junior position in the company as a way for politeness work in situations that involve higher risk: employees can involve their managers in the decision making process. Either, the manager endorses the staff member’s suggestion of accommodation for a certain problem or situation, or vetoes it. The responsibility for the action that the staff member presents to the guest is ultimately taken of the employee and face needs are again taken care of, like explained by Participant A: “So you just have to double-check with the manager, so that you’re covered as well.”

Front-line employees not only present the face of the organisation, but they actually represent the interface for the interaction of guests with the organisation. Miscommunication that occurs at this channel will therefore be seen as the organisation’s fault. Participant B gives an example to demonstrate how a customer’s misconduct could potentially cause a grave problem for the employee.

“I mean, the guest finishes the minibar, or just runs out of the hotel, doesn’t pay... then you’re in the line, because, you checked that person in, you didn’t make sure you had enough security, deposit, and then... the person is gone, it’s a loss for the company. It comes to management as well, and the management has been pushing at that time.”

Previous research that has looked at the perception of politeness in request situations had suggested that future research should consider the effect of face threats on subsequent conversational moves (Johnson, Roloff, & Riffie, 2004a). The findings from the present study suggest that front-line staff that are faced with politeness

requirements from a multitude of different parties will usually try to satisfy the face needs of all involved parties. However, should a perceived face threat evolve to a perceived real threat, politeness work becomes of lesser importance. Thus, the perception of a face threat can greatly influence how the conversation progresses in the following.

### Survey

Johnson (2007, 2008), whose research provided the basis for the construction of the questionnaire, argues that multiple face threats are likely to influence a communicator's perception of the level of politeness in the given context. For this research project, employees were faced with a potentially three-dimensional face threat: the need to protect their own face (this answer would make me look rude/incompetent); the need to protect the face of the organisation (this answer would make the hotel look rude/incompetent); and the need to protect the guest's face (this would be a polite/socially acceptable answer). The responses indicate that participants were mainly concerned with protecting their own face and the customer's face needs. This again underlines the theme that national culture is a stronger motivator for politeness concerns than corporate culture.

The theme becomes not only apparent in the answers to the two Politeness scenarios, but is supported by answers to the general questions: Participants said that they mainly use what they learned during their childhood and upbringing to guide their perceptions of polite and courteous. It is, thus, a form of behaviour that is considered 'common sense'. This concept of common courtesy can again be linked to Hall (1982, 1990) and his idea of a cultural "blueprint" for human behaviour. The answers here also complement the overall perception that individual employees have their own way of dealing with situations which can be expressed in ways that surprise observing front-line personnel.

The communicative struggle that front-line personnel faces becomes even more apparent when taking into account that participants indicate that they think that guest experience and satisfaction is greatly enhanced by staff interacting predictably with customers, thus, everyone acting the same. Arguably, 'the same' is considered to be identical to their own way of behaviour. As indicated in chapter 4, the standard deviations for a range of questions tended to be extremely low, so participants from a

wide range of cultural backgrounds with their distinctive and individual perception of what is polite, suggest that everyone in the organisation should behave the same. However, it remains questionable what this unified behaviour should entail as the results of throughout this study have supported the concept that national culture provides a stronger influence on employee behaviour than corporate culture. An organisational brand, as in the context researched here, is likely to promote a strong service culture, however, the utility and applicability of a standardised service culture is doubtful when considering the different point of views that emerged from past chapters. Yet again, as there was no internal staff training for intercultural and corporate matters, and only half of the participants indicated they had received cultural training elsewhere, this might be an observation unique to this specific organisational context. The results might have been not so extreme if the organisation would indeed spend resources on teaching staff the main corporate values and how they should be applied to this specific context.

Also, judging from the close-ended responses to the two scenarios, one might draw the conclusion that participants do not favour a particular politeness strategy over another as is usually suggested in the literature. However, when taking a closer look at reformulated versions of the answers that were provided in the close-ended section to what the respondent would say, participants employed a mixture of exclusively positive and negative politeness strategies which is demonstrated through the use of examples in the following. The overall findings can therefore be considered to be consistent with previous research. The following list shows how a selection of the individual answers that participants provided in the open-ended questions of the questionnaire can be classed into the categories of Positive and Negative Politeness as identified by Brown and Levinson (1987). The following comments are transcribed from the collected survey responses:

#### Positive Politeness:

- Attend to the hearer
  - o I do apologise for the inconvenience. I will see what I can do for you and I can offer room service if you like for extra charge.

- Avoid disagreement
  - o I understand what you are saying. However it was part of the previous couple package but let me talk to my superior about this & I will get back to you
- Assume agreement
  - o I'm very sorry, I know that seems unfair for you the couple before you booked through their travel agent and that's the deal they paid for but let me talk to my manager and see what I can do
- Hedge opinion
  - o I'm sorry but the package purchased by this couple entitles them to the vouchers they have been given, however, if you can get your travel agent to contact us about this, then maybe we can come to some arrangement.

#### Negative Politeness:

- Be indirect
  - o I would love to be able to offer you the same deal, but we need the approval of your travel agent before we can do that.
- Forgiveness
  - o We are sorry for any inconvenience caused, please can we help you find an alternative solution
- Minimise imposition
  - o I do apologise I will phone the Restaurant next door & we could either get a meal in for you or I could make a booking – free of charge!
- Pluralise the person responsible
  - o I am very sorry about this miscommunication, we are indeed at fault. I will go talk to my manager and see what we can do for you as we may be able to come up with a solution that will benefit you!!

Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that positive and negative politeness strategies are the most conventionalised in Western cultures. Negative politeness strategies appeal to the hearer's (H) negative face through trying to minimise imposition on H. Brown and Levinson identify requests as acts that could potentially threaten H's negative face (requests, but also suggestions, orders or advice). Apologies, they say, can potentially damage a speaker's (S) positive face. The

responses that participants gave to the scenarios in the questionnaire suggest therefore that front-line staff use redressive actions that have been outlined by Politeness Theory.

### *Communication Sequences*

The comments that participants made regarding their decision to formulate their answers to requests, and the comments that were made regarding their general understanding of what politeness means for them and their jobs, can be classed into three broad categories. These categories provide the basis for interacted communication sequences that influence how the requested situation is carried out. Moreover, the entire communication sequence appears to have a direct influence on the perception of politeness. The identified categories are presented below: (a) Assumptions; (b) Guest Attitude; and (c) Action.

### *Assumptions*

Responses to the questionnaire appear to be based on personal, unreflected opinions. Arguably, these might be more likely to reflect a true personal opinion, as the response was not measured against peer opinions like in the focus group; however, the responses could also reflect what a respondent thought the researcher – or the company - wanted to hear, again due to the lack of any interaction with the researcher and other peers (see Chapter 3 for a detailed assessment of differences of responses between quantitative and qualitative methods, and the social desirability bias).

The basic assumption that appears in the majority of responses is that ‘politeness’ and ‘courtesy’ are perceived as “common sense”: “Polite communication [is] should be common sense no matter what the establishment.” Participants also indicated that polite behaviour is something that comes naturally: “I don’t think there is anything unique just a good level of standards set where no slang is acceptable + courteous behaviour is adhered to at all times.” Participants also claimed to treat everyone the same: “I normally treat the guests all the same regardless their nationality.” Some, however, would suggest a ‘same, but different’ approach when interacting with guests: “Treat every guest the same but then be flexible and meet every guest’s needs.”

These observations seem to confirm the theory that individuals are often not aware of their own cultural behaviour patterns (Hall, 1982, 1990).

### *Guest Attitude*

A large number of participants in the survey commented on how the way a guest chooses to interact with them has a great influence on the way they respond, e.g. “It depends on the guest (and how angry he is)”. However, some would also observe that politeness can be also used to ‘manipulate’ difficult guests and turn them into customers that are easier to communicate with for the employees: “Im (sic) a polite person and if I was rude that would make the Hotel look bad. Also everyone loves doing nice things for people who are nice to you but also it’s nice see an unpolite (sic) person lighten up because of the service you have given them and usually they would want to come back” This comment parallels previous research which revealed that customers are likely to respond well to a smile and a general positive affective display of employees (Gountas, Ewing, & Gountas, 2007). Overall, the usage of smiling is a behaviour that participants indicate to be using fairly frequently: “Depends how the guest approaches me with the situation, but customer service is about looking after the guests so I would base my decision on what will make them happy.” The comments made in the survey are visualised in the following figure.

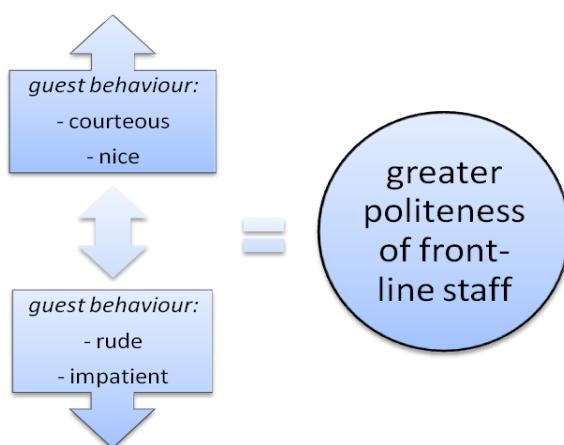


Figure 6: *Influence of Guest Attitude on Staff Behaviour*

The responses suggest that employees have learned that very rude customers require more courteous interaction as to achieve communication goals. On the other hand, respondents also indicated that they are more likely to go out of their way to fulfil customers' requests according to how 'nice' a guest interacts with them. Both extreme rudeness and extreme nicety appear to be motivators for front-line staff to increase their willingness to fulfil customer needs.

Moreover, previous research has already shown that customers have different expectations of a hospitality provider. The interaction can be interpreted in a very distinctive way, depending on what a tourist judges to be of importance in a service encounter. The response of a staff member to a guest should therefore depend on the cultural context and the requirements that this particular guest with a particular nationality has (Kong & Jogaaratnam, 2007; Stauss & Mang, 1999).

### *Action*

The responses suggest that immediately acting on customer requirements is an essential goal for customer-employee interaction that appears to have a direct influence on the perception of politeness. The literature on the other hand indicates that explanations can be an effective tool in repairing customer service interactions (e.g. Warden, et al., 2003). Yet responses in all parts of the survey indicated the absolute need for finding solutions and providing alternatives for the guest. As one respondent put it: "Key issue: assumption unable to help but need to turn guests (sic) problem to a solution." Another points out: "It is all "what we can do for one guest" To a certain extent there isn't anything we can't help a guest with."

In order to reach this communicative understanding, a sequence that employees employ can be detected through the responses, similar to sequences that have been developed by previous research (see also McCole, 2004; Teare, 1998). Keeping in line with the communication context of this study, the focus for the sequence is kept on polite interaction, thus, the overall focus is slightly different to the sequences suggested by hospitality research:

#### Stage 1: Listening and understanding

Firstly, a high degree of awareness is necessary to ensure that a customer request is understood and processed correctly (see also McKechnie, et al., 2007).

Respondents noted it is important to provide “Total Attention to guest and their request”. Respondents continued saying that “Understanding their needs and listening to guests queries” is required in this communication stage.

### Stage 2: Find mutual beneficial options

In order to respond to a customer adequately, effectively, and politely, the overall process is important. It has to be assured that the service the employee provides follows the general agreed upon quality. Naturally, the second step incorporates what has been happening in the first stage, ensuring that the request has been transferred correctly to the staff member so that the presented options are synchronised with the guest’s requirements (Leech, 1974). Here, respondents note: “Getting the right message from guests, make sure you know exactly what they ask for / requests”. Overall, employees said they need to “Generally sympathise, move forward to solve the problem for both the hotel & the guest.”

### Stage 3: Decide on plan of action and act

The last step involves the actual designing and delivering of service, which is mainly based on the sincere intent to resolve the problem. “If you cannot offer something the guest wants offer the next best thing. Or suggest something else.” “Listen, customer service if it is something for them room – act as quickly as possible”

Hospitality research has often looked at these kind of behaviour sequences, noting that a service encounter is scripted with a lot of detail (Lashley, 2002). The general customer-employee interaction is not reinvented every time, but follows a set of agreed upon rules (Chandon, et al., 1997). Regarding the results from this study, however, it can be assumed that the interpretation of this pre-set behaviour is interpreted by individuals according to the context the interaction occurs in. Here, politeness can act as a tool to navigate the conversation (Mattila, 2006).

In conclusion, the results from this investigation are similar to findings from previous studies (Johnson, et al., 2004b), suggesting that a request situation might be governed by a primary face-threat, but that there are a number of factors that influence the overall progress of the interaction. Again, it becomes apparent that hospitality research can greatly benefit from the application of communication theories as research in this field tends to take a much closer look at the underlying

dynamics of a conversation, that can potentially be of more help when trying to explain behaviour patterns than the generic sequences that current understanding is based on.

### *Documents*

The documents were used as a point of reference to present the official view that the organisation wants to see communicated. The official documents are likely to be somewhat remote from the actual day to day interaction with customers. However, the advertising material represents the view that is first encountered by guests and might be the reason why they chose to stay at this particular establishment because the portrayed reality resonates with the customers' expectations. As suggested earlier, Panorama caters for both national and international tourists. Brochures are, thus, targeted at two distinctive target markets and seek to appeal to a number of different audiences with distinctive requirements for different functions (e.g. business and conferences, leisure, recreation, weddings and other events). Different target audiences are likely to look for different information in the hotel directory. The findings presented in the previous chapter suggest that Panorama seeks to convey information to the potential customer through different channels. International tourists might be more drawn to the full-page photographs that portray, or categorise, the region that a hotel is located in, whereas business customers are likely to be more interested in the description of the specific facilities that the hotel has to offer. The description of facilities for functions and other information related to that matter might also be of interest to guests interested in holding an event at the organisation. Overall, it appears that the company attempts to ensure that there is relevant information for every potential customer. Hospitality researchers note that a customer-oriented marketing strategy is crucial for organisations in order to maintain an advantage over their competitors (Inbakaran & Jackson, 2005; Moutinho, 2000). Interestingly, Panorama employs a fairly unique adaptation of a differentiated marketing approach targeting multiple market segments. As opposed to the traditional approach to differentiated marketing, where an organisation develops marketing mixes for every individual market subdivision, Panorama chooses to relay all of the different marketing through a single corporate document, which might lead to miscommunication and confusion with the prospective customers.

### *International Guests*

As pointed out earlier in the presentation of the organisational context, “Panorama Hotels is 100% New Zealand owned and operated. We offer excellent facilities in fantastic locations with true New Zealand hospitality and service, at affordable prices” (Hotel Directory, p. 2). Promoting a hospitality establishment that is “100% Kiwi owned” appears to be the main marketing scheme of the organisation as it repeatedly appears on advertising material, and even the phone number is continues on this scheme. Interestingly enough, this concept is not necessarily seen as being of great importance by the multi-cultural front-line team. The participants of the focus group had noted that guests do not appear to have a problem with the multinationality of the front-line staff: “Tricky one... (laughter) no one’s ever said, oh... I thought we were in New Zealand...” (Focus group discussion, Participant A).

Overall, the marketing material infers a strong pride in New Zealand that suggests, especially for visitors from abroad, that the hotel staff is indeed local. This feeling is conveyed through an extensive use of “we” and the assumption that “we” have experienced the best of New Zealand already and would like to share this apparent insider information with “our” guests:

Welcome to our country, our hotels. We’re proud of New Zealand.. the level of accommodation and service we provide to travellers around Aotearoa. Our commitment is to offer you quality with a genuine sense of Kiwi hospitality. We’re your national hotel group, spread around the best of New Zealand, working to international standards with a touch of local flair.

This is where we belong. We know the coastline. We’ve walked through the lush native forests. Stood on age-old glaciers of ice. Loved the neon lights of the cities, sat back and enjoyed the timeless tranquillity of one of our beauty spots whose landscapes are amongst the most stunning in the world. We want to share the best of those times with our guests. That’s why we promise to offer affordable comfort and a welcoming smile whenever you come to us.

We’re Panorama Hotels and we’d love to see you soon. (Hotel Directory, p. 3)

Tourism scholars like Therkelsen (2003) assert that a tourism destination is bound by culture, creating associations which are linked to the background of a tourist. Still, research indicates that the perception of a destination can be influenced by branding and marketing. A strong marketing culture can therefore have a positive effect on a customer's perception of service quality (Hannam, 2004; Luk, 1997; Morgan, Pritchard, & Piggott, 2002). The marketing culture will be highly likely to influence customers' perception of the hotel, which again is interlinked strongly with the actual corporate culture. Employees are therefore expected by the customer to display a politeness level appropriate to the marketing level (Solnet, 2007).

### *New Zealand Guests*

The advertising material portrays the hotels so that they might appeal to different types of visitors. The emphasis for business travellers is put on providing a second home for them. "Come and stay with us, enjoy a great meal. Meet with your colleagues and associates and explore the attractions of the local area. We're here to help you feel at home." (Hotel Directory, p. 5). This is a distinctive branch of business for the organisation that creates the necessity for a totally different form of communication with the guests:

It's only for the New Zealand people, like, um, not for international tourists, of course they don't know what's New Zealand culture and stuff... [ ] it's a New Zealand owned company and the staff should talk like that, just like an explanation, just make him feel like it's a local hotel and my way to stay in this organisation.

Also, we promote our hotels, ok, all of the rooms of our hotel it's got a full kitchen facilities, which hardly you get in any of the other hotels, so we try to make like a home, even if you are away and staying for a long time, you can cook your own food and stuff, so that's the way we promote our hotels in a New Zealand owned hotel, it's like a home even if you are away from home. (Focus group discussion, Participant B)

Research agrees with this comment, noting that international guests are likely to be more forgiving in a service encounter as they appear to attribute miscues to

cultural distance. Business guests, on the other hand, are likely to have a lower level of tolerance (Warden, et al., 2003). This has also implications for the overall marketing strategy as Malecki (2004) notes that places, or tourism destinations, compete with each other to be favoured by the customer. Panorama Hotels' loyalty scheme provides travellers with another reason to use the facilities provided by the chain throughout the country. However, this has lead to misunderstanding and confusion for the guests, as customers would base their expectations of a different hotel on the first one that they had visited. Yet, even though Panorama advertises the same quality of service for all establishments, the setting and anticipated service differs greatly between hotels that are set in the city to those in the countryside. This has lead to a recent restructuration of the company (informal interviews).

### *Corporate Umbrella*

The individual hotels that form part of the chain are spread out over the entire country. The different hotels attract different clientele, in accordance with the surroundings that they are in (e.g. Auckland City: "our largest city, sailing, shopping, nightlife" to Fox Glacier: "Glacier, Westland World Heritage park" (Hotel Directory, back cover)). Even though the tangible requirements for guests in the individual hotels can differ greatly, the company exclaims: "Wherever you go around New Zealand, we'd like you to have a really enjoyable experience, so we're providing great facilities and offering exceptional service." (Hotel Directory). However, advertising is not the most important vehicle to influence customers. It is rather the underlying policies that are more likely to affect the guest's perception of the organisation (Kennedy, 1977). Kyriakidou and Gore (2005) elaborate on components of the corporate culture of successful organisations in the tourism and hospitality industry, positing that missions and strategies are highly important for performance.

### Concluding Analysis

The review of the literature and previous politeness research had suggested that with increasing face threat, negative politeness becomes the preferred mode of communication (Mayer, 2001). This is largely backed up with the qualitative data gathered during the focus group discussion. The survey categories, however, suggest

that the outcomes for the guest, namely the tangible action and implications for the guest have the power to override the technically preferred politeness category. In a hotel front-line situation, a request situation or refusal is likely to be linked to an increasingly high potential face threat. However, in order to maintain different face goals, immediate action is preferred over long, yet fruitless, explanations.

All of the different sources of data seem to be highlighting different types of information. Yet even though some of the responses appear to be contradictory, participating front-line employees were all dealing with the same restraints and challenges in their communication with guests. However, the level of awareness of different motivators and the effect on everyday work varied to a large degree.

Respondents indicated in the survey that answers that contained no redressive action, no explanation and no solution for the guest would be not only impolite but would also make the hotel and themselves look bad or incompetent. Participant answers in the questionnaire suggested that this would be the case, no matter whether the conversation contains language barriers or not. The focus group participants, however, stated that they have discovered that it is only frustrating for guests with a limited amount of English knowledge to listen uncomprehendingly to a lengthy, albeit polite, communication sequence with front-line staff. Participant C pointed out in the focus group discussion: “Yeah, cos people would rather do that than *struggle* through... like, trying to communicate in a different language..”. In order to avoid situations that might require the usage of a lower politeness strategy when language barriers are involved, employees try to find another staff member from the same culture as the guest. Participant C in the focus group suggested that: “There’s always somebody in the hotel, like the other day I had, um, *Spanish* people and I got one of the porters to help me, so one for every different language, practically”. Without the aid of colleagues, the necessary level of politeness, required by the anticipated level of service cannot be upheld. Participant A elaborated in the focus group, noting that: “We sometimes have to call someone away from the café to just *explain* to other customers that don’t speak *any* English, otherwise,... you’d be stuffed”. Even though this attitude was not communicated in the close-ended questions of the questionnaire, participants of the survey are still aware that language is a factor when formulating polite responses to guests. One respondent commented: “Which words I use to explain depends on language barrier”. The results of this investigation support findings by Johnson (2007) who notes that in situations where face threat is already

perceived to be high, the addition of another one does not influence the judgment of appropriateness.

All of the presented data analysis feeds back into answering the original research question. Overall, it was demonstrated that there are a number of variables that contribute to the perception of politeness in request situations. Even though the findings appeared to be contradictory at times, the main parts can be described in a fairly sequential diagram. The implications of the analysis are summarised in the following model, denoting the driving forces that influence the overall perception of politeness.

*RQ: How does culture influence the perception of politeness that occurs in nonverbal and verbal behaviour when responding to requests in a hotel front-line environment?*

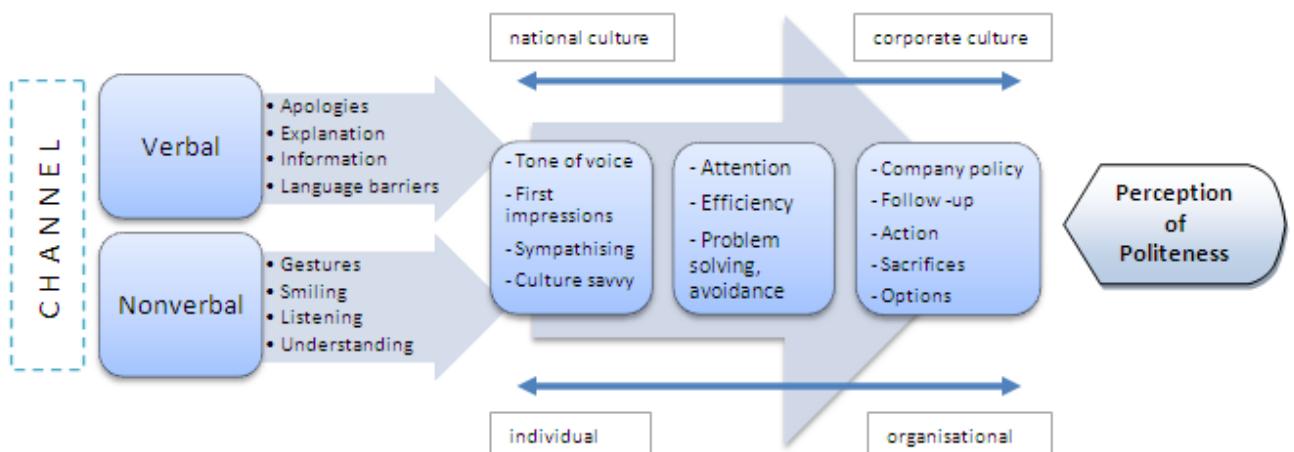


Figure 7: Integrated Model - Perception of Politeness

The above model attempts to visualise the results from the data to answer the main research question:

Overall, the analysis of the data suggests that the use of a predominating verbal or nonverbal channel is inspired by language and cultural considerations. The channels are mostly employed simultaneously. The interaction is guided in the following from an individual perspective that is mainly influenced by the national

culture of the staff member. The next step is partly influenced by the own culture, but contains increasingly aspects derived from the corporate culture and protocol. The last step is dominated by the organisational code of behaviour. All of the individual compounds influence the resulting perception of Politeness of the employee-customer interaction.

Previous research has also found that organisational culture and how it is perceived is related to differences in national cultures, contemplating that behaviours are influenced by both factors (Dastmalchian, et al., 2000). However, due to the business approach of this previous research, it has failed to take into account the individual dynamics that guide behaviour, as well as the channels that initiate the communication process.

The analysis of the data from the different sources has demonstrated that front-line staff use their own cultural script when engaging in customer-employee interaction. Corporate culture provides a general ‘formal’ setting for staff to follow, but it is interpreted differently by individual employees, depending on their experience and cultural background. Politeness, therefore, is regarded as a natural occurrence rather than an artificial construct used in a specific context. Consequently, corporate protocol can have both positive and negative effects on communication between guests and front-line staff. Employees view corporate policies as part of their general job description, rather than being directly related to required behaviour. These rules have to be negotiated with the perception of the required level of politeness as it is judged appropriate by the individual staff member.

Not surprisingly, and in accordance to prevailing Politeness research, front-line employees prefer to use a form of redressive action when they find themselves in request situations that involve a number of different potential FTAs and different interests. A main recurring theme is empathy. Both the focus group and the survey participants stress that it is highly important for smooth communication to ensure that the guest is feeling understood and his or her request is taken seriously. Participants note that this is achieved through a number of different mechanisms that already have been of interest to previous research: (a) listening behaviour (e.g. Brownell, 2004; K. Hirokawa, Yagi, & Miyata, 2004; Imhof, 2003; McKechnie, et al., 2007); (b) voice, intonation and phrasing (e.g. LaPlante & Ambady, 2003; Townsend, 1985; Winsted, 2000); (c) empathy (e.g. Burgoon & Le Poire, 1999; Coulter & Coulter, 2002; Floyd & Burgoon, 1999; Goodwin & Smith, 1990; Gountas, et al., 2007; Lashley, 2002;

Rabinowitz et al., 1997; Solnet, 2007); (d) solutions (e.g. L. Douglas & Connor, 2003; McCole, 2004; Nadiri & Hussain, 2005; Teare, 1998; Warden, et al., 2003). These individual components are incorporated in the model presented above.

### Reflections on the Three Sources

The findings from the different sources yielded information from a number of distinctive perspectives. Whilst analysing the data presented in the last chapter, it had to be kept in mind that this communicated perspective largely depends on how the data has been collected (see also Bryman, 2004). The triangulation of data presented a whole, even though individual results from the different sources appeared to be contradictory at the start.

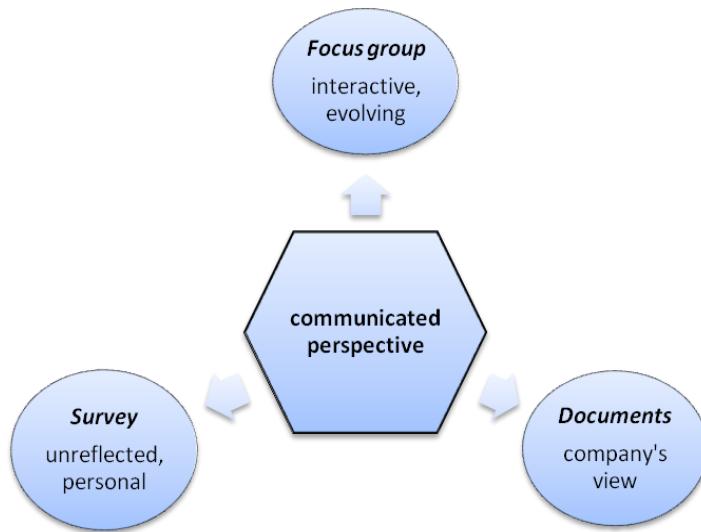


Figure 8: *Communicated Perspective*

As depicted in Figure 8, the communicated perspective depends on the channel through which it is expressed, as summarised in the diagram. The findings of this study are therefore a representation of responses to the same question from a number of distinctive view points. Triangulation of methods has therefore provided a more complete view of the question that was to be answered which has helped to overcome the limitations that the individual data sources presented.

The focus group discussion showed that the participants were able to entertain different opinions and ideas through the interaction with other participants. The

perspective was evolving throughout the course of the session. Participants continued to question their peers', but also their own beliefs and often discovered that they had in fact misinterpreted some of the other staff's behaviours. The survey on the other hand suggested a response that was purely based on the individual's own perception. Respondents did not have the opportunity to discuss with other employees which might have led to a different level of understanding, like it was developed in the focus group discussion. Answers here were based on a personal opinion that did not contain any reflection with other people. The documents contain the company's - or corporate - perspective on the understanding of the subject that the organisation would like to project. This perspective is likely to be detached from day-to-day interactions with customers, but it still appears to be likely to dictate front-line behaviour as it is likely to colour a prospective guest's expectation of the organisation. Implications of the utilised methodology are reviewed in the following chapter. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and revisits the main finds and themes of the study.

## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS

### Introduction

This case study intended to investigate the relative importance of the usage of politeness for conducting intercultural service encounters from a communication point of view instead of the prevailing strictly marketing- and managing-oriented perspective. It was designed to indicate the general usefulness of the application of a communication theory to an area of research that has been considered previously largely only from one point of view. The project may also suggest further directions for future research that are considered in the following.

The main question that was answered over the course of the last two chapters was how culture influences the perception of politeness in request situations. Both nonverbal and verbal behaviour were taken into account in this study that was set in a hotel front-line context. The project also included a number of sub-questions that were answered over the course of the project. In this chapter, the results are summarised for the individual sub-questions. Furthermore, implications of these results are presented, followed by limitations of the study and considerations for future research. The thesis finally concludes with a summary of the research study.

*How can effective and appropriate polite communication between tourists and front-line staff be defined?*

The results from this study indicate that effective and appropriate polite communication does not solely rely on simply employing courteous language. Polite communication appears to be rather exhibited in a combination of verbal language choices, like the usage of redressive action when formulating and responding to requests; nonverbal behaviour, including physical appearance, and active listening behaviour to convey attentiveness and empathy; and visible follow-up actions to finally legitimise the original request. The results therefore suggest that effective and appropriate polite communication between guest and staff member depends on a large amount of context that has to be managed during the interaction.

The results imply that front-line staff have to demonstrate a lot of awareness for the interaction with customers. Employees need to be aware of their own self, the corporate environment and the needs of each and every individual guest.

*To what extent does corporate culture enhance or inhibit the choice of communication strategies?*

The results suggest that corporate culture can both enhance and inhibit polite communication. The results indicate that the corporate umbrella provides a context for potential guests to attract them to the hotel and to ‘brief’ them on what to expect at the organisation. Communication surprises could therefore be minimised for standard and uncomplicated encounters between guests and front-line staff. Corporate culture with its standardised procedures might be able to enhance customer-staff interaction through the provision of tools that front-line employees can utilise to ameliorate a guest’s experience, like standard upgrades. On the other hand, some of the corporate rules might also restrict polite customer-staff interaction when employees have to insist on certain rules that might implicate face risks for the communicating parties involved. Examples that were discovered in this study included issues that evolve out of the corporate policy for taking a security bond from guests, and the standard procedure of having to give the bill to customers who want to charge a meal to their room straight after they have ordered, before they have eaten.

The organisation needs to be aware of the influence that corporate culture with its rules and procedures has on the interaction between guest and staff member. The organisation should provide employees with procedures that enhance a guest’s experience at the hotel and attempt to minimise the procedures that could be perceived as a face threat. For these ‘unpleasant’ policies, the organisation could provide procedures that would assist staff to navigate the situation without too much face loss risk.

*How rigid are rules that prescribe behaviour towards customers?*

The results indicate that for Panorama Hotels, employees have a set of policies that they follow when they engage in customer service. Even though participants said that they have to follow these rules, they indicated that the corporate protocol becomes negotiable when face concerns arise. The results suggest that politeness requirements can have the power to overpower corporate policy when the potential

risk for the employee is perceived to be low. When the risk factor becomes too much of a threat for the staff member in terms of liability, the employee appears to be much more likely to follow the prescribed procedure regardless of politeness and face concerns. Corporate policies are developed by the organisation's management and appear to be somewhat remote from the actual requirements for polite front-line communication. Even though employees are generally required to adhere to corporate protocols, staff members appear to use these rules more like guidelines that can be adjusted should a situation require a differentiated approach.

The results suggest that staff usually benefit from having the possibility of bending rules in certain situations. However, the organisation needs to clearly communicate that there might be liabilities that could cause a problem for the hotel if a policy is not adhered to. The organisation has to therefore ensure that the employee still follows company procedures, even when the staff member decides to make an exception to a policy.

*What is the most commonly used form of politeness?*

The results suggest that staff incorporate redressive actions into their responses to requests made by guests. The results indicate that employees prefer to frame responses according to Brown and Levinson's positive and negative politeness categories. The remaining categories bald-on record and off-record appeared to be a lot less preferred by staff members. Staff indicated that they utilise explanations and apologies to appeal to a guest's positive face.

The results indicate that front-line staff are generally aware of their need to adjust their behaviour to fulfil their job description. The overall approach on how to formulate a response to a guest request seem to still vary to a large degree. The difference in approaching a situation seem to imply that front-line staff would benefit from a training program that could attempt to streamline responses, so that responses to culturally distant members in an interaction would match better.

*Do front-line staff make innovative decisions in the absence of direction from corporate training?*

The results indicate that front-line employees at Panorama Hotels base their polite behaviour mainly on what they have learned during their upbringing. Also, it was discovered that there is no specific cultural training for front-line staff at this

organisation. Some staff have received training at another place, some have not. The differences in employees' backgrounds have indicated for this study that staff have a fairly flexible approach in dealing with customer requests. The results suggest that employees develop their individual protocol for responding to customers through trial and error.

The results imply that front-line staff would benefit from corporate training. At present, the trial and error approach of staff to solve front-line communication concerns, suggests that there is a relatively high potential for errors, especially for inexperienced staff members. Miscommunication could then lead to more communication problems, some of which might have been eliminated through a corporate training programme.

*How does the perceived need for politeness vary?*

The results indicate that front-line staff treat guests differently according to a number of variables. These factors include considerations regarding the purpose of a guest's stay (recreational or business); the background of a guest (national or international guest); and special circumstances (specific events, e.g. honeymoon or problems, e.g. not sufficient funds to pay for the security bond). However, the results also suggest that employees are prone to choose a politeness strategy – or the omitting thereof – in response to the behaviour they receive from a guest. The results suggest that often, the response of the staff member is directly influenced by the way a guest approaches a request situation: the politer a guest, the politer the employee. On the other hand, the results also indicate that employees seem to provide more courteous interaction to guests that are very rude to them. This behaviour pattern appears to be motivated by the need to ensure a positive experience for the guest with the organisation due to their job role.

The results imply that staff members need to be aware of the context that might influence a conversation in order to react accordingly, instead of running into the danger of taking every interaction personally and reacting in a personally affected manner as opposed to a corporately preferred type of reaction.

*What is the basis for the judgment of 'polite'?*

The results suggest that employees judge politeness according to their background and upbringing. The results indicate that front-line staff employ 'common

courtesy' for their interaction with guests, which is presumed to be based to some extent on the employee's national background. The perception of what is common courtesy appears to be coloured by the individual's background. Politeness seems to be considered as universal and univalent, even though the results indicated that the approach to politeness is rather personal. The results also suggest that even though politeness is considered important, or even essential, for successful customer-employee interaction, it is perceived to be more of a personal trait of an individual than a learned behaviour.

As the basis for the judgement of 'polite' appears to be motivated by an individual's upbringing, it would be beneficial for the organisation to provide basic intercultural training for their front-line staff. A training program or a generally heightened awareness in the company could alert front-line employees to the potential areas where their own understanding and perception of politeness might be at odds with the perception of another staff member or a guest.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that Politeness is a relevant topic for study in the context of front-line staff in hospitality. Both national and corporate culture has a considerable effect on employee's behaviour and response towards requests made by guests. This research project has shown that there is a large amount of factors that influence and govern behaviour choices that interconnect. It has shown that national culture is perceived as the main form of guidance for polite behaviour, but also that corporate policy and culture can have the power to override politeness choices that an employee would have preferably chosen when dealing with a given situation when face-governing issues become less important due to higher risks like a loss for the company or the job position. All interaction needs to be supported by redressive actions in order to be judged to be courteous which is considered to be synonymous with professional behaviour.

### Implications

To conclude, in order to optimise customer-staff interaction, the management of an organisation has to be aware of the pushing and pulling that a front-line employee experiences in customer service situations. The knowledge from this research could be implemented in current training programmes to create more in-

depth training, focused on intercultural communication that is relevant to front-line staff. In order to enhance customer experience, the findings from this study suggest that an organisation should invest into teaching their front-line staff on specific core values of the organisation and highlight behaviour requirements for competent intercultural polite behaviour. An organisation should also ensure that their staff understand why certain rules have been implemented and provide employees with ways to negotiate common situations that could be potentially face-threatening not only for the guest but for the company as well.

### *Research Design*

The different perspectives that were obtained in the individual sources of data have enabled the study to understand the research on a very distinctive level. The utilisation of a number of methods, thus, a triangulation of methods, has certainly enriched the data and also aided in the overall reliability of the analysis, as seemingly surprising answers and results could be interpreted with the aid of the remaining data sets to obtain a coherent result. The focus on one main theory, Politeness Theory, and the body of research that has been produced by researchers over the years exploring this specific component of human communication meant that it was possible to utilise a number of advances and alternative ideas on the original publication by Brown and Levinson (1987). This study therefore presents more of the current and evolving ideas that govern today's communication research.

### Limitations

All research is destined to contain a number of limitations. The context of the study was a case study, so the findings might not be applicable for the general population of front-line staff. Also, the response rate for the questionnaire was not particularly high which prevented the use of any inferential statistics, so that the analysis of the survey was limited to descriptive methods. The focus group was set in Auckland; therefore, the participants of the discussion based their opinions on the nature of this particular hotel, rather than on the entire organisation. The study was also set in a very particular organisational context. This means that the generalisability to other contexts might be limited. The results for this study suggest, for example, that

national culture is a very strong motivator for front-line staff/guest interaction; however, more research in that area would be necessary to determine what aspects of national culture in particular influence staff interaction with guests. Individuals are likely to have a different bond to their cultural background. However, as was already developed in Chapter 3, the scope of this project was also limited by time and monetary issues that had to be kept in line with the thesis nature of this project (Creswell, 1994), so that the exploration of certain themes lay beyond the realms of this project.

### Areas for Future Research

The results that will be obtained from this research project will hopefully aid in gaining a deeper understanding of communication practices that are employed in a front-line environment and the current techniques that are used in communicating politely in the service industry. Overall, it has shown that a communication angle on a topic which is mainly researched by business and hospitality scholars can provide the means for revealing numerous new connections and, thus, create an interesting area for future research.

The study has revealed that the general perception of politeness of participants, but also in the prevailing business literature, is simply based on an elaborate use of ‘common sense’. In regards to the concept of ‘common sense’, the study also found that the idea of an ingrained Politeness monitor is not ideal to guide staff behaviour. Here, the overall advances of Politeness research in communication could be integrated with the general lack of focus on courtesy matters in business research. Furthermore, the distinctive preferences of data usage for the two disciplines of communication and business research – focussed on understanding and focussed on a tangible outcome – could lead in combination to a far better understanding than the individual approaches.

As employee behaviour is regarded as essential to maintaining satisfied customer-organisation relationships, a communication perspective could bring the much needed understanding to this topic. In the end, this could then again feed into the applied hospitality context. However, it is likely that much more work is needed in order to prove to hospitality and business scholars that communication theories can provide useful information for their field.

Future research should also explore different types of organisational contexts to discover more on the relationship between front-line employees and customers and the driving forces of national vs. corporate culture. This could include a distinction between organisations with very strong corporate cultures and companies that do not promote a unified corporate behaviour. The point of view in future research could also include the customer's perception of an expected behaviour form of front-line staff and explore whether this aligns with staff behaviour and, ultimately, with the envisioned corporate communication.

### Summary

In conclusion, this project has discovered a number of key themes and issues that appear to be relevant for polite front-line communication. The research has highlighted the importance of courtesy for front-line staff and has identified areas that are seen to be prone to miscommunication due to the incorrect understanding or usage of politeness markers.

This study finds that national culture has a stronger influence than corporate culture on employee behaviour. National culture is considered as the 'blueprint' that individuals have developed during their childhood and upbringing. Corporate policies can affect customer-employee relation negatively or positively. However, this protocol-heavy behaviour has to be negotiated in order to maintain the required level of politeness and ensure the avoidance of committing FTAs.

Verbal and nonverbal communication channels are used by staff and customers to facilitate polite communication. Both channels are important to employees, and nonnegotiable for the interaction, as the goal in a request situation is to provide a solution for the guest, which requires clear verbal messages to ensure that the guest feels understood and the request is being validated and clear nonverbal messages to indicate an action or follow up by the staff member.

Participants appear to equal polite behaviour with professional behaviour. This behaviour, however, seems to be strongly influenced by the individual's own value and belief system, thus, depending on the national cultural background and upbringing.

Furthermore, employees explained a tendency to expect cultural clashes with their guests and try to avoid this by using their multi-cultural team as a politeness

resource. Matching guests with a staff member of the same cultural background for communication issues is presumed to facilitate polite interaction.

Employees indicated that they try to detect and guess the level of politeness that the customer expects. The correct level of politeness may vary, and the variables that are present in the interaction have to be carefully considered. These variables might include: national background of the customer, recreational or business context, location of the hotel, returning tourist, or length of stay.

Stereotyping and prejudices appear to be likely to occur on both sides of the communication situation. Employees seem to realise that guests are highly likely to judge them according to their physical appearance and are also likely to display a more favourable opinion to and of staff members that they can relate to.

Overall, this study adds to the ever growing body of knowledge and advances in politeness research. The results from the investigation support findings from previous research (e.g. Johnson, 2007, 2008) and provide some answers to questions raised by other scholars. It hopefully also provides a more useful approach to the attempt in bridging knowledge gaps existent between adjunct fields by concentrating on a singular communication aspect. The study will hopefully encourage further research in this respect. This research project has clearly shown that perceptions of politeness differ widely according to different cultural backgrounds, statuses and communicational contexts. Noting, however, that service providers and interactants have a very concrete opinion of what is polite and appropriate in a given context. Yet, the study has also shown that what is usually referred to as ‘common sense’ is not particularly ‘common’, but rather based on an individual’s perception of what is perceived to be ‘common’ in the individual’s experience and background.

*Common sense is the collection of prejudices acquired by age eighteen.*

Albert Einstein

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Appendices  
*Appendix A: Information Form (Focus Group)*



**Perception of Politeness of front-line staff in request situations**

My name is Geraldine Bengsch and I am currently enrolled in the Master of International Communication Programme at Unitec. In order to complete my studies, I have to conduct a research study and write a thesis. My research looks at politeness and courtesy in everyday encounters of hotel front-line staff with international customers. I have the approval of Panorama Hotel group to carry out this project.

**Aims and objectives**

I am interested in how politeness is perceived/enacted within front-line service situations, especially in the unique environment of the multi-cultural context in the hospitality sector. I would like to investigate the notion of front-line staff as the interface between organisation and customer and the implications this might have for the standardisation of service and perceived politeness in request situations. By taking part in this research you can express your own views on how effective communication with customers should be conducted and identify procedures that you have learned during your training that might be helpful or restricting in your communication with customers.

**What it will mean for you**

I would like you to participate in a focus group to discuss:

- How and to what extend interaction with customers is regulated;
- How confident you feel in dealing with customers from different cultures;
- What politeness issues you have encountered in your work and how you managed to overcome them

I would like your participation in this focus group that will take about 1 hour. The meeting will be held at your hotel during working time. I will tape the conversation to later transcribe it. All features that could lead to your identification will be removed from the tapes and erased once the transcription is finished.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to sign a consent form. This does not stop you from changing your mind if you wish to withdraw from the project. However, because of my schedule, any withdrawals must be done within two weeks after the focus group has taken place.

Your name and information that may identify you will be kept completely confidential. All information collected from you will be stored on a password protected file and only the researcher and my supervisor will have access to this information. The results from my study might be published in an academic journal at some time, but this will not affect your anonymity in this project at any stage.

Please contact me if you need more information about the project, via email ([geraldine\\_be@hotmail.com](mailto:geraldine_be@hotmail.com)) or phone (0212132433), at any time if you have any concerns about the research project you can contact my supervisor:

My supervisor is Dr. Donna Henson, phone 815 4321 ext. 8119 or email [dhenson@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:dhenson@unitec.ac.nz)

*Appendix B: Consent Form (Focus Group)*



**Perception of Politeness of front-line staff in request situations**

I have had the research project explained to me and I have read and understand the information sheet given to me.

I understand that I do not have to be part of this if I do not want to and I may withdraw within two weeks after the focus-group has taken place.

I understand that everything I say is confidential and none of the information I give will identify me and that the only persons who will know what I have said will be the researchers and their supervisor. I also understand that all the information that I give will be stored securely on a computer at Unitec for a period of 5 years.

I understand that the focus group and discussion with the researcher will be taped and transcribed.

I understand that I can see the transcription before the analysis has been carried out as well as the finished research document.

I have had time to consider everything and I give my consent to be a part of this project.

*Participant Signature:* ..... *Date:* .....

*Project Researcher:* ..... *Date:* .....

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2008-905.**

This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from December 2008 to December 2009. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 7248). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

*Appendix C: Information Form (Questionnaire)*



**Perception of politeness of front-line staff in request situations**

My name is Geraldine Bengsch and I am currently enrolled in the Master of International Communication Programme at Unitec in Auckland. In order to complete my studies, I have to conduct a research study and write a thesis. My research looks at politeness and courtesy in everyday encounters of hotel front-line staff with international customers. I have the approval of the hotel to carry out this project.

**Aims and objectives**

I am interested in how politeness is perceived/enacted within front-line service situations, especially in the unique environment of the multi-cultural context in the hospitality sector. I would like to investigate the notion of front-line staff as the interface between organisation and customer and the implications this might have for the standardisation of service and perceived politeness in request situations. By taking part in this research you can identify key issues that you find are important in your interaction with customers and indicate problems that might arise due to the hotel's protocol and solutions you would give for these situations.

**What it will mean for you**

I would like you to fill out the questionnaire attached to this letter, which will take about 15 minutes of your time. Upon completion, please place the survey back into the envelope, seal it according to the instructions on the questionnaire and hand it back to your manager.

Completing the questionnaire and returning it implies that you are giving your consent to participate in this study. This does not stop you from changing your mind if you wish to withdraw from the project. However, because of my schedule, any withdrawals must be done within two weeks after the questionnaire has been sent back to me.

Information that may identify you will be kept completely confidential. All information collected from you will be stored on a password protected file and only the researcher and my supervisor will have access to this information. The results from my study might be published in an academic journal at some later time, but this will not affect your anonymity in this project at any stage.

I very much appreciate your contribution!

Kind Regards,

Geraldine Bengsch

Please contact me if you need more information about the project, via email ([geraldine\\_be@hotmail.com](mailto:geraldine_be@hotmail.com)) or phone (0212132433), at any time. If you have any concerns about the research project you can contact my supervisor:

My supervisor is Dr. Donna Henson, phone 815 4321 ext. 8119 or email [dhenson@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:dhenson@unitec.ac.nz)

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2008-905.**

This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from December 2008 to December 2009. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 7248). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

*Appendix D: Information Letter for General Managers at the Individual Hotels*

**Information for General Managers**

My name is Geraldine Bengsch and I am currently enrolled in the Master of International Communication Programme at Unitec in Auckland. In order to complete my studies, I have to conduct a research study and write a thesis. My research looks at politeness and courtesy in everyday encounters of hotel front-line staff with international customers.

**Aims and objectives**

I am interested in how politeness is perceived/enacted within front-line service situations, especially in the unique environment of the multi-cultural context in the hospitality sector. I would like to investigate the notion of front-line staff as the interface between organisation and customer and the implications this might have for the standardisation of service and perceived politeness in request situations.

**What it will mean for you**

Along with this note, you will find a packet that contains ten copies of my questionnaires in individual envelopes and a return envelope. It also contains an information sheet for your front-office manager. I would ask you to pass this pack and the return envelope to your front-line manager, to be distributed among front-line staff. It will take staff only about 15 minutes to complete the survey. The completed surveys can then be forwarded to the General Manager of the hotel in Auckland. I hope that this approach causes the least inconvenience possible for your work.

Thank you very much for your assistance!

Kind Regards,

Geraldine Bengsch

Please contact me if you need more information about the project, via email ([geraldine\\_be@hotmail.com](mailto:geraldine_be@hotmail.com)) or phone (0212132433), at any time if you have any concerns about the research project you can contact my supervisor:

My supervisor is Dr. Donna Henson, phone 815 4321 ext. 8119 or email [dhenson@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:dhenson@unitec.ac.nz)

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2008-905.**

This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from December 2008 to December 2009. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 7248). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

**Perception of politeness of front-line staff in request situations**  
**Research project**

***Information for Front-line Managers***

My name is Geraldine Bengsch and I am currently enrolled in the Master of International Communication Programme at Unitec in Auckland. In order to complete my studies, I have to conduct a research study and write a thesis. My research looks at politeness and courtesy in everyday encounters of hotel front-line staff with international customers. I have the approval of the hotel to carry out this project.

**Aims and objectives**

I am interested in how politeness is perceived/enacted within front-line service situations, especially in the unique environment of the multi-cultural context in the hospitality sector. I would like to investigate the notion of front-line staff as the interface between organisation and customer and the implications this might have for the standardisation of service and perceived politeness in request situations.

**What it will mean for you**

Along with this note, you will find ten copies of my questionnaires in individual envelopes. I would like you to distribute the questionnaire to your front-line staff, regardless of the time they have worked for the organisation. It will take staff only about 15 minutes to complete the survey. Upon completion, please collect the sealed envelopes containing the questionnaires, place them into the return envelope and send the package to the hotel in Auckland. On the envelope, you will find a little box where I would ask you to indicate how many employees are working in the front-office at your hotel and the number of surveys that you are sending back. Please return the questionnaires before the end of July 2009.

Thank you very much for your assistance!

Kind Regards,

Geraldine Bengsch

Please contact me if you need more information about the project, via email ([geraldine\\_be@hotmail.com](mailto:geraldine_be@hotmail.com)) or phone (0212132433), at any time if you have any concerns about the research project you can contact my supervisor:

My supervisor is Dr. Donna Henson, phone 815 4321 ext. 8119 or email [dhenson@unitec.ac.nz](mailto:dhenson@unitec.ac.nz)

**UREC REGISTRATION NUMBER: 2008-905.**

This study has been approved by the UNITEC Research Ethics Committee from December 2008 to December 2009. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Committee through the UREC Secretary (ph: 09 815-4321 ext 7248). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

*Appendix F: Internal Letter*

Monday, 6 July 2009

Dear [REDACTED] Group Colleagues,

As part of our work with local community groups the [REDACTED] Auckland Hotel has agreed to participate in a research paper with a local student. The topic of this research was communication in the workplace and more specifically the communication between staff and Hotel guests.

One workshop has already taken place with the [REDACTED] Auckland staff and now I would like to ask you to assist where possible.

Enclosed are some questionnaires that we ask that you distribute around your front office team. If you could please ask that your teams complete as many surveys as possible that would be much appreciated. The more responses that we have to the survey the more accurate the finding will be.

Any completed surveys can be forwarded to [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] Auckland to be passed on to the research student. Naturally as part of our participation in this project we will receive a copy of the findings which will be circulated around the Hotels. I believe that any research that looks at communication within our operations will be of some use.

Thank you in advance for indulging my unusual request. If you have any questions regarding this research paper please do not hesitate to contact either myself or [REDACTED]

Best Regards

[REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] Christchurch

*Appendix G: Focus Group Discussion Guide*

## **Discussion guide for Panorama Hotel**

### Perception of politeness of front-line staff

#### I. *Introduction* (5 minutes)

- Moderator
- Purpose: to discuss how politeness is perceived/enacted within front-line service situations, especially in the unique environment of the multi-cultural context in the hospitality sector.
- Taping of session, helpers/observers
- Collection of consent forms
- Confidentiality
- Introductions:
  - First name
  - General information

#### II. *Data Collection* (5 minutes)

- Write down exercises:
- Exercise sheet
  - What is unique about working in your position
  - Think of an incident in your work that you were not prepared for during your training and how you solved the situation

#### III. *Warm-up discussion* (10 minutes)

- Description of day-to-day work
  - Identify shared understandings
  - Identify areas of difficulties
- Discussion of management expectation and reality on the job
  - Identify discrepancies
  - Job training

#### IV. *Subsequent discussion* (30 minutes)

- Intercultural issues in front-line request situations, regarding courtesy
  - Multi-cultural workforce
  - Multi-cultural customers
- Corporate culture vs. national culture
- Standardised service
  - Implications for service quality
  - Guidelines vs. improvised behaviour
- Intercultural competence
- Awareness of behaviour:
  - In own culture
  - In customer's culture

- In host country's culture
- Adaptation of behaviour
  - Controlled by individual
  - Controlled by organisation
- Decision making by front-line staff
  - Standard answers
  - Standard procedures
  - Unusual situations
- Appropriateness and effectiveness of responses
  - Perception of front-line staff
  - Perception of customer

V. *Conclusion of session (5 minutes)*

- Participants write down final comments

VI. *Summary (5 Minutes)*

*Appendix H: Focus Group Warm up Exercise*

**Exercise**

Please read the following statements and circle the number that best describes your own personal feeling about it. There is no right or wrong answer.

*Scale*

1=strongly disagree  
 2=disagree  
 3=it depends  
 4=agree  
 5=strongly agree

1. I can usually tell when there is something bothering the people I interact with because they will usually display a sad or depressed manner.  
     1 2 3 4 5
2. The best way to get along with others and avoid misunderstandings is to express my thoughts and feelings clearly and directly via verbal communication.  
     1 2 3 4 5
3. I can usually tell when others are displeased with my work because they tell me how I can do better.  
     1 2 3 4 5
4. Since people from all cultures use the same facial expressions to show their emotions, I can usually tell how others are reacting to me.  
     1 2 3 4 5
5. I use direct eye contact with my superiors to show that I respect them and am paying attention to what they say.  
     1 2 3 4 5
6. When meeting people for the first time, I always act in a relaxed and confident manner in order to make a good first impression.  
     1 2 3 4 5
7. When a person responds to my question with silence, it usually indicates that the person has not understood what I said but does not want to cause embarrassment to me or him- or herself by asking me to repeat the question.  
     1 2 3 4 5

8. What is not said in a conversation is often more important than what is expressed directly.

1 2 3 4 5

9. Laughter always indicates that a person is happy and comfortable.

1 2 3 4 5

10. People who have strong body odor are offensive and should be taught proper personal hygiene habits for their own good.

1 2 3 4 5

11. I use a lot of gestures and emphasis in my voice to make points because my foreign language skills are not very good and these nonverbal clues will help me to be understood by people who do not speak my language.

1 2 3 4 5

12. I usually try to keep a conversation active and lively because people will think I am not intelligent, or my language ability is very poor, if I am silent.

1 2 3 4 5

13. Since people know I am from a different culture, my appearance is not an important factor in how they think about me.

1 2 3 4 5

14. When I get conflicting messages from people's verbal and nonverbal communications, it is better to consider only the verbal communication because the nonverbal messages are ambiguous and I am not familiar with the meaning of nonverbal communications in other cultures.

1 2 3 4 5

15. The best way to establish good relations with others is to demonstrate my friendliness and goodwill by smiling, laughing, and generally treating others as equals.

1 2 3 4 5

(Singelis, 1994, p. 269f)

*Appendix I: Questionnaire*

## **Questionnaire – Perception of Politeness**

### **0. General information**

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. It will only take you about 15 minutes to complete it.

After you have completed the questionnaire, please place it into the accompanying envelope, seal it and sign across the envelope's flap, to ensure that the content remains confidential.



### **1. Demographic information:**

*Please tick the appropriate answer:*

Age:  15-20  21-25  26-30  31-35  36-40  
 41-45  46-50  51-55  > 55

Gender:  male  female

Ethnic Origin:  NZ European  Maori  Pacific Islander

Asian (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

English first or second language:  First  Second:

Language spoken at home:

Years in New Zealand:

Born in NZ/ lived here all my life  
 New Zealander, but lived mainly abroad  
 Years/months in NZ: \_\_\_\_\_

Other countries I have lived in (years/months):

Time on job:  less than one year  
 3-5 years

1-2 years  
 over 5 years

Position in the organisation: \_\_\_\_\_

I have worked in a similar position before:

yes  no

I have received training on cultural matters:

yes  no

Education:  some High School

High School

some Tertiary Education

Tertiary degree

I have a formal qualification related to my job:  yes  no

## 2. Questions - Scenarios:

Please read the following two scenarios and answer the questions that follow each. The questions rate your perception of appropriate and polite responses to requests made by customers. Note that there is no right or wrong answer.

### **Scenario 1**

Imagine you are the receptionist in the following situation:

New guests have just arrived who are waiting in the reception area for their turn to check in. You have just served a couple who were given a special promotional deal by their travel agent and you hand them some vouchers for the hotel restaurant. The couple waiting behind them have overheard parts of the conversation, and when you are serving them, one of them demands to be given vouchers as well, even though this couple have not received this voucher deal from their travel agent.

What would you say to this guest? Please read the following statements and rate whether or not you agree with them:

Scale:

- |                                |
|--------------------------------|
| 1 = strongly disagree          |
| 2 = disagree                   |
| 3 = neither disagree nor agree |
| 4 = agree                      |
| 5 = strongly agree             |

(for your convenience, the scale is repeated on every page)

1. Your answer: "No."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

2. Your answer: "No, I can't do that."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

3. Your answer: "You really should have brought this to the attention of your travel agent."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

4. Your answer: "I understand that it seems unfair to you. Let me talk to the manager and see what we can do."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

5. Your answer: "I'm terribly sorry, but I'm afraid there is nothing that I can do in that matter."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer.	1	2	3	4	5
This would be a socially acceptable response.	1	2	3	4	5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer.	1	2	3	4	5
This would be a socially acceptable response.	1	2	3	4	5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent.	1	2	3	4	5
This answer would make the hotel look rude.	1	2	3	4	5
This answer would make me look incompetent.	1	2	3	4	5
This answer would make me look rude.	1	2	3	4	5

6. Your answer: "We would need the agreement of your travel agency for this."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer.	1	2	3	4	5
This would be a socially acceptable response.	1	2	3	4	5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer.	1	2	3	4	5
This would be a socially acceptable response.	1	2	3	4	5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent.	1	2	3	4	5
This answer would make the hotel look rude.	1	2	3	4	5
This answer would make me look incompetent.	1	2	3	4	5
This answer would make me look rude.	1	2	3	4	5

7. Your answer: "Yes, I know but we have all these "really intelligent" rules around here..."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer.	1	2	3	4	5
This would be a socially acceptable response.	1	2	3	4	5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer.	1	2	3	4	5
This would be a socially acceptable response.	1	2	3	4	5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent.	1 2 3 4 5
This answer would make the hotel look rude.	1 2 3 4 5
This answer would make me look incompetent.	1 2 3 4 5
This answer would make me look rude.	1 2 3 4 5

8. Your answer: "There are quite a few people still waiting to be checked in..."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer.	1 2 3 4 5
This would be a socially acceptable response.	1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer.	1 2 3 4 5
This would be a socially acceptable response.	1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent.	1 2 3 4 5
This answer would make the hotel look rude.	1 2 3 4 5
This answer would make me look incompetent.	1 2 3 4 5
This answer would make me look rude.	1 2 3 4 5

What answer would you give to the couple in the scenario? Please write down your own wording here.

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Please name a few key issues that influence your decision regarding how to respond to the guest in scenario 1 (e.g. Company's protocol, I always respond like this, depends on how the guest is talking to me).

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## **Scenario 2**

Now imagine you are the receptionist in the following situation:

A guest who has been staying at the hotel for a couple of days comes to reception after discovering that the kitchen in the restaurant has closed early on this day. He is furious and claims that he had not been informed of any changes regarding the opening hours of the restaurant. He demands to be served in the restaurant, as the hotel is at fault for his situation.

What would you say to this guest? Please read the following statements and rate the likelihood with which you think you would or would not use them:

1. Your answer: "No, this is not possible."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

2. Your answer: "No, I can't arrange that."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

3. Your answer: "Maybe you could have checked earlier..."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

4. Your answer: "I see that this causes a problem for you. I'll try to find a solution that might work for you."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

5. Your answer: "I do apologise, we really should have made sure that the closure was clearly communicated."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

6. Your answer: "We must have forgotten to inform you of this."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

7. Your answer: "Ha ha, it sometimes seems to me that they have changed the opening times every time I come to work!"

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

8. Your answer: "Perhaps someone should have put up a sign..."

a. *If the guest speaks English with native/near native ability:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

b. *If the guest has limited knowledge of English:*

This would be a polite answer. 1 2 3 4 5

This would be a socially acceptable response. 1 2 3 4 5

c. *Please indicate your personal opinion:*

This answer would make the hotel look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make the hotel look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look incompetent. 1 2 3 4 5

This answer would make me look rude. 1 2 3 4 5

What answer would you give to the guest in this scenario? Please write down your own wording here.

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Please name a few key issues that influence your decision regarding how to respond to the guest in scenario 2 (e.g. Company's protocol, I always respond like this, depends on how the guest is talking to me).

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**3. General Questions/statements:**

Please circle the one that best reflects your opinion, using the same scale as before:

Strongly disagree	strongly agree
1    2    3    4    5	
1. I have received sufficient training to be comfortable in dealing with people from many different cultures.	
2. When I am faced with a situation that I have not encountered before or that has not been part of my training, I use whatever feels like a polite response to me.	
3. If I do not know how to solve a situation politely, I prefer to ask a colleague for help.	
4. I sometimes deviate from the hotel's standard response if I feel it would be the right and courteous thing to do.	
5. I try to adapt my expression of politeness according to the nationality of the guest.	
6. I think it is appropriate that I might have to adapt my appearance in order to adhere to the organisation's protocol.	
7. I understand certain procedures have to be done, even if they make me seem impolite to a guest.	
8. My behaviour towards guests is based on common sense.	
9. I agree that the experience a guest has with the front-line staff will greatly influence the overall perception this guest has of the hotel.	
10. I think it is important that everyone behave the same way in the organisation, so that guests always receive the same quality of service.	
11. I think that every one of my colleagues has a unique way of approaching the same problem.	
12. Having guidelines and standard procedures makes it easier to deal with a wide range of different customers.	
13. I am sometimes surprised by the way that a colleague chooses to deal with a certain situation.	
14. I do not think that specific cultural training is important, because I can always ask a colleague for help.	
15. I learned polite behaviour from my childhood.	
16. I use what I learned in my upbringing as a guide to behave politely towards guests.	
17. I smile and use a lot of gestures to break	

language barriers.	1    2    3    4    5
18. A smiling guest is a happy guest.	1    2    3    4    5
19. If I do not understand a guest, I try to infer the meaning so that I do not embarrass the guest or myself.	1    2    3    4    5
20. As the hotel is situated in New Zealand, I communicate with guests according to New Zealand culture, regardless of my or the guest's own culture.	1    2    3    4    5

**4. Comments:**

If you have worked in the hospitality industry before, please describe a few things that you feel are unique about polite communication with guests at Panorama.

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What do you think is most important when responding to requests from guests?

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Please think of an incident during your work where polite behaviour has aided to resolve the problem and briefly describe it.

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You're done! Thank you very much for your time and effort!