Research Paper

Intercultural Politeness and Impoliteness: A Case of Iranian Students with Malaysian Professors

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Abstract

Evaluations of polite, impolite and over-polite linguistic and nonlinguistic behaviors depend largely on the socio-cultural attributes of a society and the individuals' schemata, which are rooted in the communicators' previous experiences. In intercultural settings, communication represents a complicated picture due to the participants' different socio-cultural backgrounds and their unshared cultural schemata. Adopting the discursive approach to (im)politeness and employing ethnographic methods, this study identifies some significant sources of (im)politeness-related miscommunication between 10 Malaysian university lecturers/professors and 15 Iranian students. The findings suggest that different socio-cultural behaviors as well as some aspects of professional practices are the sources of misunderstanding and have potential for either impolite or over-polite judgments. Findings are discussed in light of the practical and theoretical implications for intercultural politeness and impoliteness.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; (Im)politeness; Ethnography; Supervisor-Supervisee Relationship.

1. Introduction

This study is an attempt to investigate the accounts of politeness and impoliteness (hereafter both written as (im)politeness) in interactions between Iranian students and their lecturers/supervisors (hereafter professors) at universities in Malaysia from the hearer's point of view. It aims to explore the professors' perception (interpretation) of Iranian students' verbal or nonverbal behavior as well as the Iranian students' perception of their professors' behavior in terms of (im)politeness. Today, many good universities in the world host both national and international students, with diverse socio-cultural background. Although this diversity has the potential to enrich academic merits and enhance the quality of education among other advantages, it also potentially offers some challenges for communication.

One of the important aspects of intercultural communication and miscommunication (hereafter both written (mis)communication) in any academic environment regards evaluations of (im)politeness. What counts as a polite behavior is not often agreed upon across cultures, and this grounds myriads of misunderstandings and miscommunications between the interactants due to the lack of 'common ground' (Clark, 1996). While most interactions in academic discourse occur between people who have ongoing relationship with each other for a long time, a good communication with professors, friends and other mates is the one which makes professional life pleasant, memorable and productive. The current study is contextualized in intercultural (im)politeness theory (Haugh, 2015) and uses the term 'culture', understood in the sense of 'community of practice' (Wenger, 1998), to refer to both categories of national culture (as Iranian and Malaysian) and professional categories such as professor, supervisor, student, etc. Intercultural communication between the participants of the current study characterizes long-term professional relationships constructed through continuous encounters and interactions.

An interesting type of relationship to focus on in academic environment in relation to (im)politeness, is that of professor-student, including supervisor-supervisee interactions. Friction-free professor-student communication is ideal but reducing the points of divergence and misunderstanding between the two groups can create more productive professional relationships. Research shows that, even in one culture, such student-professor and specifically supervisee-

supervisor relationships are often subject to several points of misunderstanding that lead to the gradual development of negative evaluations due to the unmet expectations that each party hold of each other (Parker-Jenkins, 2018; Yazdani and Alimorad, 2022). In intercultural educational environments such points of misunderstanding could be so many as to block smooth communication due to the two interrelated issues of cultural differences and the use of a language which is the language of neither party; say, English as Lingua Franca (Jenkins, 2007).

The intercultural communication between international students and their professors in Malaysian universities characterizes an "intercultural relation", where positive relationship and 'rapport building' potentials (Spencer-Oatey and Kádár, 2016) are largely influenced by the participants' in-situ evaluations of each other's conduct, and therefore, offer compelling grounds for scrutiny vis-à-vis (im)politeness. Politeness-related evaluations are part of the overall 'situated evaluative judgements that shape intercultural relations' (Spencer-Oatey and Kádár, 2016). Evaluations of (im)politeness are integral in shaping the participants´ relationships, and in co-constituting their relational connection with and separation from one another (Izadi, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018, Arundale, 2010, 2020). These evaluations constitute an important part of the ongoing professional relationship building through continuous interactions in which the participants invoke not only aspects of their national culture but also their professional categories and the type of identity that these categories represent.

Despite the vivid importance of intercultural communication, there is dearth of research in the intercultural relation of Iranian students and their interactants. Particularly, (im)politeness phenomena in Iranian\non-Iranian interactions in Malaysian academic discourse has received no attention. The results of this study can benefit both Malaysian professors and more importantly Iranian students in raising their awareness of some intercultural sources of misunderstanding and miscommunication. Moreover, this study contributes to the overall scholarship in intercultural (im)politeness, which is less represented compared with (im)politeness in unilingual cultures (Haugh, 2015). In what follows, I first delineate the theoretical framework (section 2), followed by the methodology of the study (section 3), then, present the analysis of the data (section 4), and finally, draw conclusions (section 5).

2. Theoretical Framework: (Im)politeness

Scholars in a variety of disciplines have been concerned with the nature and application of politeness in the society. While the discussion on politeness existed in early pragmatics research (Leech, 1983), politeness research was established as a field in pragmatics mainly with the publication of the seminal theory of Brown and Levinson (1978[1987]). Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness anchors on the notion of 'face', defined as "public self-image a person effectively claims for himself in interactions". Brown and Levinson argued that politeness constitutes a set of strategies to mitigate the threat to 'face' in communication. The original assumption here was that "some speech acts are intrinsically face threatening and thus require softening" (p. 61). Politeness was understood to be an attempt to mitigate the threat incurred to the face of either the hearer or the speaker (or both). Their theory implied that human communication is overwhelmingly replete with incidents where individuals are faced with a situation whereby "facework" is needed (Nwoye, 1992). The facework is often conditioned by the three social factors of power, social distance and the rank of imposition. They are the determinants factors in assessing the degree of threat which is perceived by speakers to incur to face. Following Brown and Levinson, Culpeper (1996) proposed impoliteness as threat to face and deemed impoliteness as constituting a set of strategies that direct at face-loss in a direction reverse to Brown and Levinson's face mitigating strategies.

Although Brown and Levinson did not rule out the importance of cultural specifications on politeness, their claim of universality of face and politeness was not well embraced in later research. Later studies on politeness, which gave rise to the discursive approach to (im)politeness (Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003; Locher and Watts, 2005) understand politeness as an attempt to adhere to social norms and conventions. Therefore, a polite behavior (whether verbal or non-verbal) needs social approval and social consensus. Mechanisms of politeness may, therefore, vary not only across but also within cultures (e.g., Eelen, 2001; Mills, 2003; Watts, 2003), as values, norms, conventions, and customs that underlie the politeness system are not necessarily valid across different cultures.

More importantly, however, the epistemology of politeness shifts from politeness as a speaker's intended and strategic concern for face (Brown and Levinson, 1987) to politeness as hearer's 'evaluations' of the speaker's linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior Eelen, 2001; Watts, 2003; Locher and Watts, 2005; Kádár and Mills, 2011, Kádár and Haugh,

2013, Izadi, 2015, 2016, 2019). This shift of focus was initiated by Eelen's (2001) in his meticulous critique of traditional approaches to politeness. Along the lines of what came to be known as discursive approaches to politeness, Locher and Watts (2005) provide an alternative theory of politeness to Brown and Levinson's face-saving theory. They call Brown and Levinson theory a theory of 'facework' and 'FTA mitigation' rather than a theory of politeness (Locher and Watts, 2005), and argue that face is present in every "relational work" but not necessarily a motivation for politeness. Locher and Watts (2005) and Locher (2008) then define "relational work" as "the work individuals invest in negotiating relationship with others". The notion of face constitutes a much broader spectrum in human relationships, while politeness is only part of it (Locher and Watts, 2005).

According to Locher and Watts (2005), participants render a range of possible "judgments" about on their interlocutors' linguistic and nonlinguistic behavior within the wider 'discursive' practice of 'relational work' in communication. These judgments, which are ranged from impolite, through non-polite, through polite to over-polite (p.12), have two interrelated sources: First is the socially approved norms and canons of appropriateness in a community of practice. Second is their own expectations based on past experience, which is called 'frame' as well as unconscious "predisposition to act in certain ways" (Watts, 2003). This move is important in that it places the significance of (im)politeness evaluations from the intension of the speakers to the interpretation of hearers (Kádár and Haugh, 2013). (Im)Politeness evaluations, therefore, constitute judgmental attitudes that hearers or recipients develop subsequent to the speaker's eminence of behavior. Such a view expands the scope of (im)politeness to include both linguistic and non-linguistic behavior, both said and unsaid, and to encompass the whole social behavior (Izadi, 2015). Understanding (im)politeness in this sense allows variability in the interpretation of what counts polite, impolite, over-polite, etc., (Haugh, 2013) and does not subject such evaluations to an agreeable resolution (Haugh, 2015).

3. Methodology

This qualitative study (Cresswell, 2014) draws upon ethnography of communication, with its two techniques of participant-observation and semi-structured interview (Hymes, 1974). Ethnography of communication is highly recommended for (im)politeness research (cf: Markez-Reiter, 2021, for a recent argument). Participant observation, as an ethnographic approach, is conducted over a long period of time by a researcher, who often lives with a group of people and tries to understand their ways of speaking and ways of life (Young, 2008, p. 9). As a participant-observer, the current author had the opportunity to conduct his PhD research in a Malaysian university as well as to take up an academic position in another Malaysian university. This opportunity privileged the current researcher to build some rapport with Malaysian colleagues as well as with his fellow Iranians, which helped him gather balanced data from both sides. Building trust with the researcher is an important factor in collecting data that include sensitive issues, like impoliteness evaluations.

In the content analysis of the interview data, the particular attention was given to the meta-pragmatic comments/information regarding the culture-specific interpretations of meanings regarding (im)politeness (Culpeper and Haugh, 2020). Iranian students were all postgraduate students and comprised of both genders. Malaysian professors represented the three ethnic groups in Malaysia (Malay, Chinese and Indian) and of both genders. Their academic rank ranged from lecturer to professor.

The ethnographic data were either recorded or field-noted, and were collected between 2010 and 2015, in four Malaysian universities (two public and two private universities) which favored a substantial number of international students. At the time of data collection, the number of Iranian students in these Malaysian universities was well over ten thousand. Malaysian government´s initiation of internationalization of their postgraduate higher education coincided with the accumulation of a high number of university graduates who were interested in continuing their education but faced a lack of local capacities in the postgraduate studies, leading to their migration to Malaysia in search of an affordable postgraduate study. 15 Iranian students and 10 Malaysian lecturers/professors were invited to reflect on their experiences of the occasions of im/politeness evaluations. The interview questions invited the participants to recall and reflect on the moments of their interaction with an Iranian student (for Malaysian professors) or with a Malaysia professor or supervisor (for Iranian students) which gave rise to their evaluation of their interlocuter´s conduct as polite, over-polite, rude, impolite, etc. The data elicited from the Malaysian professors are originally in English, but the data elicited from Iranian students are in Persian.

4. Analysis and Discussion

In this section, I present both Malaysian professors' and Iranian students' views and evaluations of each other and discuss the possible sources of their evaluations. Malaysian professors' reflections on their evaluation of their Iranian students generally represent their understanding of the risk of generalization of their cases. The caution not to generalize is linguistically reflected in hedged expressions (Izadi, 2014) like, 'most of the Iranians I have met are positive, but…'. However, the comments by the Iranian students represented few instances of overgeneralization and stereotyping. The too negative evaluations that potentially either create or reinforce negative stereotypes about the Malaysian culture have been omitted from the data. Let us now continue with some sources of misunderstanding and provide examples from the data to elaborate and analyze.

4.2. Malaysian Professors and Supervisors' Evaluation of Iranian Students´ Conduct in Terms of (Im)politeness

In this section, segments of data collected from Malaysian professors (ranging from lecture to professor in academic rank) and supervisors (including potential supervisors) are provided, followed by the analysis of the (im)politeness and possible sources for (im)politeness evaluations. The most important parts of the data are italicized.

4.1.1 Talk Over the Possibility of Admission to PhD

Example 1: A Malaysian Indian male professor in a private university:

Most of the Iranians I have worked with are positive, but there was a case when a man was talking to me over the possibility of PhD admission…in the middle of his talk I realized that *he is talking on behalf of his wife*…I said if she wants to be considered for PhD, I need to talk to her instead of you…he said she is outside and she cannot talk. I'm talking on her behalf. And I said, I'm sorry I don't think I would be interested in working with her……I know some Moslems are conservative, some are liberal, but I think he was *rude…*

The close reading of the professor's comment reveals that not only he evaluates the potential candidate´s husband as *rude* because he speaks for his wife for a professional matter (PhD admission), but also that he attributes this behaviour to the potential candidate's husband´s conservativeness and more broadly to his religious identity. In fact, his evaluation of rudeness makes implicit recourse to the conventions and rituals of professional interaction, which are bound to its own contingencies. The provocation of an aspect of one's religious identity is not interpreted as a relevant matter (as perceived by the professor) to this goal-oriented institutional interaction (Drew and Heritage, 1992). Such a behaviour may be understandable in conservative Muslim communities, where women appear in public with complete covering and do not directly engage in talks with men, but instead, are represented by the male parts of their family, but such an understanding is not shared in intercultural communication, in which the conventions of home-culture do not always apply. Furthermore, such a behaviour has the potential to create problems even in Muslim societies for the conflation of religious with professional goals of the speakers. After all, the potential supervisors need to evaluate the academic merits of the candidates by (among many other ways) talking to them.

4.1.2. Email Communications

In a study of intercultural communication of Iranians in Australia, Amouzadeh and Tavanagar (2005) found that Iranian students in Australia were generally evaluated as 'demanding´ by their Australian interlocutors. Likewise, Hallajian's study (2014) shows that while Iranian students´ emails to their professors feature a significant frequency of direct requests, Malaysian professors find such direct requests 'impolite'. This study supports the findings of these two studies, as the emailing behavior in general surfaced in 5 professors' evaluative reflections of their Iranian students. One professor did not rule out that 'the lack of mastery over English language' might be the reason, but still, she finds them offensive. Writing emails to professors and supervisors is common among students universally, and mainly serves the purpose of requesting information, services or commodity, making an appointment to meet, following up a previous matter, and so on. Therefore, email communications are important resources in shaping the relationships between students and their supervisors (Lorenzo-Dus and Patricia, 2013). However, email communications, and more broadly, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) is sensitive to technological and social constraint (Herring, 2007), and adds a new layer of complexity to intercultural communication. Consider the following example:

Example 2: Malaysian Indian female professor in a public university

One of my Iranian students *too frequently emailed* me and asked something, and almost all her emails started with '*I need*….',

From the vantage point of the professor represented in example 3, two issues are problematic: 1) too frequent emailing, and 2) starting the main body of emails with the phrase 'I need'. Regarding the first problem, which has brough about the evaluation of 'demanding' by non-Iranians (cf: Amouzadeh and Tavangar, 2005), too many requests might have some cultural as well as professional grounds. It might be that in some cultures individuals and especially women are more empowered in the society to solve their problems independently, while in others, they have to rely more on other individuals to solve their problems in difficult situations. In more individualistic cultures that exert emphasis on independence and autonomy, requests are taken as means to question one's sense of independence and individuality and are likely to be avoided as they are threating to face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Furthermore, requests represent different rank of imposition in different cultures, and therefore, might be differently perceived in terms of the potential threat to face (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Requests in different societies and communities have different implications for the relationships between the individuals, and as such, when individuals representing the two different cultural assumptions regarding request interact, their communication fails due to the lack of 'common ground' (Clark, 1996).

The problem can also be attributed to type of institutional professional practices and the type of professional relationships that is being co-created between the interactants. In many universities, in the absence of clear-cut guidelines regarding email communications between professors and students, students fail to live up to their professors' expectations regarding both the frequency of emailing them and the content of emails. Unmet expectations in such settings create misunderstanding and, consequently, negative judgements and evaluations. As for the second problem, and more importantly, starting the email, using a need statement or want statement, as in 'I need', seems to have caused negative and non-polite (if not impolite) evaluations from the Malaysian professor, as such requests are perceived as 'direct' requests (Hallajian, 2011). My follow up discussions with some of the Iranian participants revealed that, while they are aware of the linguistic structures like, 'can I', or 'could I' which are used to make request, they find the use of 'I need' more persuasive and stronger to influence their supervisors to grant their request. This is culturally reflected in the assumption that putting self in the low position of 'need' would create or provoke a sense of compassion in the interlocutor and would emotionally charge him/her to accept the request. As we have noticed here, this strategy does not always work in intercultural communication and may even backfire, being perceived as haughtiness and rudeness.

4.1.3 Greetings as Over-Polite

Example 3: Malaysian-Malay female lecturer

Once I had to go and back along the corridor two times and there were two Iranian female students sitting on a bench in the corridor. *Every time that I passed them by they stood up and said hello.* I think for the second encounter even the greeting was *not needed* let alone standing up.

This excerpt is extracted from a more elaborate piece of data, collected from a Malaysian Indian female lecturer. She revealed her evaluation of her Iranian students´ greeting style as unnecessary, which fits the definition of 'over-politeness' (Izadi, 2016). Not at the level of impoliteness, but over-politeness is also considered a negatively marked behavior (Izadi, 2016, cf: Locher and Watts, 2005). These interview data are supported by my own ethnographic observational data, representing an Iranian female master student in an international conference who delivered 'nice to meet you prof' five times during the first day of the conference in her frequent coming across one of the plenary speakers of the conference (a British male in 60s). This behavior was noticed as `marked` even by her Iranian fellows.

Greeting reflects complaints from both sides, but in this section, only the Malaysians´ evaluations are represented and discussed. In general, Malaysian professors find Iranian style of greetings very tedious and unwelcoming. Greeting is a big source of misunderstanding in intercultural settings and has been reported to ground many moments of awkwardness and embarrassment for language learners (Zeff, 2016). Greetings differ in different cultures in terms of length, wordings, accompanying gestures, etc., and are completely context-bound- and more specifically, relationship-bound (Ellis, 1994). Persian greetings are very long-winded, circumlocutionary and even flowery, constituting rounds of recycled sequences. A typical greeting between two friends, colleagues, or acquaintances visiting each other after a week can last up to three minutes asking about the health condition of not only the addressee but also his/her family members.

In addition to the verbal structure, greetings in some cultures are often accompanied by some gestural moves like bowing in Japanese culture. Likewise, rising simultaneous with verbal greeting (especially to a person of higher status) is a sign of respect in Persian culture. Furthermore, while greetings in some cultures characterize physical proximity, as in embracing, kissing, etc., in others they reflect physical distance. Yet, in some other cultures, gender issues conflate with interactional rituals of greetings. For example, in Iran, the greetings between interactants of the same gender involves physical proximity of shaking hands, kissing on the cheek and hugging, but they involve physical distance across genders. More importantly, there are no fixed universal rules as to when and how frequently greetings should be accomplished, but they are often tacitly negotiated in intercultural communication. In the above case, the students' unnecessary rising and greeting (from the professor's viewpoint) reflect their understanding of the professor´s status in the society; a status that deserves *ehteram* (respect, deference) (Izadi, 2013). But, as this cultural concept is not shared with the professor, she sees this behavior as cumbersome and tedious. Such behavior represents the students' perceived social obligation to greet every time they meet their professor to avoid her evaluation of disrespect or lack of adequate respect; an assumption that is relevant about the student-professor relationships in Iran.

4.1.4 Complimenting or Flattering*?*

Many Malaysian professors find Iranians to be unnecessarily complimenting and flattering and attribute this behavior to disingenuity. This is reflected in the following quote from the data:

Example 4: Malaysian-Indian female

I found my Iranian students too much complimenting and even flattering me, for me they were *disingenuous, …*

While giving compliments is an important social lubricant of interpersonal communication and is often referred to as face-saving behavior (Brown and Levinson, 1987), it can simply backfire in communication if/when it is interpreted as flattering. Research in complimenting behavior reports a significant level of variation in the practice and understanding of compliments and their responses in different cultures, (cf: Ishihara, 2010). Complimenting behavior in the Iranian culture is rooted in the overall tendency of Iranians to build interpersonal bond (Izadi, 2017a, b, 2018) especially with people of higher status (Sharifian, 2008). Such practices can be defined in the broader, all-pervasive cultural ritual of *taarof,* which has come to be known as Persian ritual politeness (Beeman, 1986; Koutlaki, 2002; Izadi, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017a, 2018, 2019).

Taarof encompasses both the linguistic forms and the social gestures of practicing deference in the Iranian hierarchical society (Beeman, 2017), and as such it is associated with politeness in the Iranian culture. However, as example 4 indicates, not every person in the world sees the phenomenon as an Iranian does. What is politeness in one culture can be conceived of disingenuity or even flattering. The borderline between the positively evaluated politeness and the negatively evaluated flattering is often opaque and rests on the dynamic interplay between the normative socio-moral behavior and the interpersonal relationship between the participants. Such misunderstandings, in fact, are not limited to intercultural communication, but even in the Iranian culture and in communication in Persian the mutual intelligibility of *taarof* acts is highly dependent on the history of relationships between the co-interactants.

4.2. Iranian Students' Evaluation of Their Malaysian Professors and Supervisors

4.2.1. Evaluation of Impoliteness Based on Professional Behavior of Supervisors

As the following stories reveal, many of the Iranians' negative evaluations of impoliteness, rudeness and not-politeness are rooted in their expectation with regard to their professor's professional behaviour. This supports Parker-Jenkins (2018) argument that in the absence of a clear guideline for supervisor-supervisee relationship, the likelihood of misunderstanding is very high even in one linguaculture.

Example 5: Female Iranian MA student with Malaysian Male supervisor and other staff:

My ex-supervisor always pushed me around and behaved very *offensively*. Her behaviour was very bad with everyone. Generally, the faculty of education in that university is notorious for its staff's bad behaviour with students. They are very *rude*, many students, including me, changed their university. At [Name of the new university] I have a much better supervisor. … at least he *respects* me. Their men are generally *more polite and respectful,* and in this university, overall, people are more polite may be because this is a private university. My previous supervisor never kept her

promise, never responded to my emails, and kept me waiting for long hours at her office door, while she was surfing Facebook.

This comment shows, *prima facie*, that rude behaviour causing students' dissatisfaction may lead to serious repercussions for the institution. What is reflected in this narrative can be termed organizational rudeness at least from the student's point of view, with negative outcomes for the mission and vision of the institution, leading to students' migration. This shows how an interpersonal relationship of a student, and her supervisor has come to a point of halt, leading the student to change her university. The student associates the metapragmatic comments of rude, offensive, disrespect, and impolite with unexpected professional and moral practices such as impunctuality and ignorance of emails. This excerpt of data is indicative of a connection between politeness and professional practice. The complaint about waiting time prior to the supervisory meetings surfaced in almost all the students' talk, but not every student evaluated it as rude or impolite, although everybody agreed that it is not polite. Note further example:

Example 6: Female Iranian student with Malaysian Indian female AP

My supervisor kept me long hours at her office door, despite that we arranged for a specific time. …While in her office, she always ate and drank without offering it to me; I got *offended* a bit, but I *don't take it as impolite*, because it's their culture.

The grievances of the current student are not limited to her supervisor's impunctuality. She reveals her expectation to be offered food and drink and her evaluation that she has taken offense for not being offered food and drink by the supervisor. This analysis shows the student´s understanding of the fine difference between taking offense and impoliteness. She shows her awareness of the cultural differences over offers and consequently does not evaluate her lack offering as impolite, an evaluation that would have been created if an Iranian had failed to ostensibly offer her/his food. In Persian terms, failure to do *taarof* instantiates impoliteness (Izadi, 2015, 2019).

4.2.2. Impoliteness for the Lack of Compensation for Gifts

In example 7 below, the Iranian student renders the evaluation of her supervisor as impolite for failing to allocate sufficient time to her supervisee. She describes her supervisor as the one who 'doesn't care about the students' problems' and is always 'busy and on trips'.

Example 7: Iranian female PhD student with Malaysian female professor

I wish my supervisor were a bit *polite*. I regret giving her that expensive art frame. She doesn't care about my problems at all… and is always either busy or on trips.

As the example shows, gift giving by the student is disclosed as a strategy to build some connection with her supervisor to create a future imposition for recompensating in them. While gift giving is a positive social behavior, it can sometimes strategically be used to create a sense of diffidence for returning the favor. In Persian terms, one may give gifts to put somebody in *rudarbayesti* (Sharifian, 2007, 2008). However, the borderline between genuine gift giving and strategic gift giving is never clear-cut, and often creates misunderstanding. Iranian students often complain that their gift giving strategy has not worked in their relationship building with their supervisors, and therefore expressed regret about it. When they do not receive the appreciation or recompensation they expect, they evaluate their interlocutors as 'not understanding', 'impolite', and many more. However, there is a PhD candidate (male) who has a different story:

Example 8: Iranian male PhD student with Malaysian (Malay) Male supervisor

Whenever I return from Iran, I bring him a souvenir… and he is very *appreciative*, every time I want to meet him, he is free for me, even if he is very busy. He reads my chapters quickly. He is so *kind and respectful* to me. Of course, I also compensate for it, I put his name in all of my papers, he loves it…

From this student's perspective, his supervisor's having time for him even when he is very busy is a sign of respect, kindness and appreciation, which he relates it to his own behavior of constantly bringing souvenir. Then he discloses another practice and formulates it as a compensation for the supervisor's kindness and respect, which is sharing the authorship of his papers with his supervisor.

4.2.3. Impoliteness in Ignoring Emails

A general theme emerging in almost all complaints of the Iranian students regarding their Malaysian's professors and supervisors has to do with the ignorance of emails by their supervisors. They attribute this to the lack of professionalism. Moreover, they were not satisfied with the emails without typical greeting coming to them from their supervisors' side. The following conversation echoes four Iranian students' talking about their supervisors. All share the same story that their supervisors only respond to those emails in which there is a personal benefit for them, which is not polite to their views. As mentioned above, from the Iranian students' vantage point failing to depict a professionally and institutionally appropriate behavior equates impoliteness, as reflected in the following example:

Example 9: A female PhD candidate with a female Malaysian supervisor

My supervisor only responds to my emails when there is a benefit for her, otherwise she ignores my emails... I think it's *impolite* to ignore emails from students.

4.2.4. Evaluation of Supervisor as Impolite and Offensive in a Private Office

In section 4.1.1, we had a case of a Malaysian professor evaluating his interactant as rude, because of speaking for his wife for a professional matter, which was rooted in the student's religion. Here is another instance of miscommunication, which can be attributed to the religion and more specifically to the gender-related issues in intercultural professional communication. Interestingly, here both the Iranian female PhD and the Malaysian male professor are Moslems. In the following example, an Iranian PhD student reports on a frequent behavior of her male supervisor in their regular meetings.

Example 10: Iranian female PhD student

Whenever I meet him in his office, he either opens the door if it is closed or keeps it open. He thinks that if passersby see us in the closed room, they will cast doubt on us. I find this behavior *offensive* to myself and *impolite*.

The punch line of this comment is that the woman feels her supervisor does not trust himself and her. However, the religion's perspective is that if men and women are found in a closed place, Satan comes in and deceives them to sexual encounter. Islam encourages its followers to avoid the situations that bring about temptations to commit sin, including out-of-marriage relationships. Despite being Moslem, the woman's view reflected here is obviously far away from this particular belief. From the female student´s the male supervisor's behavior implicitly questions her independence and ability to resist temptation over any potentially sexually suggestive behavior, which she finds offensive and consequently impolite.

5. Conclusion

This study investigated some points of miscommunication between Iranian students and Malaysian lecturers/professors with particular interest in (im)politeness related evaluations. This study unpacks an important aspect of the phenomenon of intercultural communication vis-à-vis (im)politeness evaluations. Acknowledging that intercultural (im)politeness is even more complex than what is covered here, it is hoped that both Iranian students and Malaysian professors and supervisors will benefit from the data and results of this study to familiarize themselves to the socio-cultural norms of each other's society to avoid miscommunication. Raising cultural awareness is a significant result of intercultural studies like the current one, as it can help culturally diverse participants to understand each other better and to avoid prejudgment, stereotyping, and unfair negative evaluations. This is especially beneficial to the participants who would seek positive rapport-based intercultural relation with those with whom they are compelled to have professional relationships.

This study investigates (im)politeness from the participants' perspective, and therefore, theoretically aligns with the discursive approach to (im)politeness (Locher and Watts, 2005). This means that the evaluations that are presented here with regard to what is polite, impolite, over-polite, rude, etc., are rendered by those who have been the recipient of the behaviors. This study, therefore, does not argue whether a participant is right or wrong in their evaluation, but argues that (im)politeness is a subjective evaluation of a hearer/recipient of an action/behavior. As such, variability in these evaluations is perfectly expected (Haugh, 2015). We observed that the lack of common ground (Clark, 1996) or shared

knowledge, that often triggers evaluations of impoliteness and rudeness (as the most marked type of behavior), originates from differences in some aspects of the participants' identity.

While the participants' national identity is relevant, participants in intercultural interactions also invoke aspects of their own and their interactants' professional and gender identity which are relevant to their co-construction of their relations through evaluations of (im)politeness. In a situated context, individuals attribute to each other aspects of their own and their interactants' identity that are relevant not only to that moment of interaction but also to the ongoing intercultural relation that they co-create. In intercultural communication, there is always more than one aspect of culture (e. g Iranian vs. Malaysian) which is in play. One's national, professional, religious and gender identity are important resources not only in politeness-related evaluations but also in the continuously re-worked interpersonal relationships they create. Intercultural encounters often occur in professional discourse with participants' legitimate rights and responsibilities that are pertinent to the type of relationship they are constructing and to the politeness evaluations that are instrumental in building those relationships. Politeness-related evaluations are tightly linked to the expectations that arise due to the participants' professional roles and identities in the discourse. And therefore, they evoke and enact both sociocultural and professional norms and moral codes.

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