

A Study of Face-saving Tactics in Construction Claim Negotiations

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Abstract

Construction claim negotiations are commonly found to be inefficient and one of intangible factors playing a tangible and pivotal role in negotiations is 'face'. 'Face' is defined as "*the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line of others assumed he has taken during a particular contact*". In construction, several studies have inferred 'face' as an imperative factor in managing conflicts and maintaining harmony. Notwithstanding, lack of research into the topic in particular of construction industry triggers this study. With regard to the fact that 'face' is specific to culture, this study explores the concept in the Asian context. Specifically, this study aims to (1) identify face-saving tactics from the literature and (2) evaluate the importance of the usefulness of the tactics to construction claim negotiations in Hong Kong. The result suggested that tactics scored high were found to be characterised as showing respect towards others while tactics with relatively lower scores were identified as saving others' face by behaving passively to make concession. Though this study is purely descriptive, it lays an important groundwork for identification of the tactics. Developing generic types of the tactics in construction claim negotiations is suggested for a more comprehensive understanding. It is also suggested that further understanding can be made by adopting case study approach.

Keywords: face-saving, face, negotiation, claim

1. Introduction

It is pervasive to settle claims or disputes by the means of negotiation in construction industry. The use of this method can preserve relationship among parties (Ren et al, 2003). Nonetheless, construction claim negotiations are always found to be inefficient due to the diversity of intellectual background, numerous variables involved, complex human interaction and inadequate negotiation knowledge of construction participants (Ren et al, 2002). Human interaction is complex as multi-disciplinary professionals are of various individual biases, egos, personalities, attitudes, history of past dealings and psychology on both sides of negotiating table (Zack, 1994). Among these, 'face' is one of the intangible factors playing a tangible and pivotal role in the negotiation. It is defined as "*the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line of others assumed he has taken during a particular contact* (Goffman 1955, 1967)". Wilson (1992) pinpointed that threatening one's 'face' resulted in hostile attitude towards others, thus terminating the whole negotiation process. Many scholars (Brunner & Wang, 1988; Buttery & Leung, 1998; Zhu et al, 2007; Graham & Lam, 2003) have also acknowledged the role of 'face' as the key factor governing the behaviour of negotiators. In construction, 'face' is implied in several studies as a crucial factor in maintaining the harmony and managing conflicts (Harmon, 2004; Jong et al, 2003; Chua et al; 2003). In discussing the obstacles of China construction market, Chua et al (2003) commented that lack of a standard dispute settlement procedure and the preference for adopting "face-saving" makes the negotiation difficult. In addition, Harmon (2004) suggested that "face-saving" is one of the factors influencing the parties to settle disputes. In light of the prominent role of 'face' in negotiations and the increasing awareness of the implication of 'face' in the industry, lack of research into the topic in particular of construction industry triggers the present study. Specifically, this study attempts to

- 1 identify face-saving tactics from the literature
- 2 evaluate the importance of the usefulness of the tactics to construction claim negotiations

To this end, literature will be first reviewed on the definition of 'face', previous studies on facework and face-saving tactics.

2. Literature review

2.1 Face

'Face' was defined by Erving Goffman (1955,1967) as *the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line of others assumed he has taken during a particular contact*. Redding and Ng (1982) defined it as *the individual's assessment of the way in which others views him or her*. More recently, Ting-Toomy (1994,199), Oetzel and Ting-Toomy (2003) introduced a face-negotiation theory to explain how different culture view 'face' and manage conflict. She defined 'face' as *an individual's claimed sense of positive image in the context of social interaction*. Definitions of 'face' from Western scholars abound, yet subtle difference has been drawn from Chinese culture. Chinese scholars identified 'face' as having two dimensions, 'Lien' and 'Mian'. Hu (1944) explained 'lien' as

the moral face which relates to one's dignity based on the moral code and social expectations in one's social circle. 'Mian' in contrast is defined as one's social face which is related to reputation, prestige and success, self-esteem (Yu and Gu, 1990), social, personal and relational identity (Gao, 2006). To be explicit, difference between 'Mian' and 'Lien' is that 'Lien' cannot be manipulated because it is internalized, while 'Mian' can be monitored as it is externalized. (Hu, 1944; Brunner et al., 1989; King, 1993; Lam and Wong, 1995). With regard to the fact that 'face' is specific to culture, this study adopts and investigates the concept of 'face' in the Asian context.

2.2 Previous studies on face-saving tactics

Facework is a collection of the communicative strategies to enact self-face and to uphold, support, or challenge another person's face (Ting-Tommey, 1998; Oetzel and Ting-Tommey, 2003). Considerable amount of studies have been devoted to develop facework typologies in different contexts. As shown in Table 1, different facework typologies were developed as the cultural contexts vary. Given that the concepts of 'face' and 'facework' are specific to cultures, it is thus difficult to study within an inter-cultural environment (Keegan, 1999). In this regard, this study emphasizes the intra-cultural Chinese negotiation setting. Among the typologies, focuses will be put on studying face-saving as it is defined to embrace Chinese culture most specifically. It is defined as preserving or maintaining one's 'face' which is closely related to prestige, social standing, reputation and dignity (Hofstede, 2001; Graham & Lam, 2003). Non-construction related studies have shed light on elaborating and long-listing the face-saving tactics (Gao, 2006; Graham and Lam, 2003). A list of tactics is identified and can be referred to Table 3. Nonetheless, a tailor-made face-saving tactics for construction dispute negotiation is scant.

As such, this study aims to (1) identify face-saving tactics from literature and (2) evaluate the importance of the usefulness of the tactics to construction claim negotiations. The objectives of the study are to be accomplished by conducting a questionnaire survey in Hong Kong. Data collected were analyzed by relative importance index (RII). The method and results are discussed in the next part.

Table 1 Summary on some of the facework typologies (Ting-Toomey and Cocroft, 1994)

Study	Description
Lebra (1976)	<i>“Lebra (1976) discussed the Japanese cultural ideal of balancing face-concerns in ritualistic interactive situations. Her facework typology focused on strategies which protected self-face and other face, and strategies which protected self-face while threatening the face of the other”</i>
Shimanoff (1985, 1987, 1988)	<i>“Shimanoff (1985, 1987, 1988)’s facework typology concerned with the speaker’s and the hearer’s face-needs. It examined face-honoring, face-compensating, face-neutral, and face-threatening messages in marital interactions”</i>
Penman (1990)	<i>“Penman (1990) drew upon Brown and Levinson’s politeness theory and assumed that the major goal of facework was to maintain respect of self and avoid contempt. He developed a model of facework in which various microstrategies fell into one of two dimensions: respect-contempt, direct-indirect”</i>
Lim and Bower (1991)	<i>“Lim and Bower (1991) developed his typology in the context of the U.S. culture. He identified types of facework in correspondence with the types of face-needs. The facework identified were tact facework, solidarity facework and approbation facework. The facework typology was to examine the effects of relational intimacy, power difference, and the right to perform a given act in a given situation on tact, solidarity, and approbation facework”</i>

3. Method

3.1 Questionnaire survey

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, a questionnaire survey has been conducted for the study. The questionnaire aims to obtain the demographic information of the participants. Second, they were asked to rate degree of usefulness of face-saving tactics in construction claim negotiation on a Likert scale of 1 (least useful) to 7 (most useful). The tactics are identified from literature and are summarized in Table 3.

Questionnaires were then administered by email to 252 construction professionals in Hong Kong. The list was compiled by identifying key personnel from the government and professional directories and websites of companies. A total of 78 valid responses were returned and the response rate was 31.0%. 67.9% respondents have more than 15 years working experience. Majority of respondents work in public sector (44.9%) and consultant firm (29.5%). The respondents’ profile is shown in Table 2. Data collected were then analyzed by relative importance index (*RII*).

Table 2 Profile of respondents

Experience (yrs)	No.	%	Cumulative %	Organization	No.	%	Cumulative %
Below 5	7	9.00%	9.00%	Developers	5	6.40%	6.40%
5-10	6	7.70%	16.70%	Consultants	23	29.50%	35.90%
10-15	12	15.40%	32.10%	Main Contractor	8	10.30%	46.20%
Above 15	53	67.90%	100.00%	Public Sector	35	44.90%	91.00%
				Others	7	9.00%	100.00%
Gender	No.	%	Cumulative %				
Female	2	11.50%	11.50%				
Male	69	88.50%	100.00%				

Notes: All respondents are Chinese

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Relative importance index (RII)

Relative importance index (*RII*) method was employed to evaluate the importance of the usefulness of face-saving tactics to construction claims negotiation. It is a method commonly used in construction studies for determining the relative rank and importance of items (Kometa et al, 1994; Aibinu and Jagboro, 2002). The indices ranged from 0 to 1 and were calculated by equation (1).

$$\text{Relative importance index (RII)} = \frac{\sum w}{A \times N} \quad (0 \leq \text{RII} \leq 1) \quad (1)$$

where w = weighting given to each face-saving tactics by the construction professionals

A = the highest rating of the scale (in this study, 7 is the highest rating)

N = the total number of respondent of the sample

By using equation 1, overall RIIs for the face-saving tactics were calculated and reported in Table 3. It was shown that RIIs for most of the face-saving tactics scored 0.5 or above, ranging from 0.828 to 0.485. This suggested that construction professionals generally found the face-saving tactics important in construction claim negotiations. The top three ranking face-saving tactics are 'Not breaking promises', 'Allowing thinking time to calm down when counterparts feel insulted, angry or frustrated' and 'Polite talk and being courteous'. Graham and Lam (2003) remarked that 'breaking promises' would invariably result in a mutual loss of face especially at the Chinese negotiating table. 'Being polite and courteous' prevailed in Chinese business dealing (Woo and Prud'homme, 1999). Gao (2006) identified 'allowing room or leaving leeway' as a tactful strategy of saving 'face'. In essence, tactics scored high were found to be characterised as showing respect towards others (e.g. not

breaking promises, being polite and courteous etc.). On the other hand, tactics with relatively lower scores were identified as saving others' face by behaving passively to make concession (e.g. Remain silent when having disagreement in negotiation, Ask irrelevant questions to change subjects to prevent direct confrontation). The result was generally in line with other construction study which suggested that use of avoiding styles was less influential in achieving functional negotiation outcomes (Cheung et al, 2006).

The result obtained deepens the understanding of face-saving tactics in negotiating claims. The ranking of the tactics reveals that particular types of face-saving tactics are likely to be more useful than others. A more rigorous examination on the structure of the tactics is speculated to provide insight into the result. On the other hand, the result is purely descriptive while the underlying reasons remain to be explored. Are the tactics useful in the different scenario? Why do the tactics characterized as behaving passively to make concession score lower? Though this study is not able to provide an adequate answer for these questions, it lays the groundwork for suggesting further research direction. A combination of qualitative analysis such as case study is suggested for further advancing the understanding. As Tracy and Baratz (1994) stated, case study approach can expand analyzing the scope and nature of facework strategies. Interviewing construction professionals on how they adopt face-saving tactics in different situational contexts shall be a tantalizing direction to provide further insight.

Table 3 Relative Importance indices and ranking for the face-saving tactics

<i>Face-saving tactics</i>	<i>RIIs</i>	<i>Rank</i>
<i>Not breaking the promises³</i>	<i>0.828</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Allow thinking time to calm down when counterparts feel insulted, angry or frustrated^{5, 6, 7}</i>	<i>0.789</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Polite talk and being courteous²</i>	<i>0.785</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Not displaying negative emotion at the negotiation table^{3, 4}</i>	<i>0.730</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Not criticize others^{1, 2, 7}</i>	<i>0.692</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Avoid discussion of specific issues that cause embarrassment^{7, 8}</i>	<i>0.641</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Be soft spoken¹</i>	<i>0.632</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Moderate one's fault by the use of disclaimer¹⁰</i>	<i>0.599</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>Apologize when facing criticism in the negotiation¹¹</i>	<i>0.557</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Remain silent when having disagreement in negotiation⁷</i>	<i>0.496</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Ask irrelevant questions to change subjects to prevent direct confrontation^{7, 9}</i>	<i>0.485</i>	<i>11</i>

Reference: ¹Brunner and Wang, 1988; ²Woo and Prud'homme, 1999; ³Graham and Lam, 2003; ⁴Fisher and Ury, 1981; ⁵Ma, 2006; ⁶Pruitt and Johnson, 1970; ⁷Gao 2006; ⁸Kirkbride et al, 1991; ⁹Brown,1977; ¹⁰Hewitt and Stokes, 1975; ¹¹Edelmann, 1994

5. Concluding remarks

The study aims to (1) identify face-saving tactics from the literature and (2) evaluate the importance of the usefulness of the tactics to construction claims negotiations. The relative importance indices

suggested that construction professionals generally found the face-saving tactics important in construction claims negotiations. Tactics scored high were found to be characterised as showing respect towards others while tactics with relatively lower scores were identified as saving others' face by behaving passively to make concession. Though this study is purely descriptive, it lays an important groundwork for identification of the tactics and paves the way for developing generic types of the tactics in construction claim negotiation. It is suggested that further understanding can be made by adopting case study approach.

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