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Communication Mode Among Malaysians

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Abstract Malaysia is a multicultural society which comprises three dominant ethnic groups: Malays (68%), Chinese (28%), Indians (10%) with other minorities (10%) (The Star July 21, 2009). Most Malaysians

tend to behave in ways that could be predictably Asian, that is keeping a low profile when it comes to personality issues and tending to keep things to themselves rather than highlighting them. However, there is a

slight difference in how the three ethnic groups communicate when it comes to the discussion of particular

issues. This study looks at how Malaysians view 'silence' as a tool in human communication. Using surveys

as our instrument to extract data, self-administered questionnaires were carried out on 661 respondents. SPSS

was used to analyze data. Our findings reveal that Malaysians prefer words to silence when communicating

with others. However, most prefer to keep silent when issues involving money are being discussed. We also

found that a majority of Malaysians would not hesitate to ask directly when they discover their partners/spouses committing adultery. Of the three ethnic groups, our findings suggest that Malaysian Indians

talk more than the others.

Keywords: Malaysians, Malays, Chinese, Indians, communication, silence, talk, relationships

1. Introduction

Malaysia is a multicultural and multilingual society and it comprises three dominant groups of Malays

(68%), Chinese (28%), Indians (10%) and other minorities (10%). Asmah Haji Omar (1992, 1993) studied

the various ethnic groups of Malaysia in the 1990's. She found that the linguistic situation of this country has

been evolving over the years to accommodate the needs of the people. Due to the influence of migrant

cultures and linguistic adjustments with the locals, the language environment of Malaysia was described as a

'potpourri of cultures', 'mosaic-like' and 'batik-like' (Asmah Haji Omar, 1992, 1993) and these terms

exhibit the multi facets of Malaysian ways of lives. Studies on how Malaysians communicate (see Asmah

Haji Omar, 1992, 1993; Jamaliah Mohd. Ali, 1995, 2000; Asma Abdullah and Pedersen, 2003; David, Kuang,

1999; David, Kuang and Zuraidah, 2002; and Thilagavathi, 2003) show that the Malays, tend to be indirect

in their communication styles. It is believed that the Malays avoid being upfront and they find conflicts to be

adverse. The Chinese, on the other hand, have been described as a direct community (David and Kuang,

1999) due to their intense need to make money as time is gold (see Ling, 1995) while the communicative pattern of the Indians can fluctuate between being direct and indirect (see David and Kuang, 1999, 2005).

Nevertheless, this depends on their education level and professional backgrounds. The higher their status, the more direct they are.

2. Aim

This study will provide an insight into the Malaysian's way of life, particularly in their communication modes. It highlights when Malaysians observe silence and what kind of issues/topics being discussed are likely to trigger silence and when they prefer talking.

3. Theoretical framework

Social constructionism is a theoretical construct which considers all forms of communication, including silence, as being socially constructed and historically and culturally situated (Berger and Luckman, 1966).

This framework is selected for this study based on the fact that Malaysia is a multiethnic and multicultural society. It has been argued that social truth/reality emerges through social consensus and self-reflection with the help of language in a society (Gergen, 1994) and that the use of language and its effects (verbal and nonverbal) are of central importance to social constructionism. From the linguistic and non-linguistic dimension, Jaworski (1993) has shown that silence is an extremely powerful communicative tool in theoretically pragmatic terms, arguing that silence can be accounted for by the same principles as those of speech.

4. Methodology

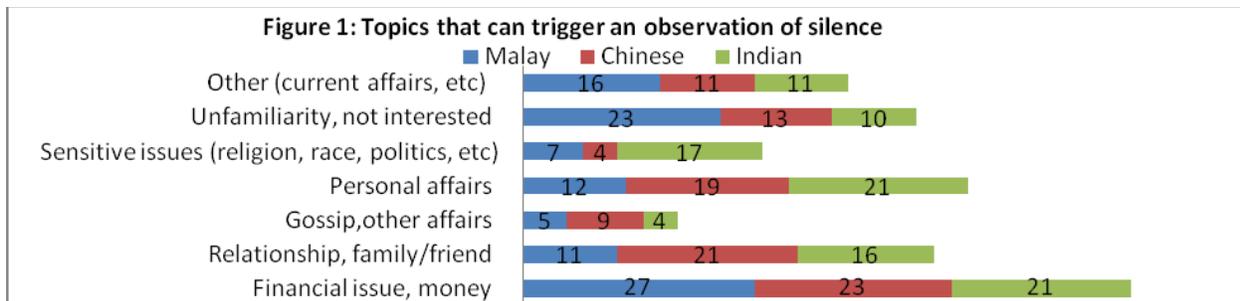
A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to 661 Malaysians: 228 Malays, 326 Chinese, 101 Indians (6 missing value) who were aged between 20 to 60 years old. The questionnaires were retrieved and SPSS was used to analyse data. All the results are presented in terms of percentages.

5. Analysis of data

Data will be presented both qualitatively and quantitatively. We first discuss the findings of the various topics that can trigger silence among Malaysians. This is followed by the various contexts/situations that might lead to silence or talking as a mode of communication.

5.1 Topics that can trigger silence

Figure 1 shows that the three ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians do observe silence but it depends on the kind of topics being discussed. Data was derived from Question 1: "What topics being discussed (e.g. matters related to money) are likely to result in you not responding verbally? Why?"

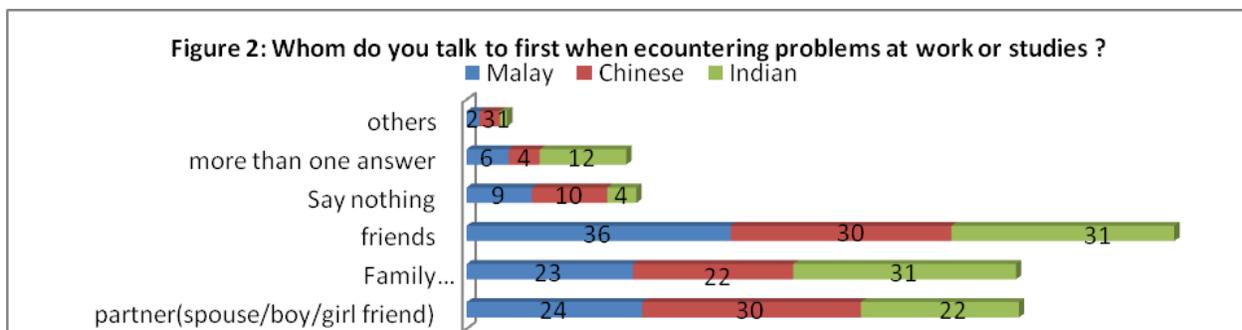


From statistics shown, it seems clear that respondents from the three ethnic groups observe silence most when they are faced with issues or topics which include finance or money. It seems that 27% of Malays, 23% of Chinese and 21% of Indians prefer not to talk when they are besieged by topics/issues which involve money. Nonetheless, we also noted some variations. Besides keeping silent to avoid talking about money issues, 23% of the Malay respondents also refrain from talking when they are unfamiliar with or have no interest in a particular topic of discussion and 16% would stopped talking when they are unsure about issues on current affairs. The Chinese respondents not only avoid talking about money matters, 21% also dislike talking about their relationships and 19% refrain from talking about their personal affairs. For the Indian respondents, silence is rated highly in two major issues with 21% keeping silent when financial issues are involved and 21% keeping silent when personal affairs are involved followed by 17% refraining from talking about sensitive issues like religion, race and politics. Although our analysis cannot be ascertained with precision, we attribute this observation of silence among the Malays to their traditional cultural conditioning which encourages humility, to observe hierarchy, to have respect for elders and to also avoid conflicts where possible. To a small extent, we also deduce that silence may be observed by the Malays as a show of low confidence. Among the Chinese respondents, silence is observed when issues concerning relationships and personal affairs are involved. We also attribute this finding to the cultural upbringing of the Chinese culture that could have been influenced by Confucianism. One of Confucius teachings subscribe to the concept of a great man (*junzi*) (see Yu, 2009). A *junzi* (a great man) is fast of action and slow of words and this notion has been taken by most Chinese seriously. Many have been brought up to say as little as possible about bad relationships so as to avoid being labelled by others as a non-*junzi*. In addition, most Chinese families also discourage their children from

discussing family issues outside of home grounds as 'face' for the family is of utmost importance. Due to that, we conclude that the Chinese respondents prefer to keep silent when they are faced with issues that might affect their image/face. As for the Indians, silence is triggered by two important issues: financial and personal issues followed by sensitive issues like religion and politics. We also attribute this finding to the Indian upbringing where people are not encouraged to discuss their personal matters with others as it affects their family name, thus may incur shame or a stigma. In addition, silence is probably engaged as a way of showing respect to other communities as sensitive issues like religion and politics can spark off anger when not kept in rein.

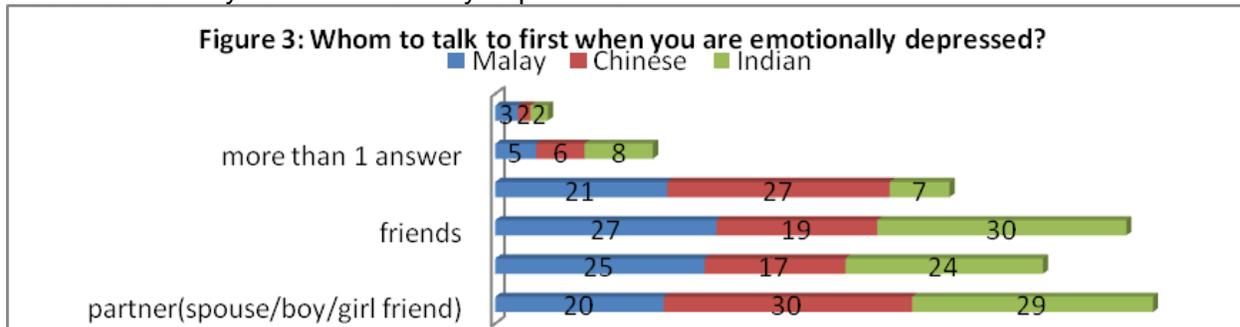
5.2 Breaking of Silence

In this section we discuss the findings derived from three questions asked in one component of the questionnaire. Question 1: "Whom do you talk to first when encountering problems at work/or in your studies?"



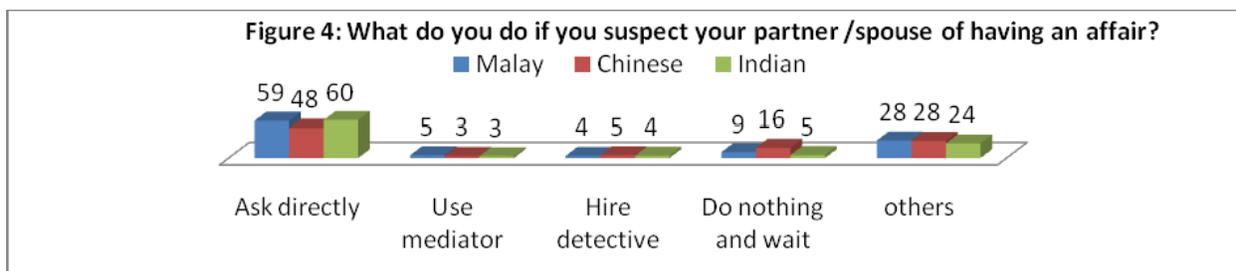
From Figure 2, it seems obvious that Malaysians prefer to talk when they face problems at work or in their studies. Our data implies that most Malaysians choose to talk about their problems with friends most followed by their family members, and then their respective partners. However, our findings indicate that the three ethnic groups may differ slightly in terms of their preferences. It appears that 83% of the Malays choose to talk whilst only 9% would choose to remain silent. Of those who do talk, 36% prefer to talk to friends, 24% prefer to talk with their partners and 23% prefer to talk with family members. Not unlike the Malays, 82% of the Chinese also prefer words and 10% prefer silence. Of those who prefer talk, 30% choose friends and 30% prefer partners whilst only 22% would talk with family members. Likewise, 84% of Indians also prefer to talk when faced with problems and only 4% might consider silence. Of those who prefer talk, 31% prefer friends and 31% prefer family members but 22% would opt for their partners.

What can be deduced from these findings is that all the three ethnic groups like to talk matters out but depending on what their cultural background is, the preference of talking to friends, family members or partners might vary. Overall, it appears that Malaysians are generally collective at heart, preferring to rely on the support of their friends, family members and partners when faced with problems at work or in their studies. Our data suggests that for the Indian respondents, the support of their family members and friends are vital with 31% opting for each channel and 22% opting for the support of partners. 36% of the Malay respondents prefer the support for friends followed by 24% opting for partners and 23% for family support. The Chinese respondents seem to rely on the support of friends and partners with 30% each catering to each channel and 22% opting for the support of family members. Our next question is: Question2: "Whom do you talk to first when you are emotionally depressed?"



From the responses gathered, it can be seen that Malaysians also experience emotional setbacks in today's world such as going through depressed moments. While westerners might have turned to counselors or psychiatrists for help to deal with these problems, it appears that Malaysians have not resorted to that path yet. Figure 3 above shows that there are some significant findings. In identifying the person whom most Malaysians would resort to talking with first when feeling depressed, a significant difference emerge in the findings of the three ethnic groups ($X^2(10) = 30.0, p < 0.001$). Overall, it appears that all the three ethnic groups prefer to talk to release their emotional pent up feelings like depression. Of this phenomenon, 79% of the Indian respondents prefer to talk but their choices differ from those whom they talk to when facing problems at work or in studies. 30% of the Indians would talk to friends when depressed, 29% would talk with their partners and 24% would go to their family members. Not too different, 72% of the Malay respondents also prefer to talk when depressed but 27% prefer to talk with

friends, 25% with family members and 20% with their partners. Among the three, the Chinese is the group that least wants to talk as only 66% prefer to talk. Slightly more than a quarter or 30% choose to talk to partners and only 19% prefer to talk to friends and 17% prefer family members. This indicates that for the Indians and Chinese, family members would be the last to know if they are suffering from depression. For the Malays and Indians, friends are their priority buffers when they are depressed whereas for the Chinese their partners are very important. With this being the case, which of the three ethnic groups prefers silence when dealing with emotional depression? Our findings indicate that the Chinese had the highest percentage with 27% preferring to keep silent and only 21% of Malays opting to be quiet and 7% of the Indians would choose silence in this context. This clearly shows that the Indian respondents are more prone to talking. The last question is Question 3: "If you suspect that your partner is having an affair with somebody, what do you do?"



Besides the various topics and contexts that can create silence and talks, we also wanted to know how Malaysians deal with situations when they suspect their partners/spouses of having an affair. Figure 4 shows that regardless of ethnicity, this issue will certainly not lead to silence. Our data indicate that 60% of the Indian respondents, 59% of the Malay respondents will ask their partners directly as compared to less than half of the Chinese, only 48% would question their partners. Surprisingly, 16% of the Chinese respondents as compared to 9% Malays and 5% Indians will opt to remain silent by doing nothing or just wait until their partners tell them. From this study, we thus conclude that when it comes to matters of the heart like a partner's infidelity, Malaysians tend to be more vocal although among the three ethnic groups, the majority of Chinese may choose to remain silent.

6. Conclusion

Overall, it can be said that Malaysians prefer spoken words to being silent. Silence is not ruled out

completely for it is observed in particular contexts like when faced with pressing issues such as money or sensitive issues like religion and politics. To a small extent, silence may also be triggered when Malaysians feel unsure of themselves or when they have no interest in a particular topic. Our findings imply that there are different social rituals and way of upbringing that can lead to this diversity among the three ethnic groups. From this study, it can be concluded that Malay and Chinese respondents observe silence to maintain harmony, avoid confrontation, indicate a lack of confidence, or show disinterest, a practice that differs slightly the Japanese. The Indians tend to talk more preferring to discuss their thoughts and emotions with others. Based on the discussions of this paper, it can be said that silence is observed as a mode of communication among Malaysians and that its function is not totally negative. It seems that silence is used as a form of communicative strategy that could help to maintain harmony, although not necessarily to show agreement. Further, silence might also be used by Malaysians because they are unsure of what to do in particular situations and this can probably be attributed to our Asian/Malaysian culture which has not empowered us to deal with situations of this kind, whether through family upbringing or through formal training.

7. Acknowledgments

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