

The Perceived Value of Silence and Spoken Words in Malaysian Interactions

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ABSTRACT

This paper analysed the perceptions of Malaysians in engaging silence (say nothing) and in using spoken words (talk) as a tool of communication in their daily interactions. Types of topics and situations being discussed were explored in order to detect when silence or words were likely to be used by participants. Self-administered questionnaires were distributed to students and staff of three public universities. Of the 656 samples collected, 50% were Chinese, 33% were Malays, 15% were Indians and 2% others. The demography consisted of 199 males and 456 females. SPSS version 18 was used to analyse data and results indicate that the use of silence was more significantly related to issues concerning money and personal affairs. In contrast, the use of spoken words was more significantly related to issues regarding infidelity. These findings are beneficial to researchers who are doing cross cultural studies and in particular, silence. Course designers can thus develop courses which can promote harmony by introducing certain strategies such as silence which, when used appropriately, can help to alleviate misunderstandings.

Keywords: Malaysians, communication, words, silence, cultural differences

1. INTRODUCTION

Silence, in the Asian context, is often eluded because few can appreciate its value as many do not know how to deal with silence. In contrast, silence is cherished in Japanese interactions as it is regarded with respect. During interactions, it is a norm for the Japanese to observe silence. As both parties interact, interlocutors are somehow expected to know what is going on in their respective minds (Wong, 2010). While information may be exchanged, they are usually not explicit. The Japanese people tend to convey only essential information while the “decisive part” of the interaction is restrained. Both parties do not ask for that information and so waiting becomes a

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part of the game where the parties concerned try to figure out mentally what had been said and then decide what to say or do next. This period of waiting in complete silence by the interlocutors is expected as a reaction in Japanese culture, while both parties try to figure out what to say next. Seen as an ambiguous moment, that period of silence is also open for interpretations (Wong, 2010). Correct decoding of that silence can contribute to the continuation of the interaction while an incorrect one can cause a stop to the interaction. From this context, it can be said that precise interpretations of verbal and non-verbal messages encoded in another culture like the Japanese is largely dependent upon one's proficiency in social interactions and worldly experiences which have been gained from exposure to a wide scope of intercultural communications.

Cultural attitude plays a marked role in the decoding and assessing of what has been said or left unsaid as well as in judging someone's use of silence which can take place in many contexts and on many levels. Ajzen (as cited in Lope Pihie and Bagheri, 2011) says that attitude is one of the main factors which can influence one's behaviour. Thus, by being able to understand people's behaviour and perception towards silence across cultures, the ability to decode and predict with precision the respective behaviours in various situations is increased. This simultaneously decreases the likelihood of misunderstanding and such an ideal situation is definitely beneficial to mankind.

1.1 Aim

This study aims to understand when silence or spoken words are used during interactions in the Malaysian context. In particular, it focuses on how participants from the three dominant ethnic groups of Malaysia react to various hypothetical contexts and what would be their preferred choice of communication.

2. COMMUNICATION

Human communication is primarily a means of survival (Maslow, 1954) as it is a process where human beings interact among themselves for the purpose of exchanging meanings and information. Information is given and exchanged but its interpretation is dependent on the participants who come from different backgrounds and have different upbringing, values, beliefs and attitudes. Thus, the structure of a society cannot be divorced from how people communicate among themselves. The Universal Law of Communication indicates that all human beings communicate through a number of ways which encompass movements, sounds, reactions, physical changes, gestures, languages, breath and others (Scudder, 1900).

Communication can be verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication involves the use of spoken words to convey meanings while non-verbal communication depends on body movements, facial expressions and other forms of non-verbal communication. Spoken words, in comparison to written words, are spontaneous and meanings can be easily conveyed and ambiguity can be easily rectified but Davidmann (1998, 2006) argued that the value of words in communication varies considerably in terms of its level of abstraction. Davidmann mentioned that the greater the level of abstraction, the less meaningful the words are to the listener.

2.1 *Silence*

Silence may be non-verbal but it serves many functions (Jaworski, 1993; Lehtonen and Sajavaara, 1985; Tannen, 1985; Nakane, 2007; Wong, 2010). Its usage within a communication exchange depends very much on the interlocutors' cultural background, socio-competence experience and their perception or understanding of what silence may mean in their respective culture or daily practices. In the organizational context, for instance, the attitude of individuals (e.g. top management and supervisors) towards silence can create an ambience that "encourage or discourage the enactment of silence behaviour by employees" according to Okey and Chiwuba (2008: 9), who also suggested that there is a reciprocal link between silence and work attitudes.

Silence is not a universal value (Tannen, 1985; Samovar and Porter, 2001) because cultures like the Jewish, Italian and Arabic observe very little silence in their conversations while the North American (US) culture finds silence stressful (Giles, Coupland and Wiemann, 1992). In contrast, eastern cultures like Japan, Korea and China (Kim, 1999) value and treat silence as a way of preserving harmony in social groups (Barnlund, 1989; Nakane, 2007).

Among easterners, verbal expressions such as arguments are synonymous to "an activity of dubious value that can lead to anger and unreasonable behaviour" (Cheng and Tardy, 2009: 35). The scholars claimed that a quiet person is viewed more favourably than a loquacious person who is perceived to be insincere. There is more favour given to a taciturn person since meanings can be sensed through silence (Cheng and Tardy, 2009). This perceived silence is linked to the Japanese *haragei* (wordless communication), Korean *noon chi* and Chinese *mo chi* (tacit understanding). The tacit knowledge of the Chinese has been interpreted by Cheng and Tardy (2009) as a conduct of self-restraint and self-discipline where harmony is maintained by deliberate measures. By remaining silent, the "face" of the other party can be preserved. Chen (2002) concurred when he highlighted that silence may be seen as a means to accomplish a certain goal. Nonetheless, these studies merely explain when silence is acknowledged by the participants. They do not describe to us the situations in which silence is observed.

2.2 *Positive and Negative Values of Silence*

Silence conveys both positive and negative values. Silence may be perceived as good behaviour and also as a rude or impolite gesture (Sifianou, 1997), as a sign of active learning and concentration or as a sign of laziness or ignorance in the educational setting (Jaworski, 1999) and in organizational contexts, silence may imply weak followers who lack motivation (Pinder and Harlos, 2001). Thus, silence is perceived as a symptom of stress and isolation (Jenkins, 2000). Marrison and Milliken (2000), for instance, suggested that employees' silence may be a hindrance to an organization's endeavour to leverage its employees to achieve excellent performance. Such a taciturn behaviour is viewed negatively because it is seen as the preference of employees to withhold their opinions when problems arise at work (Okey and Chiwuba, 2008). This may prove to be dangerous as the more members accept this silent behaviour as a core organizational value, the lesser their commitment will be towards their organisation.

To resolve this matter, managers are advised to improve their work attitude and lessen their silent behaviour (Okey and Chiwuba, 2008). In addition, silence is also viewed as a failure of language (Tannen, 1985 as cited in Jaworski, 2000) or as a chance for self-exploration (Allen, 1978). Nonetheless, silence conveys different values depending on cultures. Wong (2010), for instance, claimed that silence can be eclectic since it can be taken as a moment of thoughtfulness or contemplation which is defined as a mental inactivity with others. In some situations, silence may also be used to demonstrate anger, disgust or uncertainty while in other contexts, participants interacting among themselves may remain silent because they need to ponder over a statement made by another party. People may remain silent as they contemplate on their next move. When people withdraw from participating, silence may also ensue. Thus, it appears that silence in human interactions could bear contrasting values such as bonding or dividing people, healing emotional wounds, revealing or hiding information or showing assent and favour or dissent and disfavour (Jensen, 1973).

2.3 *Close and Distant Relationships*

People behave differently in different situations to suit the atmosphere of their conversations. For instance, some may refrain from articulating what they want to say if they think that what they are going to say will spoil the harmony of the interaction. In interpersonal communication, emotion becomes a response which one uses in reacting to a particular stimulus, or as a socially constructed phenomenon based on the adaptations of one's perspective (Gopinath, 2011). Those who declare their emotions freely say what they want to say regardless of situations but they may be perceived as people who lack social common sense, particularly in public where many are strangers or in situations involving parties of distant relationships (e.g. acquaintances, colleagues, bosses). In service industries, the display of appropriate emotions at front counters is of importance for customers who support a particular industry (Salovey and Mayer, 1990 as cited in Gopinath, 2011).

Culture can affect the display and recognition of emotion in terms of how, when, in what social context and by whom (Porter and Samovar, 1998). Nonetheless, through a process of socialisation, people also learn to communicate their emotions either by expressing or inhibiting them. A common phenomenon in interactions is that the display of emotions is more allowable between people in close relationships (e.g. family members or spouse).

Andersen and Guerrero (1998) explained that some emotional expressions which are manifested in public situations do not necessarily present themselves in private situations and such emotional expressions serve as forms of interpersonal communication rather than as expressions of internal feelings only. Coining the word "channelling" to indicate a process of selective displays of certain emotions in particular situations or contexts, Andersen and Guerrero (1998) added that the British, for instance, perceive public display of emotion as distasteful. The British regard those with higher education to be rational and better at dealing with emotions. Consequently, they assume a reserved attitude in the public eye, especially when

emotion becomes an issue. However, there is more room for emotional expression and open disagreement among family members and close friends (Wong, 2010). This implies that the British use spoken words more when they are with someone who is close to them. This characteristic of the British is contrary to Japanese married couples who need less spoken words in conveying their needs and messages because telepathic communication works effectively for them. Encoding and decoding messages through non-verbal means such as silence is possible between Japanese couples (Wong, 2005). Even if she is suspected of adultery, the wife prefers to wait until her husband is ready to confess the truth before she confronts the husband directly (Wong, 2005).

3. COMMUNICATION STYLES OF MALAYSIANS

Communication is about social interactions and is based on respective assumptions as stated by Lokasundari (2009). Thus, in looking at the communication styles of Malaysians, one cannot deny that the observations and analyses could also be based on assumptions but by using evidence drawn from studies, such assumptions are thereby confirmed.

Most studies have described Malaysians as indirect people but it should be mentioned that such a description is more relevant to the Malays (David and Kuang, 1999, 2005; Jamaliah, 2000; Thilagavathi, 2003). Part of the Malay conduct involves being non-confrontational (Asrul, 2003) and *berbudi-bahasa* or courteous (Asmah, 1992, 1993; Kamisah and Norazlan, 2003; Asrul, 2003). Malaysians are generally group-oriented people and are collectivistic in nature (Hofstede, 1984; Asma, 1992) but they also have some distinctive differences in their behaviour due to their different culture, religion, beliefs, values as well as upbringing.

Littlejohn (2002) stated that human beings respond to various contexts in different ways and individuals are more or less governed by their cultural backgrounds when dealing with certain aspects of communication. In that regard, it is possible that their behavioural patterns could have been influenced by certain underlying values which were acquired from their upbringing (Littlejohn, 2002) as well as exposure to other values. Some common values which are still intact among the Malays include respect for elders, respect for authority, preservation of face and maintaining hierarchy and harmony (Hofstede, 1984; Asma, 1992).

A common feature of the Malays is their indirectness (Asmah, 1992, 1993; David, Kuang and Zuraidah, 2002; Thilagavathi, 2003) and their avoidance of conflicts and confrontations (Asrul, 2003). Another Malay characteristic is its good upbringing which is demonstrated via courteousness (Asmah, 1992; Jamaliah, 1995) which is synonymous with being polite. However, irrespective of the traditional heritage, behaviours can also change as people adapt to technological and economical changes. Lailawati (2005) found that some Malays have moved on from being collectivistic to being more individualistic.

Malaysian Chinese, in comparison, are descendants of 17th and 19th century migrants. Early Chinese migrants often withdrew from interacting with the locals for various reasons, one of which was to avoid trouble (Ling, 1995), but the current

generation of Malaysian Chinese lead a different lifestyle. Many are nuclear family oriented and do not live with extended families like before. In addition, many have also become more prosperous, gained education both locally and abroad and are more open-minded unlike their ancestors. Thus, their lifestyles and attitudes would be markedly different from that of their ancestors. These differences are manifested in the way they interact, behave and socialise. However, certain traditional values such as filial piety and deference for elders acquired from Confucian teachings (Ling, 1995) are still widely practised. Historically, Chinese people place a lot of value on “face” (Chan, 2006; Shi, Furukawa, Jin and Zhu, 2010). Any incident within the family that brings shame and embarrassment are often not discussed in public. Previous studies of the Malaysian Chinese indicate that they are direct and upfront (David and Kuang, 1999, 2005; Kuang, 2007; Kuang and David, 2009) in their communication styles. However, Lim and Syed (1997) found that their Chinese respondents had a higher need for affiliation than their Malay colleagues while handling intracultural and interpersonal conflicts in a business context. The Chinese managers in their study wanted to maintain harmony instead of alienating themselves in a conflict. From these results, we can see variations in the way Malaysian Chinese react in particular situations.

Malaysian Indians are the smallest ethnic group of the country but they are made up of Tamils, Telugus, Malayalam, Punjabis and other subgroups. There are very few reports about the communication styles of Malaysian Indians but some studies (Jamaliah, 2000; Suraiya, 2002) carried out on young Malaysian Indians in universities indicate that they are generally polite and indirect. Nonetheless, their communication style may depend on their social status and professional backgrounds (David and Kuang, 1999, 2005) as some Indian professionals were found to be very direct. To date, no studies have shown them to be more voluble or more taciturn and no study has looked at silence as a part of the three dominant groups’ communication style or features. Thus, the findings of this study will help to fill this literature gap.

4. METHODOLOGY

The perceived responses of 656 Malaysians who were given hypothetical contexts to define whether silence or spoken words would be used in communicating certain responses were extracted from a self-administered questionnaire which was adapted from Wong’s (2005) model. Wong (2005) had studied the use of silence amongst British and Japanese participants in her work but in the present study, the respondents were Malaysians between the ages of 19 to 60 years. The majority of them were students and staff of three public universities located in the Klang Valley, Selangor. A total of 25 questions with some consisting of sub-questions were developed for the questionnaire and responses were guided by the Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, mildly disagree and strongly disagree). Open-ended questions were also included in order to gauge the explanation provided by respondents. On average, each questionnaire would require 30 minutes to complete. The questionnaires were administered in stages over approximately three months and respondents consisted of 50% Chinese, 33% Malays,

15% Indians and 2% others. The SPSS version 18 was used to quantify our findings. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the survey and that results would be shared once published. Responses to five specific questions were extracted, tabulated and quantified for this paper. The analysis is presented in histograms and percentages were derived from the frequency of the choices made by the respondents.

4.1 Justification

The responses of 656 Malaysians can serve as a good representation of the way the majority of Malaysians think in response to particular contexts. Our response rates matched the recommendation made by McCracken (1988) who indicated that a quantitative research provides information on how the general population think about and experience the world and that it would require a larger sample and particular type of questions which can be used to generalize a larger population.

Pliner, Blankstein and Spigel (1979) also stated that self-reporting methods provide data on people's inner state which cannot be obtained by other means. Their argument was based on the assumption that every individual has a personal theory of reality and that the theory is not developed with a conscious intent but arises, unwittingly, in the course of living. Since this theory is not an explicit theory, it would be best to infer it from behaviour, particularly emotional reactions. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the respondents by ethnic group and age.

Table 1: Breakdown of respondents

Ethnic groups	Male	Female	Total
Chinese	96	230	326 (49.8%)
Malays	83	145	228 (34.8%)
Indians	20	81	101(15.4%)
Total	199 (30.4%)	456 (69.4%)	661 (5 missing values = 656)

4.2 Theoretical Framework

This study adopted the theoretical framework of social constructionism which considers all forms of communication including silence as being socially constructed and historically and culturally situated (Berger and Luckman, 1966). Taking the process of communication as the means where members of a society share and create meanings for themselves, social constructionism thus considers the way something is said can determine the way the message is conceived and interpreted. It also posits that truth and ideas are constructed as a result of the social process of interacting with each other. Craig (2001: 125) describes this as "...an ongoing process that symbolically forms and re-forms our personal identities". Social constructionism suggests that "... in human life, information does not behave simply as bits in an electronic stream, information flow is far more like an electric current running from one landmine to another" (Lanham, 2003: 7). It is more realistic because it concerns real people interacting among themselves, sharing their thoughts and ideas freely. Likewise,

Chandler (1994: 2) stated that “humans do not communicate simply as computers or robots”. Instead, they gather facts and data by acquiring meaning through the process of communication or through interaction with others.

As a multiethnic and multicultural society, the identities of Malaysians are constructed through social consensus and self-reflection via the help of language (Gergen, 1994). The use of language and its effects, whether verbal or non-verbal, are vital ingredients to social constructionism. From the linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives, we can say that all forms of communication, including silence, can depict pragmatic meanings and silence can be an extremely powerful communicative tool as it can account for as many meanings in communication as those of spoken words (Jaworski, 1993).

5. ANALYSIS OF DATA

The development of the discussion is based on five questions selected from the questionnaire. The responses to these five questions shed light on situations in which silence or words may be used. Figure 1 illustrates the statistics for the three ethnic groups of Malay, Chinese and Indian who claim to observe silence. Question 1 asks: “What topics being discussed (e.g. matters related to money) are likely to create silence as a response?” The discussion for this is provided under the subsequent heading.

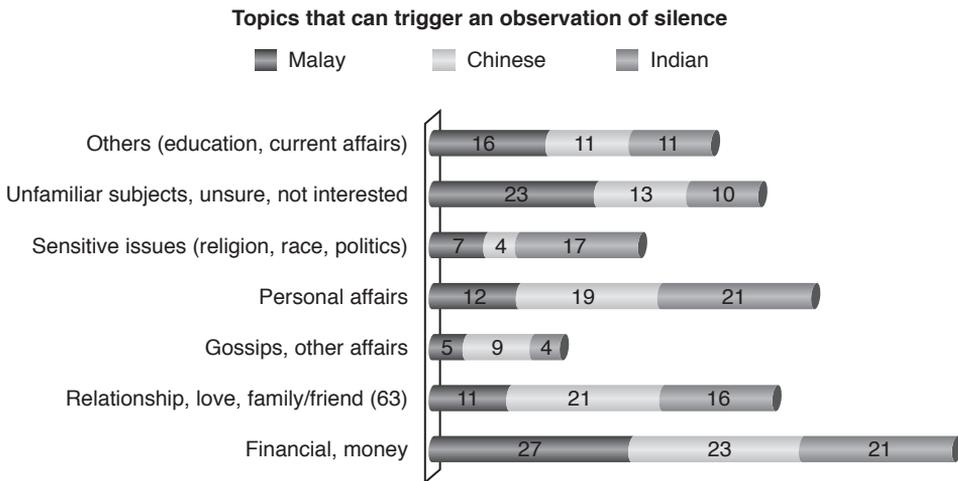


Figure 1. Responses showing topics that can trigger an observation of silence

5.1 Topics that can Trigger Silence

This question focuses on the results of the three highly rated topics. In issues pertaining to “financial issue/money”, statistics show that 27% Malay respondents, 23% Chinese respondents and 21% Indian respondents claim to observe silence. Their behaviour could have been induced by their cultural background which avoids confrontational

topics involving “financial” and “relationship” issues. Thus, silence was used as a non-confrontational strategy. It is also possible that these issues involved a lot of “face threats” (Kim, 1999; Cheng and Tardy, 2009) which can damage relationships if not handled amicably, hence keeping silent alleviates the need to confront and argue.

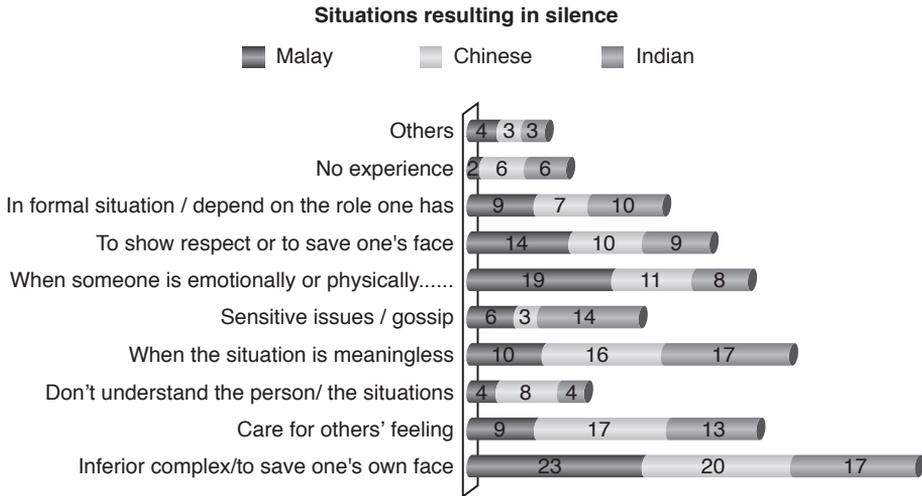


Figure 2. Responses showing situations resulting in silence

5.2 Situations that can Trigger Silence

Figure 2 provides nine hypothetical situations which could trigger silence. Although the percentage of respondents claiming to observe silence is small, it nevertheless shows that silence is a useful tool in these situations. Our findings suggest that the cultural upbringing and values instilled in Malaysians in their upbringing (Asma, 1992; Lim and Syed, 1997) may be the main reason why all the three ethnic groups observed silence in similar situations. From the analysis, it appears that silence was used when respondents feel “inferior” and this is interpreted as a “face-saving” strategy. Statistics in Figure 2 indicate that 23% Malay respondents, 19% Chinese respondents and 17% Indian respondents would observe silence when having a low level of confidence. Thus, the notion of “face” shown here is important to all three ethnic groups. Additionally, 17% Indian respondents and 16% Chinese respondents used silence as a tool of communication during moments when “situations seem meaningless”. In these hypothetical situations, Malaysians observed silence to avoid dead-end discussions.

Silence was observed by 14% Malays to bypass confrontations and show respect to others. Such a behaviour was also noted in Lope Pihie and Bagheri (2011), where Malay respondents scored low in a survey focusing on their self-esteem in business. This was interpreted as a lack of self-confidence. In the context of this study, when the Malay respondents observed silence, it was to refrain from talking with an emotionally

unstable interlocutor. Thus, it was an avoidance strategy which was to steer clear of conflicts (Asrul, 2003). It is observed that when people are confronted with the need to do the right thing or wrong thing, a lot of emotions such as guilt and shame are involved (News Scan, 2011) and this emotion could have possibly affected the Malay respondents' choice of behaviour. Kraus added that "It's not something ingrained in the individual, it's the cultural contexts which lead to these differences" (News Scan, 2011: 733).

Among the Chinese, silence was probably observed as a way to self-reflect, self-restraint and self-discipline (Kim, 1999; Cheng and Tardy, 2009) since silence alleviates the need to talk as 20% of them had observed silence to save their own face. It is also possible that silence was engaged as a way of remaining "aloof" like a *junzi* (Yu, 2009) which means a great man who is fast of action and slow of words. As the notion of "face" is still an important issue to the Chinese, keeping silent was probably one way to maintain self-dignity, thereby abating shame and embarrassment. Being silent in situations where talk is meaningless is also practical as it saves time by not talking.

Findings indicate that Indian respondents observed silence when in situations of being inferior and when it involves sensitive issues (17% and 14%, respectively). This is probably due to their lack of ability to respond appropriately since many of us have not been trained to deal with the negative impact of such situations. It is also probable that silence was observed as an act of humility, an important aspect of the Indian culture. In this regard, silence was used as a device to reflect harmony.

5.3 When Words are Used

Data for this section were derived from three questions asked in the questionnaire. The first question asked "Whom do you talk to first when encountering problems at work/ or in your studies?" Findings are presented in Figure 3.

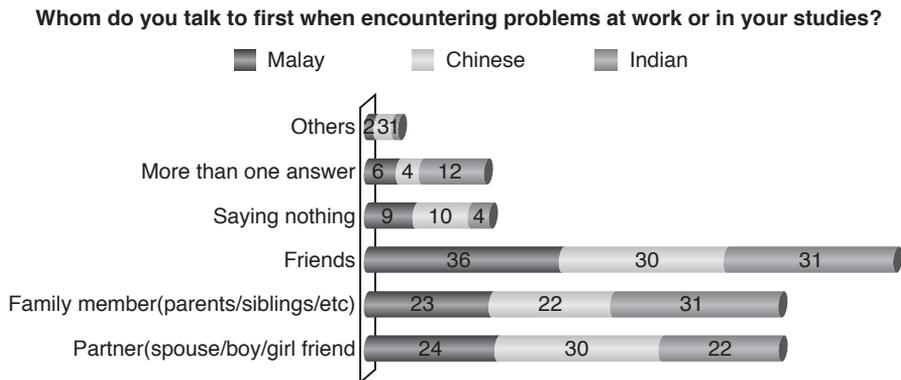


Figure 3. Responses for the question, "Whom do you talk to first when encountering problems at work or in your studies?"

The responses therefore illustrate when spoken words were used and with whom. Statistics indicate that Malaysians have a range of support. When faced with problems, many claimed to talk (spoken words) to “friends” before going to “family members” and finally “partners”. However, there are some variations in preference among the three ethnic groups.

If the response “say nothing” is to be taken as an expression of silence, then it could be seen that only 9% Malays, 10% Chinese and 4% Indians opted for silence. The majority claimed to express themselves verbally. When encountering problems at work or in studies, 36% Malays would talk to their friends, 24% to their partners and 23% to their family members. In comparison, 30% Chinese preferred to talk to their friends, 30% to their partners and only 22% may talk to their family members. Likewise, 31% Indians choose to talk to their friends, 31% to their family members while 22% preferred to talk to their partners.

The above data imply that all the three ethnic groups do not vary very much in their reliance for support. “Friends” is the first preference for all the three groups when having problems at work or in studies. Among the Chinese and Malays, “partners” were second choice and “family members” came last. In contrast, Indians preferred to talk with their “family members” more and their “partners” would be their last choice. From this result, we can deduce that the Chinese and Malays approach their “partners” for support and this in return, alleviates the need to burden their family members. It appears that Indians trust their family members more when encountering problems at work/in studies, thus reducing their burden on “partners”.

The next question asks: “Whom do you talk to first when you are emotionally depressed?” Figure 4 illustrates the findings.

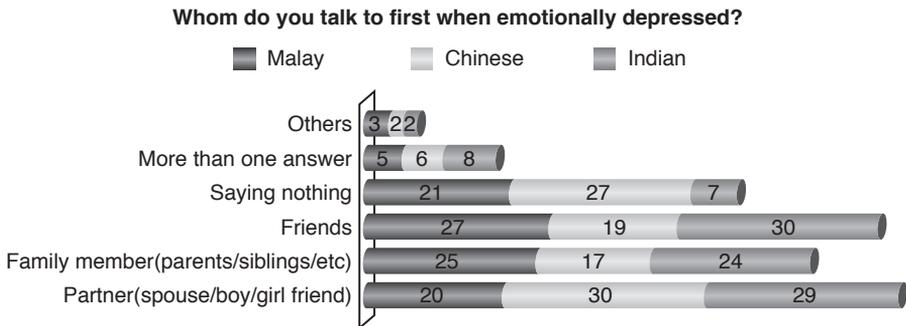


Figure 4. Responses for the question, “Whom do you talk to first when emotionally depressed?”

In such a hypothetical situation, the responses of the Malaysian respondents varied, showing a significant difference among the three ethnic groups ($X^2(10) = 30.0, p < 0.001$).

At this stage of analysis, it appears that more Chinese respondents would “say nothing” (27%) when compared to the Malays and Indians. From Figure 3, we can

see that the Chinese were more inclined towards confiding in “friends” and “partners” when encountering problems at work/studies. However, in situations where they were emotionally depressed, the percentage of talking to “friends” dropped by almost half (from 30% to 19%) although the percentage of talking to “partners” remained unchanged (30%). With regard to such hypothetical situations, this implies that silence (saying nothing) has become their preferred choice when they encounter emotional problems.

Likewise, the Malays showed the same tendency in resorting to silence when they were emotionally depressed. The only distinction between the two ethnic groups is that Malays talked to their “friends” more than their “partners” in this particular situation. The Indians talked more to their “partners” when they were emotionally depressed (change from 22% to 29%). A slight increment, from 4% to 7%, was also found in the category of “say nothing” for the Indians. On the whole, it can be deduced that the tendency for Malaysians to resort to silence increased when they were emotionally depressed as compared to when they encountered problems at work or in their studies.

The next question attempted to detect what Malaysians think they may do in another hypothetical situation, “What do you do if you suspect your partner/spouse of having an affair?” Figure 5 illustrates the findings.



Figure 5. Responses to the question, “What do you do if you suspect your partner/spouse of having an affair?”

In this question, four alternatives were presented to the respondents:

- (a) ask directly (being confrontational)
- (b) use mediator (being indirect)
- (c) hire detective (get indirect help to gather proof)
- (d) do nothing and wait (use silence)

The results show that the response “others” in Figure 5 was highly rated. This is probably because approximately 70% of the respondents are still single. It seems that a hypothetical and difficult situation of this nature is more likely to provoke the use of spoken words than silence. Most respondents claimed that they would confront

their “partners/spouses”. Among the four options provided, “talk” (spoken words) or “say nothing” (silence) was highly rated by the Chinese respondents. This finding reveals the trait of self-restraint. The analysis shows that 16% Chinese claimed that they would “wait and see” in contrast to only 9% Malays and 5% Indians. Data thus imply that Malaysians vary in their choices of strategies. As stated by Hilton and Earnest (2010) and Reid and Vogel (2006), the effectiveness of coping strategies could be determined by many factors such as personal, cultural and social as well as socio-economic conditions (Paul and Routray, 2010).

5.4 Silence in Close Relationships

Although not every culture observes the practice that the closer the relationship, the more people talk, it is a given that those who are close in their relationships would want to share more stories or information with each another. The Japanese, for example, use more non-verbal gestures to communicate within close relationships (Saville-Troike, 1985) and North Americans prefer to fill in “air-time” (Lehtonen & Saravaaja, 1985). The communication style of Malaysians in close relationships is an intriguing topic. Figure 6 shows the results on this topic.

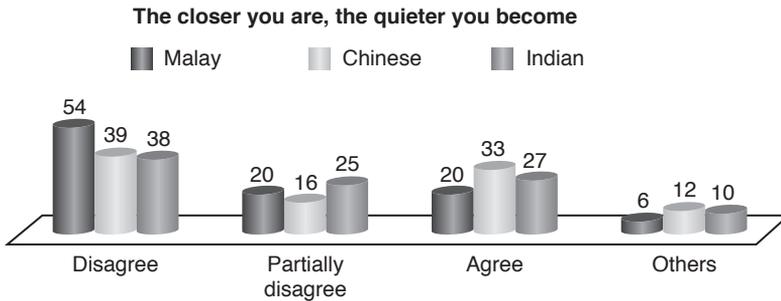


Figure 6. Responses for the statement, “The closer you are, the quieter you become”

A significant difference ($\chi^2(6) = 18.5, p < 0.005$) was found among the three ethnic groups in relation to the statement, “the closer you are, the quieter you become”. About a third or 33% Chinese agreed with the statement, 16% partially agreed and 39% disagreed. In comparison, 27% Indians agreed with the statement, 25% partially agreed and 38% disagreed whilst 20% Malays agreed with the statement, 20% partially agreed, and 54% disagreed with the statement.

In this context, it seems that more Chinese think that “when you know someone very well, lesser (spoken) words are required” and this may be substantiated by the reason “because you understand each other” (Kim, 1999; Cheng and Tardy, 2009). This finding is interpreted as having the ability to think that “meanings can be sensed from the communication process” (Cheng and Tardy, 2009). In responding to this particular context, the Malays opted for the talkative mode (spoken words) when their relationship

with others becomes closer. Findings on the Indians do not show an obvious variation but statistics indicate that spoken words were preferred as a means of conveying messages to others.

6. CONCLUSION

The findings presented in this paper provide some pertinent answers which could help disclose the type of topics and situations that can influence multiethnic Malaysians to observe silence or use spoken words. Our situations were based on hypothetical contexts and our analyses were drawn from the responses provided. We did not focus on the non-verbal aspects. Our findings indicate that most Malaysians appear to opt for silence when emotionally depressed and when faced with “money” issues. This finding suggests that “money issue” is something many Malaysians find difficult to talk about as it involves face-saving. If respondents were unable to say the right thing during a discussion, a “good relationship” could be jeopardized. Hence, to preserve that relationship, care has to be applied and in the context of our study, silence became the preferred choice of communication among a majority of the Malaysians. This characteristic was highlighted in Zafar, Asif and Qureshi’s (2002) study when their Pakistani respondents were found to avoid discussing family issues such as spending money, happenings in society or the number of children to have because of their cultural background. The findings of our study also reveal that spoken words may be a useful tool of communication in difficult situations such as when experiencing problems at work or in studies, and when suspecting one’s partner or spouse of infidelity. However, the choice of using silence or spoken words may be dependent on a few factors such as the cultural norm of the ethnic groups concerned, the closeness of their relationship with others and the situations arising from their interactions.

From the findings presented, we can conclude that in the Malaysian context, spoken words were needed by the Malays and the Indians who apply them to indicate close relationship, find solutions when having problems at work or in studies and in critical moments of suspected infidelity. Of the three ethnic groups, it appears that spoken words were most used by the Indians as a tool of communication whilst silence was more prevalent among the Chinese who probably used it as a veil to inhibit personal emotions and as a sign of close relationship. This finding is in tandem with the Japanese notion of silence which is used as a marker of close relationships – “the closer they are, the quieter they become” (Wong, 2010). The Chinese respondents exhibited this preference more than the other two ethnic groups. This unusual nature of the Malaysian Chinese can be attributed to their easterner characteristic (Kim, 1999) where mutual understanding could be gained through their ability to sense meanings rather than verbalize them. We hope to verify this claim in our future work based on interviews.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to thank the University of Malaya for the extended funding (RG041/09SBS) that enabled us to design our study and administer our questionnaire on the respondents and thus develop our data.

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