Communicating Disagreements among Malaysians: Verbal or Non-verbal?

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Abstract

Although Malaysia is a multiethnic society, not many studies have been conducted to examine the cultural differences of its three dominant ethnic groups. This study examines how Malay, Chinese and Indian Malaysians respond to disagreements. Three domains in which disagreements take place were identified: family (parents, siblings, spouses/partners), friendship (friends), and workplace (bosses). A questionnaire was used to obtain data from 655 Malaysian respondents from the three main ethnic communities. SPSS was used to obtain quantitative results. The findings indicate that although Malaysians express themselves verbally in these three domains there are variations among the three ethnic groups. The findings will benefit researchers working on cross-cultural norms.

Key words: Malaysians, disagreements, family, friendship, workplace, words, silence.

1. Introduction

People behave differently due to cultural differences. Some come from the collectivist culture and others from the individualist culture. The former emphasizes family and group goals while

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the latter concentrates on personal accomplishments. Most North Americans and Western Europeans are from the individualistic culture while Asians like Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, Singaporeans and Malaysians, for the large part, fall into the collectivistic culture. Collectivists conform to the norms of the society they come from. Family interests, group goals and common good are more important than the rights of the individual. John Rawls (cited in Velasquez et al. 1992) defines common good as specific conditions which people follow for the sake of everyone's benefit and advantage. In other words, collectivists are others-oriented (Wong 2010), behaving in ways that fall in line with the needs of a society. This is seen as a step towards maintaining harmony and good relationship with others since group goals are all important. Asma and Gallagher (1994) state that harmony and maintaining good relationship is crucial in business communications in Malaysia.

Communication can be both verbal and non-verbal. Verbal communication involves the use of spoken words while non-verbal communication encompasses body movements and facial expressions including silence. The concept of silence is addressed in both the collectivist and individualist cultures. The Japanese regard silence as a token of respect, agreement and harmony and in contrast, North Americans and the British may find silence awkward.

When people talk, disagreements may occur when there is a difference in opinions, or when values are disputed. During such times, it is difficult to know how people will react since individuals are influenced by their respective cultural roots (Gudykunst et al. 1997). In general, there are several ways for participants to respond to disagreements: use words to express how they feel or think, use physical means or body movements to convey their message, remain silent or have a combination of all or some of these.

2. Aim

The objective of this study is to determine Malaysians' preferred mode of communication when they have disagreements with others including parents, siblings, spouses/partners, friends and bosses. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

2.1 What are the preferred response patterns of Malaysians when having disagreements with their parents, siblings, spouses/partners, friends, colleagues and bosses?

2.2 In what ways are the three ethnic groups similar to or different from each other in their responses?

3. Methodology

This paper is a part of a larger study (PJPUMRG 041/09SBS) which examines the use of silence . A questionnaire adapted from Wong's (2005) thesis was developed for the purpose of this study. Focus is given to disagreements in three domains: family, friendship and workplace. Malaysian respondents were randomly picked based on accessibility but the majority of the respondents are undergraduates and staff from public universities in the Klang Valley, in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Male and female respondents were categorised according to academic qualifications, profession, ethnic group, age and location. Of the total number of questionnaires administered,

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only 661 questionnaires were retrieved of which 6 with zero values were discarded. SPSS was then used to analyse the data. Table 1 provides the breakdown of the total number of respondents.

Table 1: Breakdown of respondents involved according to ethnicity

Ethnicity	Male	Female	Total
Malays	83	145	228 (34.8%)
Chinese	96	230	326 (49.8%)
Indians	20	81	101(15.4%)
Total	**199 (30.4%)**	**456 (69.4%)**	**655 (6 missing value)**

4. Spoken words and silence

One of the basic needs of mankind is the desire for love and the need for a sense of belonging (Maslow 1954) hence family, friendship and intimacy are important. One way of establishing a sense of belonging is through support groups built as a result of communication with others. Communication can be accomplished either verbally or non-verbally. Mehrabian's (1971) study indicates that 55% of our message is conveyed non-verbally via body movements and facial expressions while 38% of our message is delivered through paralinguistic means. Only 7% of our message is delivered through spoken words. Although Mehrabian's study specifically looks at feelings and attitudes, nonetheless, his statistics have been used widely by various authors of communication including Pease (1984), Giardina (2002) and Lammers and Barbour (2009).

Silence serves many purposes in communication and has various roles and functions. Silence reflects quietude, noiselessness, stillness, peace and tranquility but at the same time silence may also represent awkwardness, contempt, hostility, and insincerity (see Dunn n.d.). Silence thus carries many connotations, depending on who the speakers are and in what contexts the silence is being performed. In the context of this study, silence is defined as stillness that exists within a communication process. It may be a complete stop in talking, a short pause before continuing the talk, a momentary halt due to forgetfulness, a long pause due to a deep concentration in thoughts or a complete withdrawal from participating in a talk.

From the socio-cultural perspective, silence is an absence of speech and constitutes a part of communication which is as important as speech (Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985; Jaworski 1993, 1997; Bilmes 1994). Silence can be described as ''an absence of something that we expect to hear on a given occasion… but remains unsaid'' (Jaworski 2000, p. 113). In addition, silence can be regarded as a result of the gap in time which is required for cognitive processing and this silence varies across different speech communities (Nakane 2007).

In a communication exchange, silence means a person is either showing a restrained attitude or is refraining from saying what he/she wants to say in the presence of others according to the context, venue or degree of relationship with the interlocutors concerned (Wong 2010).

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Nonetheless, keeping such a reserved attitude varies from culture to culture and may depend on one's historical background, personal experiences and individual perceptions.

4.1 The Japanese and British

In a questionnaire survey conducted on 136 respondents made up of 54 Japanese and 82 British in England, Wong (2005) asks her respondents in what situation would they allow or avoid open disagreements. The two groups of respondents claim that they might have some reservations with direct open disagreements in the public domain. While the British respondents indicated a significantly higher tendency for open disagreements in informal situations such as family gatherings or at parties, the Japanese respondents showed more hesitations in articulating their opinions when among friends.

Wong (2005) in discussing close relationships finds the stronger the relationship between her respondents and other people, the more open and direct the respondents were. She finds that both the British and Japanese respondents allowed direct and open disagreements to occur more than usual if those involved were family members or spouses/partners. However, Wong's (2005) study indicates that the silence observed by younger generation of Japanese was negative.

4.2 Disagreements

Disagreements cannot be avoided in human interactions. To disagree is to fail to agree on a particular issue or to have a different opinion. A disagreement refers to an instance where two parties do not see eye to eye over certain issues being discussed. There are differences in dealing with disagreements. One group of people might vehemently disagree while another may be silent but yet harbor an intense anger until they resort to physical violence. In that regard, it can be said that there are amicable as well as aggressive ways of dealing with disagreements. Not much has been written about disagreements in the family, friendship and workplace domain and fewer studies discuss how people deal with disagreements, especially in the Malaysian context. The general understanding of disagreements in the western context is that "people agree to disagree" and this statement seems to imply that this is healthy for relationships. Studies which show how people respond to disagreements in the Asian context are limited but it is probably because Asians are more reticent about disagreeing openly. Nonetheless, globalisation and exposure to various cultures and values have created changes. Bond and Hwang (1986) have shown how Chinese immigrants to the United States of America after a period of time alter their behavioural patterns.

A disagreement may be seen as a conflict because it is "an interactive state manifested in disagreement, differences or incompatibility within or between individuals or groups" (Rahim 1985, p. 81). Schneer and Chanin (1987) define conflict more broadly as a disagreement which occurs between and among individuals. Conflicts involve some aspects of "face" which has been explained by Holmes (1995) who says that disagreements generally involve face-threatening acts (FTA) which can create problems for politeness because one's reaction is dependent on how one is made to feel. In the theory of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987), politeness is linked to the concept of face (Goffman 1955) and disagreement done openly may result in one party

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"losing face". Waldron and Applegate (1994, p. 4) explain that speakers may want to preserve their own face or the face of their addressees during disagreements.

Gudykunst et al. (1997) cited in Faisal I. and Narimah I. (2007) mention that individuals bring into the world different communication styles because each style is the result of the individuals' norms, rules and values of culture. Locher (2004, p. 93) indicates that disagreements tend to involve power display as they involve some degree of conflict and a difference in interest. How respondents deal with conflicts may be due to whom they are dealing with, i.e. whether or not they are subordinates, superiors or peers (Kozan, 1989).

4.3 The Malaysian culture

Malaysia was ranked by Hofstede (1984) as the 26th most collectivistic society with many of its traditional values such as showing deference to authority, respect for older people, preserving harmony and avoiding conflicts being maintained. Recent studies have shown that Malaysians are generally indirect. Kennedy's study on Malay leadership, for example, indicates that leaders who "forego direct communication in favour of face-saving approaches" (Kennedy 2002, p. 20) are preferred. Malaysia is a high context culture where approval from members of a community is important for the well being of an individual. This is because one's local standing in society depends very much on acceptance by the community.

The demography of Malaysia is 65% Malays, 26% Chinese, 8% Indians and 1% others (The Star, July 24, 2008). The history of the Malays dates back many centuries but the history of Malaysian Malays is often traced to the development of the Malaccan sultanate in the 1400s. From that era until now, it can be said that the history of the Malays began with a class-ridden society (Syed H. A. 2008) with the *sultans* in power and the *rakyat* or common people being respectful of them. The *rakyat's* language to the *sultans* indicated respect. This behavior has been described as indicating refined discourse norms. Malays are generally indirect in their communication styles and this has been reinforced by many studies (Asmah H. O. 1992, 1993; Jamaliah M. A. 1995; David and Kuang 1999, 2005; Thilagavathi 2003; Suraiya M. A. 2006). Malays avoid being upfront, therefore, indirectness helps to mitigate various aspects of the face threatening acts (FTA) described by Brown and Levinson (1987) and Holmes (1995). The Malays are generally reticent, hesitant or non-committal with their comments and answers when asked, and they prefer to go "around the bush" or say things in a "beat about manner" (Asmah H. O. 1995) so as to avoid being direct. Professional Malay women were indirect in the way they talk (Kuang and Jawakhir 2010), Malay respondents brush-off compliments paid to them either by degrading themselves or by negating the compliments (Thilagavathi 2003) and Malay memo writers convey their intentions indirectly (David and Kuang, 2005).

The Chinese are the second biggest ethnic group in Malaysia and many live in the urban areas of the country. They are prone to business opportunities and are business minded (Ann 2008). Malaysian Chinese are the descendants of migrants some of whom still maintain the migrant values of their forefathers and seek money-making opportunities and demonstrate efficiency, reticence and diligence (Ling 1995; Ann 2008). They can be described as those who do not waste time and who emphasise on education. The Chinese are direct in their discourse norms (David

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and Kuang 1999; Kuang and David 2009). Kuang (2009) shows evidence that Chinese participants declined offers directly while Phaveena (2010) provides evidence of Chinese students rejecting a request openly and directly. Thus, it would not be surprising to note that the Chinese are often perceived as being direct, upfront and straightforward. Some Chinese have also acquired the indirectness of the Malays over the years (see David and Kuang 2005) and this is probably due to acculturation (Tan, 2004).

The Malaysian Indians, as the smallest of the community have not been researched as widely as the other ethnic groups. From the few studies conducted, the Indian community could be on the continuum of being direct and indirect (Jamaliah M. A. 1995; Suraiya M. A. 2006). These two extremes of the continuum may however, depend on certain factors such as location, origin, educational level, profession and socio-economic level. Malaysian Indians have some similar traits with the Malays (Jamaliah M. A. 1995; Suraiya M. A. 2006). The two studies which focused on Indian students found them to be generally indirect and polite. However, David and Kuang (2005) have some evidence to suggest that the higher they move up on the professional scale, the more direct they tend to be.

The identity of a typical Malaysian rests on his/her ethnic and cultural background and depends on family and community. The personal self is derived from family and societal values. In other words, most Malaysians conform to the needs and codes of behavior imposed by society (see Hofstede 1984; Asma and Galagher 1994). Nonetheless, lifestyles in all places around the world have evolved as a result of change in technology, education, exposure and many other factors. Due to this it is possible that Malaysians of Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnicity have also shifted away from their general behavior pattern (Lailawati 2005) of being reticent and reserved and have become more outspoken. In this study, we determine if this is the case by focusing on the preferred and dispreferred responses of Malaysians.

5. Analysis of data

The findings will be categorized into two sections: a) disagreements with family members that is between self and parents, siblings, spouses/partners and b) disagreements between respondent and close friends, colleagues and bosses. All the results are displayed in percentages. Responses to the survey questions encompass Likert's four (4) values: always express, sometimes express, seldom express, never express and no answer. "Always express" and "sometimes express" suggest that they verbalise their disagreement while "seldom express" and "almost never express" could indicate some reliance on silence. "No answer" refers to no indication from the respondents.

5.1 Section A: Disagreement with family members

Family members include parents, siblings, and spouses/partners. It is hypothesized that when respondents experience disagreements with their parents who are on a higher hierarchy, they may be less verbal out of respect. On the other hand when they experience disagreements with their peers e.g.siblings and partners, they may tend to be more verbal.
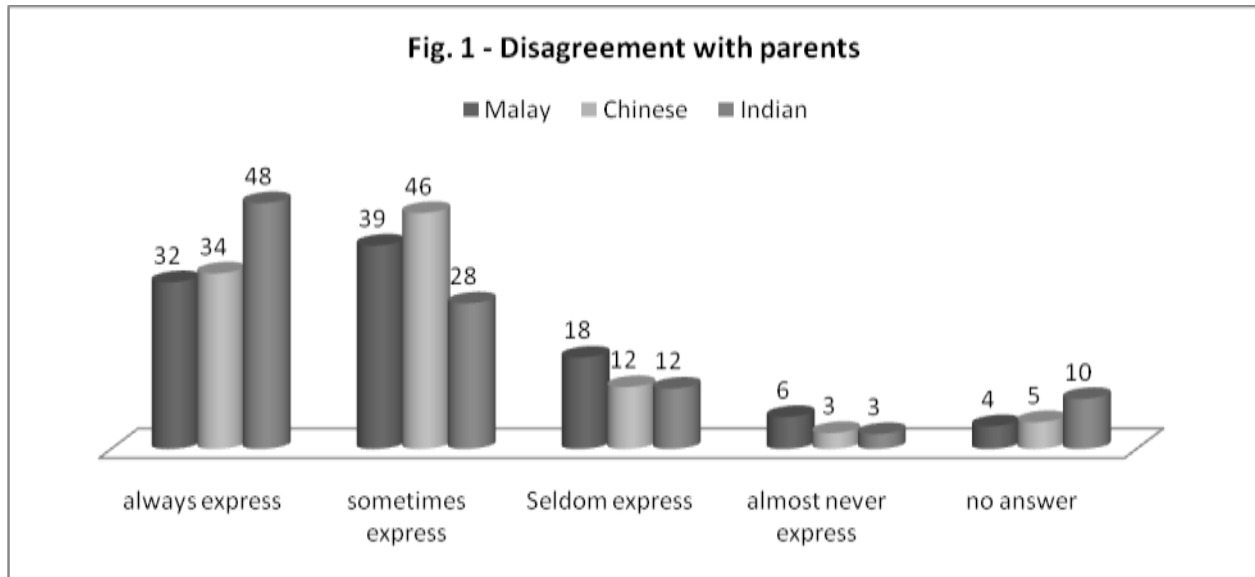
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5.1.1 Disagreement with parents

Figure 1 illustrates the responses of the three ethnic groups when expressing their disagreements with parents. A significant difference is detected among the three ethnic groups ($X^2(8) = 22.0$, $p < 0.005$).

Fig. 1 - Disagreement with parents

■Malay ■Chinese ■Indian

always express: Malay 32, Chinese 34, Indian 48
sometimes express: Malay 39, Chinese 46, Indian 28
Seldom express: Malay 18, Chinese 12, Indian 12
almost never express: Malay 6, Chinese 3, Indian 3
no answer: Malay 4, Chinese 5, Indian 10

Figure 1: Disagreement with parents

Figure 1 indicates that about half or 48% of our Indian respondents say that they "always express" their opinions when they have disagreements with their parents. About a quarter or 28% of them say that they "sometimes express" themselves. The total sum of both categories (48% + 28%) suggests that Indians tend to be vocal even when having disagreements with parents. Only 12% say that they "seldom express" themselves with 3% claiming that they "almost never express" themselves, i.e. nearing silence.

The Chinese were second in line with 34% claiming that they "always express" themselves. 46% say that they "sometimes express" their disagreements with their parents. Only 12% say that they "seldom express" themselves with 3% saying they "almost never express" themselves, i.e. nearing silence.

The Malays were expected to be the least vocal when having disagreements with parents because of their indirect nature and their cultural values which place premium on respect for elders. Malays who rated this preference was 6% compared to only 3% Indians and 3% Chinese.

It appears that Indian respondents are significantly the most vocal because almost half (48%) always express themselves. This figure implies that many Indians are not reticent. Malaysian norms do not expect children to rebut parents (see Kuang 2007). In comparison to their Indian counterparts, fewer Chinese (34%) and Malays (32%) say that they "always express" their disagreements with their parents. The findings thus indicate that Indians were the most vocal

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with parents and Malay and Chinese were in the middle range and among the three, the most reticent of the three are the Malays.

5.1.2 Disagreement with siblings

Besides having disagreements with parents, Malaysians also experience disagreements with their siblings. Figure 2 illustrates the findings.
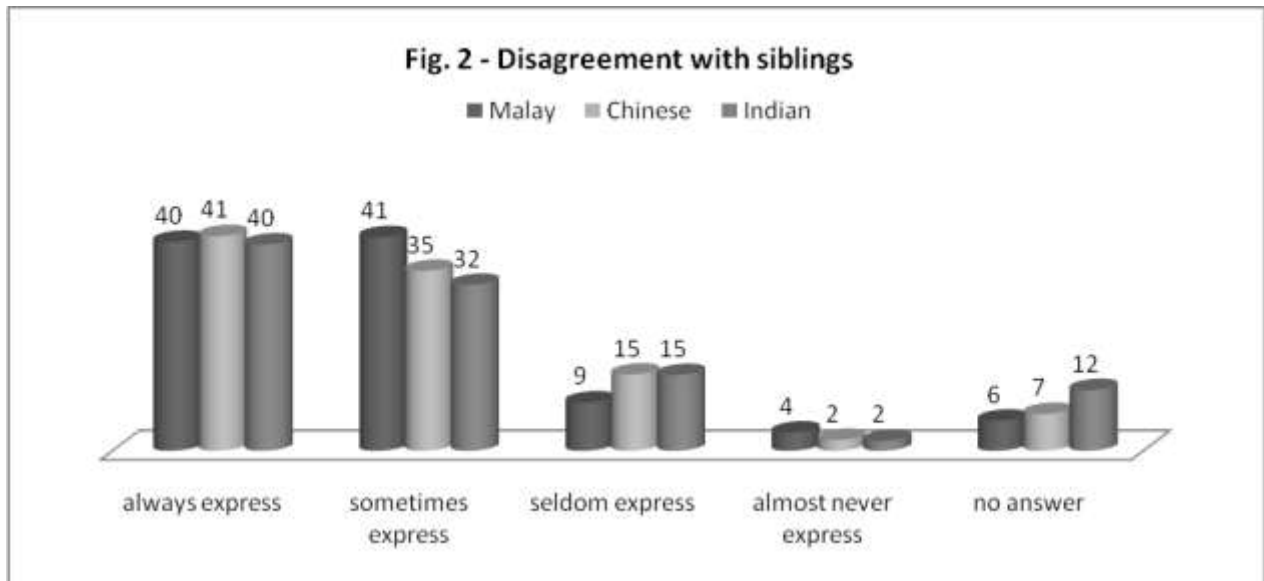
Figure 2: Disagreement with siblings

It seems that Malaysians would express themselves verbally when having disagreements with siblings. 41% of the Chinese "always express", 35% "sometimes express" and only 15% "seldom express" with 2% saying they "almost never express" themselves. The sum total of the first two categories (41% + 35%) suggests that more than three quarters (76%) of the Chinese respondents verbalise their disagreements with siblings.

40% of Malaysian Malays claim they "always express" themselves, 41% "sometimes express" with only 9% opting for the occasional exchange of words with siblings. 4% may resort to silence.

Likewise, 40% of Indians say they "always express", 32% say they "sometimes express" and only 15% may resort to using some words while 2% resort to silence.

This shows that disagreements with siblings create a different picture. More Malays that is approximately 81% (40% always express + 41% sometimes express) followed by 76% Chinese (41% always express + 35% sometimes express) and 72% Indians (40% always express + 32% sometimes express) tend to be expressive with siblings. Malay respondents (81%) were most vocal while Indian respondents (72%) were least vocal and Chinese respondents (76%) ranged in

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between. What may be perceived as non-verbal mode or silence is clearly the least preferred mode of communication. Only 4% Malays, 2% Chinese and 2% Indians indicated this preference.

5.1.3 Disagreement with spouses/partners

Figure 3 illustrates the results of disagreements between spouses/partners. Our results indicate that Malaysians prefer to vocalise when in disagreements with spouses/partners.
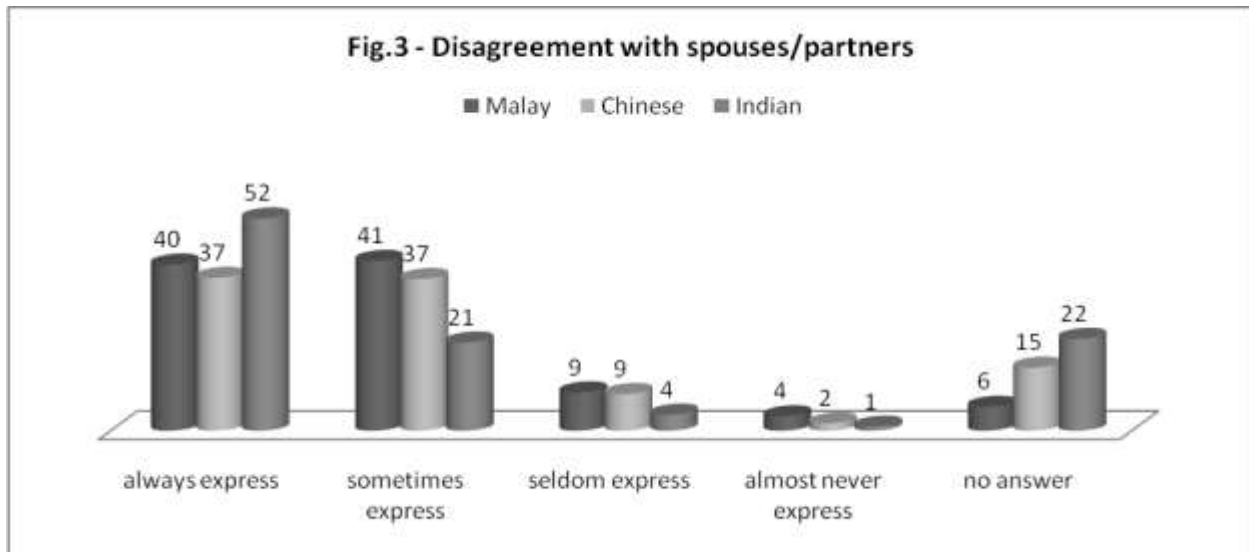
Figure 3: Disagreement with spouses/partners

A significant difference of $X^2(8) = 30.1$, $p < 0.000$ is found across the groups when disagreements with spouses/partners are analysed. Figure 3 indicates that Indians were relatively more vocal than the other two ethnic groups. 52% of Indian respondents claim that they "always express" disagreements with their spouses/partners, 21% "sometimes express" and only 4% claim they "seldom express" with 1% saying that they "almost never express". This means that the sum total of the first and second category (52% + 21%) suggests that 73% of Indians tend to vocalize disagreements with their spouses/partners.

Malays also prefer words when they have disagreements with their spouses/partners. 40% say they "always express", 41% say they "sometimes express" and 9% say they "seldom express" with only 4% saying that they "almost never express". From the sum total of the first two categories (40% + 41%) it could be said that 81% of Malaysian Malays tend to vocalise their disagreements with spouses/partners and only 4% are likely to remain silent.

Statistics show that 37% of Chinese respondents say they "always express", 37% say they "sometimes express" and the sum total of these two figures (37% + 37%) suggests that 74% of the Chinese could be described as preferring to vocalize their disagreements with their spouses/partners. Only 9% claim that they "seldom express" with 2% possibly resorting to silence.

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It seems clear then that Malaysians prefer to use the verbal means of vocalising their disagreements with spouses/partners. The Malay respondents appeared to be the most vocal of the three groups of respondents with 81% preferring words to express themselves when having disagreements with their spouses/partners. Between the Chinese and Indians, 74% and 73% respectively say they would vocalize their disagreements. Only 4% Malays, 2% Chinese and 1% Indians would prefer to be silent (seldom express).

5.2 Section B: Disagreements with outsiders

It is hypothesized that when respondents have disagreements with friends or colleagues they would be more verbally expressive as compared to when they faced a similar situation with their employers or bosses.

5.2.1 Disagreement with close friends

Figure 4 illustrates the responses of the informants..
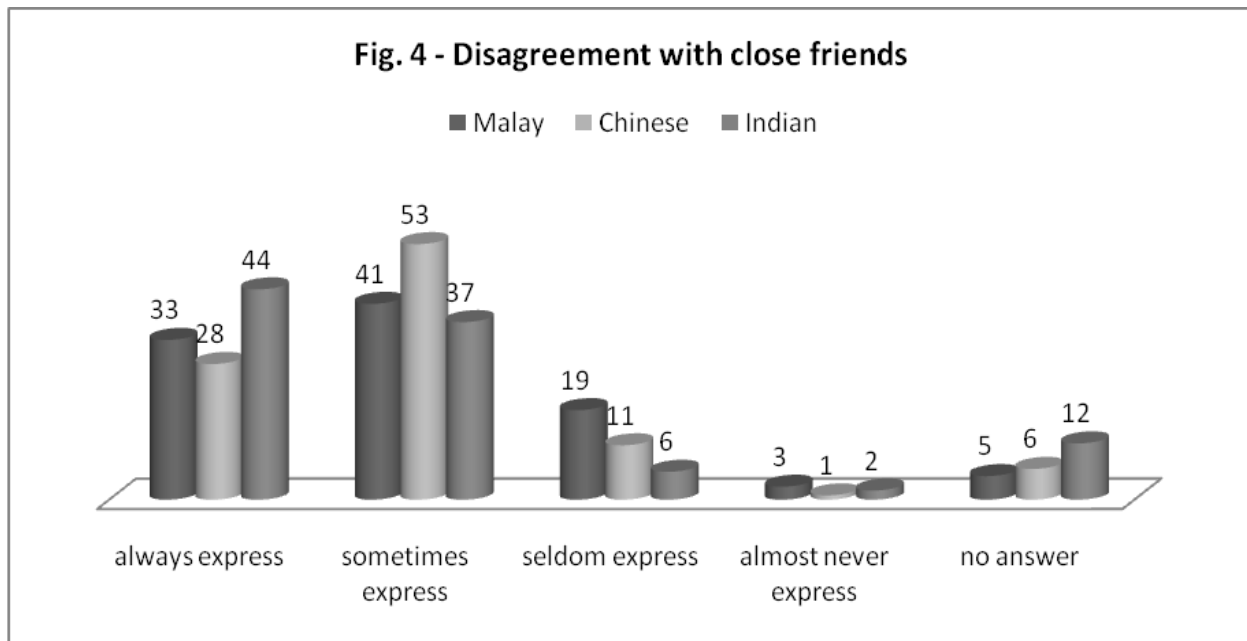
Figure 4: Disagreement with close friends

The responses from all three ethnic groups are fairly similar. For instance, 44% Indians "always express", 37% "sometimes express" themselves when having disagreements with close friends. Only 6% "seldom express" and 2% say they "almost never express". The sum total of the first two categories (44% + 37%) indicates that 81% of Malaysian Indians prefer verbalizing their disagreement while 2% are likely to resort to silence.

Although 28% Chinese may claim that "always express" more than half, 53% claim to "sometimes express" themselves. 11% say they "seldom express" and 1% say that they "almost never express" themselves. From the sum total of the first two categories (28% + 53%), it would

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seem that 81% of Chinese prefer using words when having disagreements with close friends with only 1 % resorting to silence.

33 % Malays claim that they "always express" themselves and 41% claim they "sometimes express" their disagreement with close friends. However, 19% claim they "seldom express" and only 3% say they "almost never express" themselves. The sum total of the first two categories (33% + 41%) suggests that 74% of Malays prefer to use words. Only 3% are likely to resort to silence.

In other words, verbal expressions or words are the preferred mode of communication. More Malays were likely to resort to silence with 3% saying they "almost never express". In contrast, the Chinese were the least likely to resort to silence with only 1% of them choosing the "almost never express" route. The Indians ranged in between with 2% of them likely to choose this path. There is a significant difference ($X^2(12)$ = 33.2, p< 0.001) across the ethnic groups. Figure 4a illustrates the reasons.
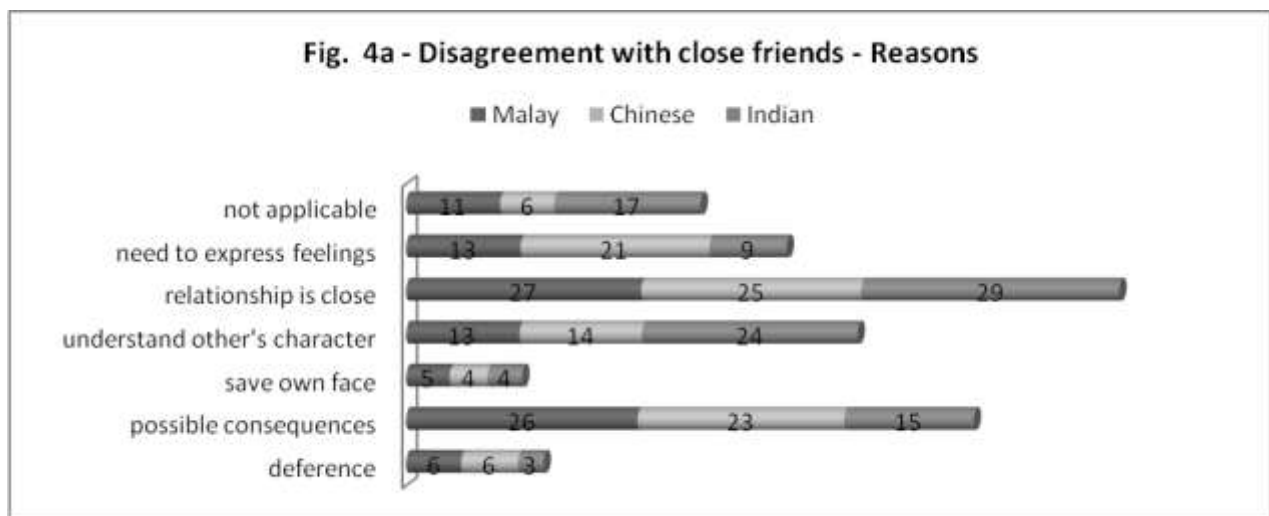

Figure 4a: Disagreement with close friends - Reasons

Six possible reasons were adapted from Wong's (2005) study. 27% of the Malays emphasised "close relationship", 26% stated "possible consequences", 13% mentioned the "need to express" and 13% said they "need to understand the other's character". 25% of the Chinese focused on "close relationship", 23% on "possible consequences", and 21% on the "need to express". 29% of the Indians emphasised "close relationship", 24% focused on "understand other's character" and 15% focused on "possible consequences".

In this component, "close relationship" indicates that the closer they are, the more vocal they tend to be and "possible consequences" imply that they try to predict the consequences of their actions before they express themselves. "Understanding other's character" refers to how much they know the other party's personal background while the "need to express" suggests that they feel a need to say what they think. All three ethnic groups focus highly on "close relationships", "possible consequences" and the "need to understand the character of others".

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5.2.2 Disagreement with colleagues:

At the workplace, colleagues become good friends whom we confide in and consult from time to time. Figure 5 provides statistics of what Malaysians prefer to do when they have disagreements with colleagues.
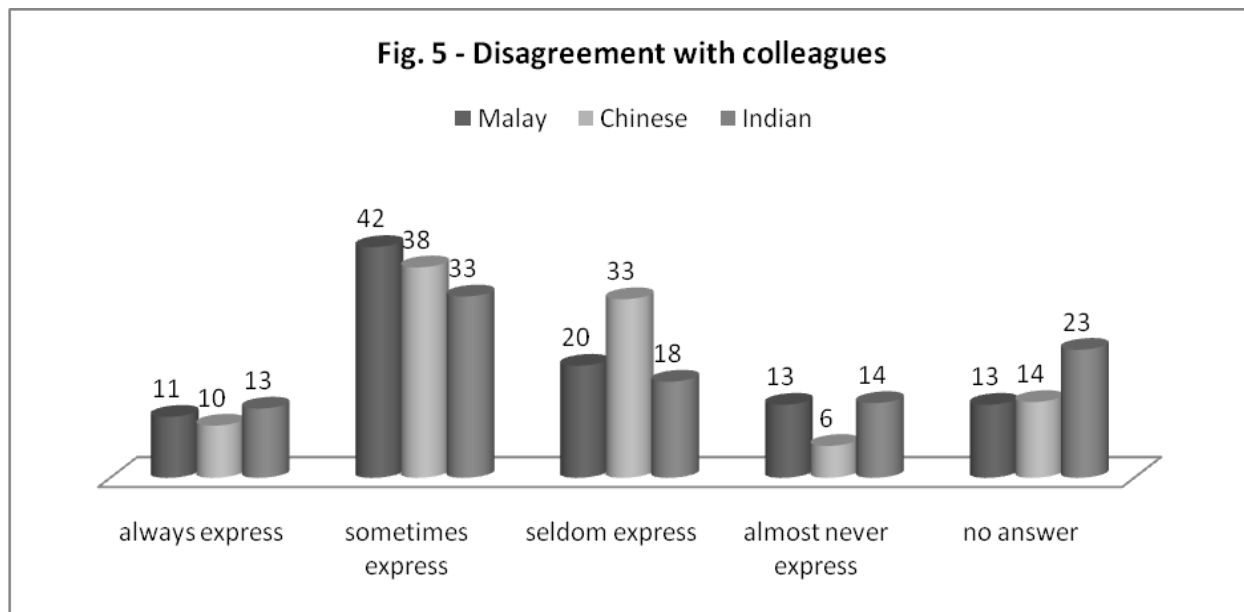
Figure 5: Disagreement with colleagues

It appears that in lateral relationships where both parties may be of the same rank, the frequency in "sometimes express" and "seldom express" were higher than "always express". There is a slight but significant difference across the ethnic groups ($X^2(8) = 28.4$, $p < 0.000$) in the responses of the respondents when they face disagreements with colleagues.

11% of the Malays say they "always express" themselves when they have disagreements with colleagues and 42% say they "sometimes express". It appears that 20% claim they "seldom express" and 13% say they "almost never express". The total of the first two categories (11% + 42%) suggests that 53% prefer to vocalize their disagreement with colleagues while only 13% might resort to silence.

10% of the Chinese claim that they "always express" themselves when they have disagreements with colleagues with 38% saying they "sometimes express". In the same category, 33% claim they "seldom express" and only 6% indicate they "almost never express". The total of the first two categories (10% + 38%) suggests that 48% prefer words while only 6% might resort to silence.

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13% of the Indians claim that they "always express" their disagreements with colleagues and 33% say that they "sometimes express". 18% claim that they "seldom express" and 14% say that they "almost never express". The total of the first two categories (13% + 33%) suggests that 46% of Indians prefer words while only 14% are likely to resort to silence.

In this category, the Malays were comparatively the most vocal of the three ethnic groups when they have disagreements with their colleagues. This is quite surprising as Malays are normally less confrontational as literature (see Asmah H. O. 1992; Asrul Z. 2003; Asma A. and Pedersen 2003) suggests. Among all the three ethnic groups, the Indians tended to be the most taciturn with their colleagues when facing disagreements as 14% prefer silence. The Chinese were the least taciturn with only 6% likely to choose silence.

5.3 Disagreement with bosses

Figure 6 illustrates the communication mode of Malaysians when they have disagreements with their bosses.
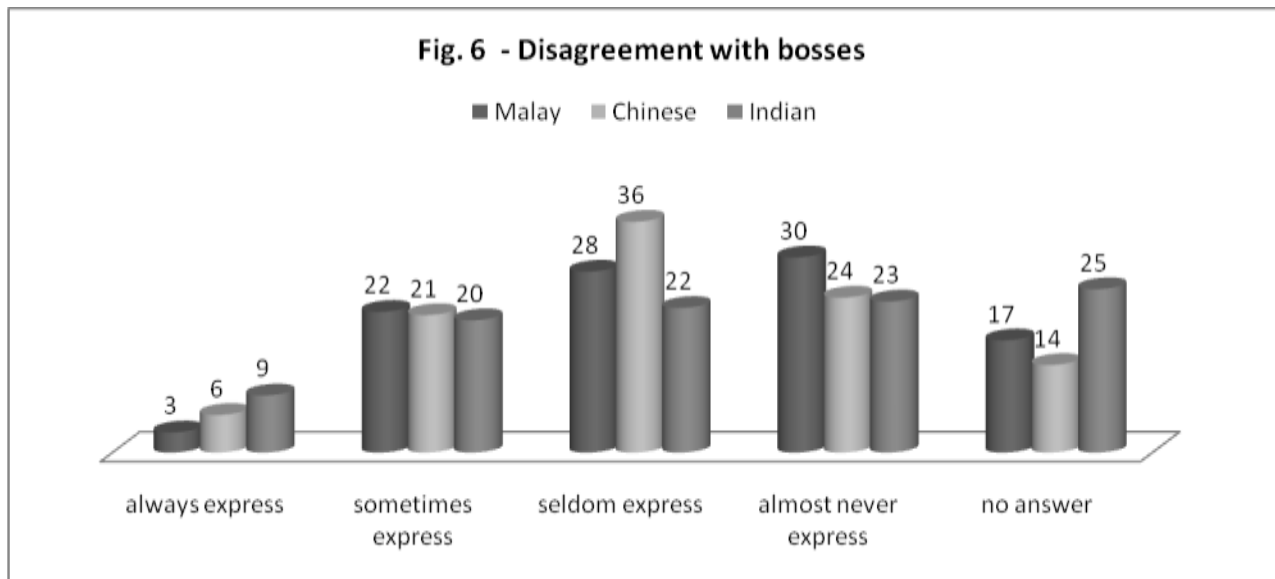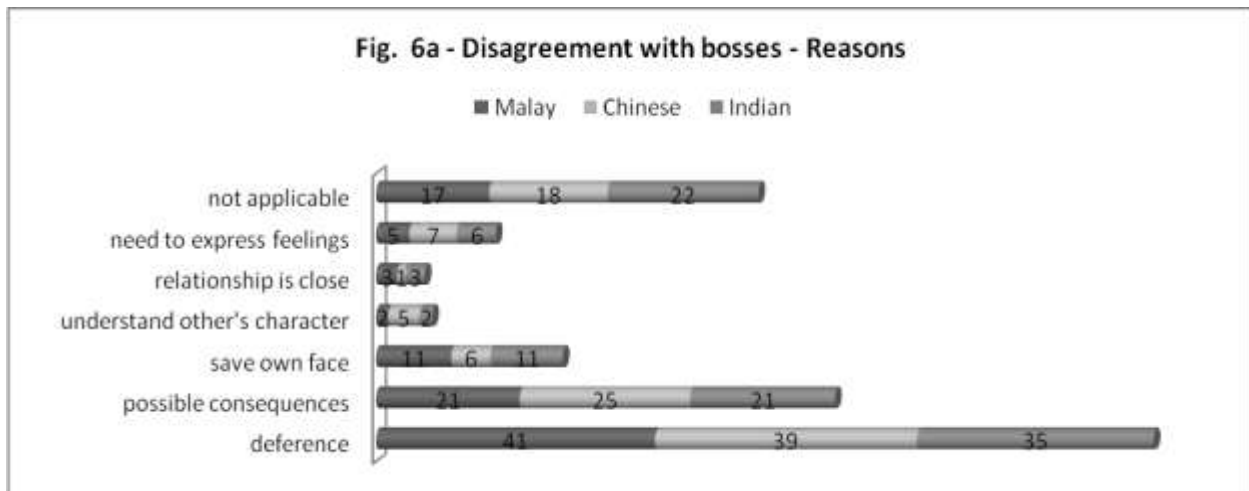

Figure 6: Disagreement with bosses

It seems clear that in this context, there is less preference for verbal exchanges. Data show that 9% of the Indian respondents "always express" themselves and 20% claim that they "sometimes express" themselves, 22% claim that they "seldom express" and 23% claim that they "almost never express" themselves. The sum total of the first two categories (9% + 20%) suggests that 29% of Indians may prefer words but 23% might opt for silence.

6% of the Chinese respondents claim to "always express" themselves with 21% claiming to "sometimes express" themselves, 36% claim they "seldom express" and 24 % claim they "almost never express" themselves. The sum total of the first two categories (6% + 21%) suggests that 27% of Chinese prefer words but 24% might opt for silence.

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3% of the Malay respondents claim to "always express" themselves with 22% claiming that they "sometimes express" themselves, 28% claim they "seldom express" and 30% claim they "almost never express" themselves. The sum total of the first two categories (3% + 22%) suggests that 25% of Malays prefer words but 30% might opt for silence.

In searching for the Malaysian's preferred mode of communication, it seems that the choices may depend on who the Malaysians are dealing with. In their disagreements with their bosses, it appears that both verbal and non-verbal means are employed. Statistics indicate that 29% of Indians prefer words when faced with a potential source of disagreement with their superiors i.e. their employers. A comparison of the three ethnic groups indicate that Indians were the most vocal as statistics show that only 23% opted for silence while Malays were the most likely to observe silence and also the least confrontational with 30% opting for silence. The Chinese, on the other hand, ranged in between with 24% of them opting for silence.

When it comes to giving possible reasons for expressing their disagreements with their bosses, a significant difference ($X^2(12) = 42.8$, p< 0.000) among the three ethnic groups was found. Figure 6a illustrates the findings with six reasons adapted from Wong's (2005) study.

Figure 6a: Disagreement with bosses - Reasons

Of the six reasons provided, it appears that "deference" and thinking of "possible consequences" were two main factors which could cause Malaysians to resort to silence, regardless of ethnicity. Malay and Indian respondents focused on the need "to save own face" while Chinese respondents focused on the "need to express feelings" as their reasons.

41% of Malays chose "deference", 21% chose "possible consequences" and 11% chose "save own face". In comparison, 9% of Chinese chose "deference", 25% chose "possible consequences" and 7% chose "need to express feelings". Statistics also indicate that 35% of Indians chose "deference", 21% chose "possible consequences" and 11% chose "save own face". The findings thus indicate that all the three ethnic groups place a high emphasis on "deference" for their employers. This is followed by the next reason, "possible consequences". A small

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percentage focused on "save own face" and "need to express feelings". Figure 6a thus illustrates that Malay respondents could be seen as the most respectful among the three groups as the highest percentage in citing "deference" as the reason for remaining silent came from them.

6. Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show the different response patterns of Malaysians when they experience disagreements in three domains: a) family, b) friendship and c) workplace.

Malaysian respondents who are from the three dominant groups in the peninsular follow two paths of expression when they experience disagreements in the three domains stated. Malaysians may choose to use words to express themselves verbally or they may resort to using fewer words or go silent. Malaysians rarely resort to complete silence but there is indication that this option of silence may be preferred in certain situations. In the context of this study, it appears that Malaysian respondents would prefer verbalising themselves when in disagreements with family members and outsiders. Even when disagreements involved parents, it appears that all the three ethnic groups do not hesitate to use words. This may suggest that in general, the values of most Malaysians have evolved and this include the generally non-confrontational Malays. Nonetheless, being verbal does not necessarily mean that they are rude or disrespectful.

On the whole findings seem to suggest that Malaysians tended to be vocal with siblings, spouses/partners, close friends and colleagues but they were more inclined towards being taciturn with their bosses. From the results shown, it could be said that using silence as a tool of communication when in disagreements is not a preferred choice of communication for Malaysians. It appears that the preference to verbally express themselves to the concerned parties could indicate that Malaysian respondents tend to be direct. It is possible that this is their avenue to seek a redress or a solution to deal with what appears to be the cause of the disagreements. It is also possible that being vocal (verbal) enables the Malaysian respondents to seek a compromise where both parties might be able to meet halfway. This option of expressing themselves verbally to each other is probably better as it allows them to understand each other when they express themselves instead of the mode of silence where meanings are difficult to be understood. Although silence may be an important aspect of communication, its meanings can be ambiguous and multifaceted (see Bruneau 1973; Jenkins 2000; Jensen 1973; Sifanou 1997). Due to this, interpreting silence may require more time and possibly more patience, both of which aggrieved parties in disagreements may not possess. Consequently, it is concluded that despite the preference of handling disagreements verbally, it can also be seen that when the other party is their boss, silence may become an option. In this context, silence is applied to show deference.

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