Understanding Malaysian Malays Communication Characteristics in Reducing Psychological Impact on Flood Victims

CHE SU MUSTAFFA
NAJIB AHMAD MARZUKI
MOHD SUKERI KHALID
MOHD FOAD SAKDAN
Universiti Utara Malaysia

SAPORA SIPON
Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Culture has a very important function in the daily lives of Malaysians. In spite of its importance, less attention has been paid to identifying Malaysian ethnic values from their own perspective. Most of previous studies have focused on a universal approach to identify the values of Malaysians. By addressing the gap, this paper hopes to identify a more comprehensive list of values related to Malaysian communication characteristics in flood disaster management context. Over the past decade, flood has become Malaysia's most common natural disaster. Sustainable flood mitigation and relief management is important as it reflects the ruling government for dealing with crisis. The psychological support on victims' wellbeing, during and after the disaster is substantial from the humanitarian perspective. Hence, this paper discusses the communication practices from indigenous perspective to help reduce the psychological impact of flooding. This paper presents qualitative data, based on in-depth interviews with 13 flood victims. The findings indicate that local values are important characteristics of effective communication surplus to the aids that bound to reduce the psychological impact of a disaster. This research intends to contribute in terms of the identification of the local code of conduct in communication in an attempt to obtain insights about flood disaster management. Besides, the outcome of the study could help to develop policies for aid agencies, information resources and community organisations in relation to the competency in communication to advocate the betterment and well-being of flood disaster victims.

Keywords: *Communication, disaster management, well-being, local values, psychological impact*.

INTRODUCTION

Culture has a fundamental function in the daily lives of Malaysians.   Despite its importance, less attention has been paid to identifying the Malaysian ethnic values from their own perspective (Fontaine & Richardson, 2003). Most of previous studies have merely focused on a universal approach to identify these values of Malaysians (Terpstra-Tong, Terpstra & Tee, 2014; Fontaine & Richardson, 2005; Lim, 2001) which have made these aspects are important to be studied. By addressing the gap, this paper hopes to identify a more comprehensive list of traditional Malay values associated with Malaysian communication characteristics in a disaster management context. The sections of the paper are organised as follows: first, the paper discusses the ideas about communication and psychological well-being; secondly, it elaborates the methodology employed; thirdly, it interprets the findings; next, it presents some conclusions that highlight the academic and managerial implications; and finally, it mentions the limitations and areas for future research.

The researches on Malay values are in majority pertaining to conceptual aspect and are based on individuals' personal experiences, rather than comprehensive quantitative and qualitative analyses (Idris, 2008). Almost all of these studies have focused on the values of Malays in organisations (Zawawi, 2008; Storz, 1999), management (Terpstra-Tong, Terpstra & Tee, 2014) and communication area (Awang et al., 2012) by borrowing the approaches and theories used in the west. These contribute to a dearth of literature that exists in the context of the Malay cultural values. Therefore, the study aims at identifying the communication practices from indigenous perspective of the Malays as suggested by Adhikarya (2012) on the importance of indigenous theorisation or traditional values.

In Malaysia, flooding, like any other disasters, affect people in terms of some aspects like its contribution to psychological and emotional stress. Victims experience chronic stress with increased symptoms of psychological changes, fear, demoralisations, emotional or anxiety disorder as well as depression (Manson, Andrews & Upton, 2010). Many researches have exposed that stress related to psychology and emotion is normal after experiencing natural disasters including floods. A research conducted by Badiah et al. (2010) on the flood victims in Johor, Malaysia had revealed that the victims experienced three major things, namely; stress, anxiety and depression during the disaster. The findings showed that 13% of the respondents had mild depression, 7% experienced moderate depression and only 3% of them went through severe depression. It was also revealed that 22% of the respondents were mildly anxious, 19% of them were moderately anxious, and only 5% were severely anxious. As for the stress scores, 15% of the respondents were discovered to have suffered mild stress, 11% were moderately stressed, while only a very small number of them, 2% were severely stressed. These findings are consistent with Steffany's (2010) who stated that the results from structural equation modelling had revealed a positive and significant direct association between threat or harm and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms in flood victims.

The social psychological aspect of disasters requires further research due to the fact that many previous studies had simply focused on individual psychopathological responses compared to other aspects. Psychological trauma occurs when events such as natural disasters challenge these responses and take on a person beyond their tolerance. Occasionally, the events are so painful and unbearable that the people question and adjust their fundamental views towards the events. These events can cause damage not only because of their immediate harm but also due to the persistent need for people to re-evaluate themselves and the events.

COMMUNICATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

Among the various aspects of disaster management, communication is one of the most critical requirements. The word "communicate" implies conveying thoughts, ideas, warnings, instructions, orders, commands, knowledge and information. In the context of disaster management, safe communication is vital during a wide range of actions, from the significant phase of "preparedness" to the imparting knowledge and information (mass education and public awareness), warning of impending threat of a disaster, calling various resources and informing the authorities and conducting disaster management in general. Unfortunately, most of communication studies are dominated by Western ideas, whereas traditional, cultural values should be revitalised (Aikenhead, 2000). This leads to the importance of recognising the value of the cultural traditions practiced by societies in a

different context such as disaster management. Hall (1959) suggested that such study will meaningfully result in the overall comprehension of the complexity of culture and the importance of human communication. The significance of these issues gives rise to this area being vital for a continuous examination by intrigued scholars and practitioners.

Psychological wellbeing or mental health can possibly be characterised based on a few elements used to determine an individual's positive state. These elements include personal growth, self-acceptance, purpose of living, autonomous behaviour, positive relationship with people, and mastery of environment (Shojaee & French, 2014). Hishinuma et al (2012) has argued that poor psychological wellbeing is related inversely to ineffective communication. Literatures have shown that good communication could increase satisfaction and trust. On the other hand, failure in communication could lead to stress, and poor outcomes.

The review has indicated that flooding affects people of all ages, thus, exacerbates mental health problems or provokes anxiety and highlights the significance of secondary stressors in extending the psychosocial effects of flooding. The distressing ordeals that the most people experience momentarily during a post-disaster period can be difficult to differentiate from the symptoms of ordinary mental disorders. This obviously emphasises the need to reduce the impact of primary and secondary stressors on people being affected by flooding and identify the narrative approaches to distinguish distress from mental disorder. Much of the literature has merely focused on post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosable depression and anxiety disorder; and the substance abused is under-represented in the published data. Most of the victims' psychosocial needs are fulfilled through close relationships with families, friends and the community; while smaller proportions of these people are likely to require specialised mental healthcare from professionals.

Communication has a fundamental function in nourishing the mental health of disaster victims. A lot of victims will deal with relief workers who provide them with some assistance. Thus, the competency in communication of the responsive staff is vital to help reduce the trauma suffered by the victims. The elements related to communication competencies are the values that are applied during the communication. These values should be in harmony with the culture of the people. Based on the above discussion, this paper has the main objective to identify the traditional values in communication as practiced by the relief workers from the perspective of the flood victims which could help in reducing their trauma thus increasing their well-being.

The fostering of western theories and practices by the practitioners and managers in developing countries fails to evaluate the appropriateness of the newly learned approaches in their own cultural settings, and therefore, uncritically adopting the techniques. This may occur for several reasons. First, practitioners in developing countries are often criticised for not practising the 'right' ways, hence are advised to adopt western ways. Second, as noted by Blunt and Jones (1997), practitioners in developing countries are more interested in replicating, rather than resisting western styles of management. Third, organisations in the developing countries are often advised, and assumed that they must adopt Western thoughts and practices to achieve economic prosperity (Kanungo & Jaeger, 1990).

A small number of studies integrating the contextualisation of culture have been conducted in Malaysia (Abdul Rashid & Ho, 2003; Hassan Abu Bakar, Mustaffa, & Mohamad, 2009; Lim, 2001). The majority of the studies have focused mostly on the emphasis on one

single nation and have not seriously investigated the other populations of the country as contributors to the communication in organisations. This research also anticipates to address the issue of the lack of attention to sub-cultures in Malaysian organisational communication, especially the majority of the population of Malaysia, the Malays, in the search for what constitutes communication characteristics during a disaster. This study contributes to the growing body of research on organisational communication via specific sub-cultures in a multi-racial society. Exploring sub-cultural communication in organisations using an in-depth qualitative analysis is theoretically and practically fundamental because it provides a more inclusive and realistic picture of the interpersonal communication within organisations (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2006). This approach is also helpful because it provides insights with respect to how communication which belongs to specific cultural communication is being practised in a disaster management context.

The field of communication has much to offer in understanding the portrayal of a specific cultural character. Communication offers several distinctive contributions. These contributions are oriented towards understanding, explaining and perhaps predicting specific interaction attributes that are constructed among members of a specific culture, the interactions and cultural formations in the interactions are rooted in the natural process, hereby the meaningfulness of the interaction attributes are created in the workplace (Fontaine & Richardson, 2003) and in this context the focus is on the interaction at the disaster relief centre.

As for the present research, the researchers ground their projects in these distinctive aspects of communication by selecting several specific communication characteristics from the in-depth interviews to examine how the flood victims perceive the communication aspects practiced by the relief workers. The approach employed in the present study is slightly different from that of the previous researches, as the researchers aim to explore the nature and characteristics of communication based on Malay culture. McCroskey and Richmond (1996) believe in the importance and relevance of sub-cultural context in the workplace. They have argued that all behaviours take place between individuals in organisations within the context of one or more systems that are cultural based. Given this discussion, it therefore seems appropriate to understand a specific culture in theorizing organisational communication during a disaster.

In this paper, the researchers examine the Malays' interactions which provide unique theoretical insights and pragmatic applications to disaster communication in Malaysia contexts. Specifically, their goal is to expand people's understanding on specific communication characteristics of Malaysians during a disaster in relation the psychological well-being of disaster victims.

THE MALAY ETHNIC COMMUNICATION CHARACTERISTICS

Malaysia is a multi-cultural country and each ethnic group may not share the same cultural values due to its distinct separate identities and cultures. The work of cross-cultural studies has provided us some communication characteristics of Malaysian Malays in workplaces. For example, based on Hofstede and GLOBE studies in predominantly Malay ethic organisations, the Malays are inspired by their connection to groups and families as well as individual human beings. They also retain their unique culture with a distinguishing combination of Asian and Western cultural values; in which the Malays' social structure is shaped by the Islamic principles and the British colonial managerial philosophies and

cultural values. These shared values denote that the Malays provide better responses to productivity increment, for example, their productivity grows in number if they see the ensued advantages not only to the organisation but also to their family members, the community as well as the nation at large (Asma 1992). Malaysian Malays also desire a sense of harmony in their surroundings. Because of this inclination, open and opposing viewpoints are seldom offered. When it comes to communication, the Malays are very indirect in expressing their opinions. When responding to difficult questions, the Malays tend to make a point, elaborate on it, and then go off on a tangent. According to Asma (1992), such communicative behaviour of the Malays exists because of the tendency of the Malays to preserve harmony and trust. Asma (2001) has affirmed that the attempts to bring in western management principles and techniques in Malaysia may not go down well with the Malaysian workforce as they were brought up with unique cultural values which may have an influence on behaviour in workplaces. Furthermore, the practice of one culture is evident when he or she communicates (Lynn-Sze, Yusof & Ahmad, 2014).

The Malays are also uncomfortable with verbal encounters with individuals of different hierarchical positions. For example, subordinates are reluctant to assert their views too strongly with their superiors, usually offering proposals rather than arguments. A subordinate is not likely to contradict his superior's point of view because subordinates who argue with their supervisors would be considered as contributing to the factor of low credit of worthiness from their supervisors. For that reason, a subordinate may pretend to understand the instructions given by his superior in order not to be perceived as ignorant. Because of this, employees are often hesitant to ask for assistance when they lack understanding of a certain thing. In addition, subordinates are often reluctant to bring forward a problem to their supervisors' attention. However, the employees' relationship with their supervisors often determines the subordinates' motivation in the workplace. The Malays generally believe that if they have good supervisors, they will work for them with devotion. Thus, the Malays are often satisfied with their work when they are able to develop and maintain harmonious relationships with both their supervisors and colleagues (Asma, 1996).

As mentioned before, Malaysia is a multi-racial country, thus there were few studies which have been conducted on Malaysian organisations in comparison with other ethnicities. For example, Rashid (1978 cited in Che Su, 2004) has revealed that the Malays preferred leaders who stimulate people to work in harmony, whereas the Malaysian Chinese preferred trustworthy superiors. Saracheck, Hamid, and Zakaria (1984) have discovered that the Chinese accepted western industrialised values more than the Malays. However, these researchers consistently have found that the Malays were more highly influenced by western practices compared to the Chinese. This proved a contradiction to the results, thus suggests that the Malays do respond to work values and do not mimic the Malay traditional values. However, the Chinese's responses were consistent with their traditional value system. Asma (2001) has identified some underlying values which characterise the Malay workforce in general, as non-assertive, face preserve nature, loyalty, respect for authorities, collectivism ("we" orientation), cooperative, harmony and non-aggressive, trustworthy, skilful in relationship building and respect for differences. These values diverge with that of westerners, which emphasise on assertiveness, independence, aggressiveness and competitiveness. Hassan and Che Su (2013) have revealed that in

Malaysian organisations, collective bond and mutual respect are salient work relationships.

From the above discussions, it could be claimed that in the organisations in Malaysia, the Malays exhibit the following widespread practices: (a) being less expressive with their leaders; (b) having low self-confidence in judgmentally assessing peers and subordinates; (c) being negative in providing responses is considered as having awkward and difficult behaviour; and (d) being polite in the interaction is the norm, particularly with criticisms. Therefore, the following research is advanced with respect to addressing the following question: What are the specific characteristics of communication that are deep-rooted among Malaysian Malays during a disaster that lead to psychological well-being of flood victims?

METHODOLOGY

This study applied qualitative method. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with 13 respondents. The respondents of the study were victims of the major flood that occurred in 2014. The flood that took place in the year 2014 has been described the worst flood which has caused much destruction to the victims. The researchers intended to find out the communication factors that have led to the well-being of the victims. Therefore, the most suitable respondents who can provide information are the flood victims who were evacuated to the disaster relief centres during the flood. Based on these criteria the appropriate sampling technique chosen in this study is a purposive sampling. However, in terms of deciding the total number of suitable samples for the study, the researchers also took into consideration the issue of data saturation. Hence, the researchers decided that at a certain point of indication, no more data needed to be collected. This is in line with Yin (2003) who has claimed that saturation may not be easily reached where participants are many and not from the same setup.

The researcher has used in-depth interviews since Creswell (2012) has highlighted that in-depth interview is a suitable approach for the examination of questions in terms of values and policy oriented. Interview protocol containing eight questions was formed. Among the questions asked were: what are your perceptions towards the communication style practiced by the relief workers at the disaster relief centres and how does this relate to your psychological well-being?

A combination of note-taking and audio-recording was used to record data from the interviews. Every interview was audio-recorded then copied to ensure the accuracy of the statements from the participants. Interviews were then coded using a comparative interpretive approach (Lofland & Lofland, 2006) in order to identify the major and specific themes from the interviews. The thematic data analysis technique was used to analyse interview data. Researchers followed Creswell (2012) guidelines to carry out data analysis stages. During the analysis, themes emerged in relation to the underlying communication factors that influenced the well-being of the flood victims. After that, the researchers continued by coding the answer from the informants. Coding is the process of gathering and transferring texts and phrases that represents the theme. For instance, the study's coding has generated five (5) themes that captured the research questions.

RESULTS

This research intended to understand the specific communication characteristics among the relief workers, the discussions provided new insights into organisational communication during a disaster as perceived by the flood victims. The themes were situated around the characteristics of the communication as practiced by the relief workers. Each theme revealed some unique characteristics of the flood victims' conceptualisations and articulations of specific values and meanings as well as the desirability of the communication during the disaster.

(i) Respect/Politeness

Among the most important features of communication with the relief workers which the participants of this study expressed were friendly; casual; polite; respectful; and the interactions indicated an impression that the victims were part of the big family in the organisation. Verbal communication was widely used and they addressed each other with respect. For instance, if one person was older than the other person, the younger person would call him/her "brother" or "sister" ("Abang" for gentlemen and "Kak" for ladies in Malay). This was indicated by the respondent below:

> They (relief workers) respected the seniors and old citizens, spoke softly especially to the female workers.....They showed sympathy to the victims which this caused the victims to feel comfortable and safe (Respondent 7).

Other respondents claimed that:

> They also always prioritised the elderly or people with disabilities in providing assistance. In terms of providing services to the victims, they first gave priority to the elderly. This shows that there was respect for those who were older and also women. This attitude made the victims and me feel appreciated... (Respondent 3).

> I felt very worried when I came here ... looking at the situation here that was uncomfortable. But the workers showed a good attitude and respected us that this made me and my family not worried. Although the situation was not so comfortable, we understood. This could be done in collaboration with the relief workers (Respondents 7).

Other respondents added:

> The way the workers talked was very important as well as their tone of voice. They did not use abusive words that might cause the victims to feel offended and axious. In anxiety, speaking in a courteous and friendly way made us not to feel bored at the relief centre (Respondent 5).

> When they spoke in a calm tone, I felt my concern diminished. In addition, the flood caused me not to be able to save anything. There was only one mat and a few clothes. That's all I could bring together when moving here (Respondent 6).

The results of this study showed that respect for victims was an important value in the critical atmosphere. Workers' communication and behaviour were reflected on their respect for and appreciation of the victims. This caused the victims to feel calm and comfortable in terms of psychology after the disaster. The dimensions of respect identified in this study were attitude (respect to the elders) and speaking competency (language and tone of voice).

(ii) Sincere Communication

Another important dimension identified in this study is sincerity in the delivering of the services and during the interactions. The importance of this element was described by the respondents as the followings:

> They were sincere in helping us. They themselves were wet with the rain water but they never failed to serve us. They provided food for us... they also sacrificed much to help us (Respondent 3).

> I saw the employees in a state of fatigue because they had to come early and sometimes had to spend the night at our transfer centre with discomfort and inadequate facilities. I saw they were trying to solve the problems of the disaster victims well... (Respondent 5).

One of the reasons why the element of sincerity plays an important role is because the Malay community emphasises on the value of family in their culture. This culture is adopted in their daily work as described by the following respondents:

> The JKM channelled the aid with sincerity without expecting any praise from their superior or us as the flood victims because they considered us as their family members… (Respondent 2).

> After a few days settling here, our relationship with the workers here was getting better. I think we were all like a big family who had to face big problems. Each of us tried to help each other…this could help calm the atmosphere here (Respondent 3)

> The atmosphere here was of a lot of problems, many people were with their little children ... but with the cooperation and family spirit, the problems here had been successfully reduced (Respondent 9).

(iii) Maintaining Dignity

The communication style of Malaysians is influenced by the cultural value of saving face. For Malaysians, a person's dignity is very important as as degrading someone in a

conversation by embarrassing them is considered to be very impolite. Therefore, Malaysians tend to convey messages, especially ones with negative connotations indirectly and speak politely in order to avoid being disrespectful to people that could occur in the conversation. For that reason, we hardly hear the word, "No" from the Malaysians as when they express their disagreement, they prefer to utter it in a polite way by using pleasant words.

Maintaining dignity is all about avoiding embarrassment not only to oneself but also to others, especially if they are senior citizens, the elderly, or people of different nationalities. One's dignity is also an important element discovered in this study. The importance of maintaining dignity was described by the respondents as the followings:

> The relief workers did not only provide assistance but they were also concerned about maintaining the face of the victims. For example, in imperfect and irreversible circumstances, undesirable things like shame and so forth...there was also negative behaviour regarding the food distribution but the workers were not unprofessional... they just tried to explain the situation to calm the victims down (Respondent 5).

> There was once a disaster victim who was unhappy with the situation here and raised his voice to the relief worker but I saw the relief worker tried to ease his situation. Maybe the disaster victim was still traumatised ... maybe he needed help (Respondent 7).

> Maybe they (the relief workers) understood that the disaster victims were in anxious state, so they tried to communicate calmly, not angrily and they took care of the disaster victims and also did face-saving…. we also tried to give cooperation to them… (Respondent 3).

(iv) Caring Attitude
During a disaster, being caring is an important attitude. To be caring is a display of concern about the condition of a victim. This is illustrated by some respondents through the following interview excepts:

> Our service providers were very kind, always asked us whether we had taken our meals or not. They also often asked about our family to make our relationship better (Respondent 8).

> The JKM people were always talking to us, asking questions about the problems we faced (Respondents 4).

> When the relief workers asked about our conditions including visiting leaders, we felt they were concerned to share the problems we faced ... this could help to balance the mental burden we had that we were concerned about our loss and how to start a new life (Respondent 1).

(v) Professionalism

Professionalism is also a reflection of traditional values. Professionalism in this context refers to the exhibition of courtesy, conscientious and business-like manners of the relief workers. This can be seen in the views of the respondents as discussed below:

> The relief workers worked late into the night...probably because of the disastrous situation. We felt sorry to see them forced to work until late... (Respondent 7).

Another respondent added:

> It's easy to ask for their help regardless of time (Respondent 2).

The dimension of professionalism is also illustrated by the tone of voice of aid givers during communication:

> They talked softly, so we were not afraid and were not reluctant to ask for help (Respondent 9).

In addition, the listening skills shown by the relief workers can create empathy among the victims as mentioned by the following respondent:

> If I gave an opinion on something to the RELA members, they would listen and accept my opinion, they were not arrogant (Respondent 6).

Another respondent added:

> They were willing to hear us (Respondent 8).

Another dimension of professionalism is patience. This dimension of patience was expressed by a respondent as follows:

> Even though the atmosphere in the evacuation centre was quite foggy and noisy, the relief workers like JKM, fire fighters and JPAM were not emotional and were always patient with our attitude (Respondent 5).

> Overall, the findings had identified several important dimensions that were practiced by the relief workers based on the perceptions of the victims interviewed.

DISCUSSIONS

The context of Malay communication characteristics in the organisation (disaster relief centre) provides a unique premise to investigate both culture and interaction in relation to disaster management. Respect, sincerity, caring attitude, professionalism, and dignity maintenance are some unique qualities from which the Malay culture and interaction are conceptualised by the flood victims as indicators of good communication practices by the relief agency workers. Furthermore, based on these qualities we can probably realise the influences that such culture has on the psychological condition of the flood victims.

Moreover, the communication characteristics have illustrated that the designing and building of communication and psychological well-being are interweaved between culture and communication.

The results showed that the relief workers were friendly; casual discussions were practised; and they were part of the big family in the organisations (relief centres). The communication between the victims and aid workers were treated as personal and they addressed one another with respect. The findings also suggested that the relief workers exhibited firm characters but in friendly manners. They avoided giving instructions but they preferred seeking for help and asking for ideas from the victims. Instructions were given indirectly as a gesture of showing respect to the ones instructed. Group and interactive discussions were the preferred form of communication. In this area of communication, the victims needed to exhibit their respect and acknowledgement towards the relief workers despite their social and educational status, as well as organisational hierarchy. Therefore, the conclusion based on the observation of the interaction in the context of disaster management among Malaysian Malays connotes the idea that the Malays communication reflects a sense of togetherness in the society. The communication characteristics reveal the close ties between the victims and the relief workers and there was great tolerance for a variety of opinions. As indicated by one of the participants, the victims were considered as part of the big family. Malays are concerned about the feelings of others and as a result, they are not likely to oppose the ideas of disagreements. One's dignity can be tarnished by openly criticising; insulting or putting someone in the spotlight; doing something that welcomes shame to the group; challenging individuals in authority, especially if this is committed in public; showing anger; refusing requests; not keeping promises; or disagreeing with someone publicly. Conversely, one's dignity is possible to be retained by being constantly calm and courteous; discussing mistakes or transgressions privately; discussing problems without blaming anyone; using non-verbal communication to say 'no' and allowing the other person to step out of the situation in pride.

Consequently, these communication characteristics will help the victims and aid workers to maintain unity within a group. The characteristics of Malay communication in presenting this research are in line with the descriptions of Malaysian society in general by Hofstede and GLOBE. In Asma's (2005) study has also found that the Malays have scored the highest in the level of importance of relationship, religious and high context.

The findings of this research also revealed that the attitude of caring for disaster victims is important. According to Dayang Aizza et al. (2017), building credibility with victims and other stakeholders is a major concern. Therefore, the organisation should acknowledge and display some concern for stakeholders' needs (especially the victims who are directly affected by the crisis). The compassion which was emphasised in adapting Information has suggested that the organisation credibility in turn to facilitate the development of a favourable organisational reputation. In this research context, both the attitudes of being concerned or caring about the disaster victims' problem shown by the relief workers will improve the reputation of the organisations represented by them.

The subsumed and integrated discussions as revealed in the interviews proved larger contexts of the Malay culture which did not only provide lenses of differentiation, but also continually existed to influence and shape meaningful interactions between the victims and the relief workers. More specifically, the present research's approach to examining the discussions about the communication during disaster revealed a few aspects of the Malays'

communication characteristics across five categories. The discussions illustrate the meaning of respect with regard to communication characteristics. Accordingly, the meaning of respect indicates that the Malays emphasise relationships in communication. Clearly, this aspect of the characteristics of the Malays' interaction reinforces Abdul Rashid's and Ho's (2003) review on the study on the multi-racial community of Malaysia. It dictates that the Malaysians prefer to work as a group. For example, the Malaysian employees regardless of their ethnic backgrounds are favoured exercising coordination to integrate their work tasks, and they use team workflows to handle tasking uncertainty (Pearson & Chong, 1997). There is also a high tendency for teamwork goals as compared to individual goals (Chan & Pearson, 2002) and they tend to be more idealistic with respect to group performances (Karande, Rao & Singhapakdi, 2002).

The same phenomenon was discovered in the context of this study. This finding also can be related to the idea of shame where the Malays displayed the greatest tendency to do such thing during interactions. The Malays view shame as an ingredient of social conditioning because it educates them to be externally driven by what other people have to say about them (Asma, 2005). Their behaviour is often judged and evaluated by their peers and the elders who are significant in their circle of network. It serves as a tool to prevent them from committing acts that are deemed to be socially unbecoming by the group. The same value is practiced at the relief centres and during the interactions with the relief workers despite being in a very challenging environment.

The cultural values and norms of maintaining one's dignity frequently shape the central reasons why the Malays are slightly uncomfortable with sharing appraisal review deliberations with their subordinates. Even when they do this, the managers prefer to practice interactions with their subordinates. It is not an easy task for Malay managers to provide honest, and specific performance feedback without first establishing a relationship based on trust. This aspect is also observed in the present study. Workers are said to be the ones who are willing to make sacrifices in helping the victims.

The Malays consider fulfilling religious obligations highly important and they believe that there should not be any separation of work matters from their religious teachings. The Malays strongly trust that they should not sacrifice their religious beliefs for the sake of productivity. They practice upholding their religious values and practices at the workplace. This idea is supportive of the emphasis placed by Malay employees with regard to the workplace that their work ethics have to be strongly anchored in their religious beliefs. In terms of coping with a certain situation, religion and spirituality may offer a unique opportunity and how it can operate in the lives of individuals in the context of a broader community following a flood disaster as indicated in this study.

The Malays display their respect for the elders by using elaborate rituals and standardised forms of courtesy that are regulated according to rank, ancestry, and the wealth of the elders. A senior individual or leader in the group is like the father of a family who is infused with prestige and authority over the younger members in the group. The younger members are expected to respect and obey their leaders and also the authorities. They are not expected to question or challenge what the elders say or decide. Malaysians generally practice a unique form of communication where they attach meanings to the elements surrounding the explicit messages. Their communication styles are typically indirect because meaningful information can either reside in the physical context or can be internalised in the person to whom the information is directed. Malaysians also prefer to

honour their past experiences and value the symbols existed in the past to perpetuate the experiences of their forefathers. The old and rich traditions as well as heritage supply the examples to guide future actions of the people. Malaysians also do not separate the individual from the environment under which they function. Furthermore, Malaysians believe that being too open, outspoken, straightforward and direct comes with a perception of being insensitive to the feelings of others (Bakar & Mustaffa, 2008). Relationships could suffer because of this, which can lead to a breakdown in interpersonal communication.

The comprehension of the specific communication culture in organisations offers serious implications on managing communication in disaster management. Based on this study, it clearly implies that communication during a disaster is based on the traditional culture and it affects the overall communication characteristics between victim and relief workers at the relief centres. The findings seem to support the proposition by some communication scholars that culture, communication and the meanings of communication are intertwined (Usunier & Lee, 2005). These features were also discovered in past studies related to Malay communication characteristics.

Ryff (1989) argues that well-being is based on the strength in some key components such as environmental mastery, good relationships, personal growth, autonomy, purpose in life and self-acceptance. So, all of these factors will strengthen or weaken a victim. These factors are combined with the use of effective communication and the results of this study prove that communication based on traditional characteristics helps in improving the psychological well-being of the disaster victims.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The interview method employed in this study can be utilised to identify and describe the communication characteristics in a disaster management context by taking the insights on the aspect of communication in disaster management, specifically about how the Malay victims expressed their views on the communication in the organisation (relief centre). This paper however does not obtain the emotional contributions for the purpose of understanding the meaning of communication during a disaster that is the emotional dimension. Secondly, the current investigation is restricted to only flood as the disaster selected for this study. Therefore, a comparative study between different ethnic groups and natural disasters should be considered by future researchers.

Finally, the findings of this study can perhaps improve the comprehension of the Malays' communication characteristics by identifying the specific form of communication during a disaster. However, in order to continue providing useful knowledge, researchers must continue their efforts to identify the specific form of communication among major ethnic groups in Malaysian organisations. Of course, the results of this study should be interpreted with caution given the inherent limitations of the research design. A research perceived the communication activities within a specific culture as an interdependent complex process that is grounded within the ethic group identity (Selvarajah & Meyer, 2006), and thus, a key limitation of this report is the nature of the data. Clearly, a longitudinal research that tracks communication development with regard to psychological well-being in disaster management context is desired. Similarly, the employment of interview method and the homogenous sample (e.g. Malay disaster victims) warrants a caution. The issue of the extent which identifies communication characteristics reflects the entire variations of communication among the groups studied and it should also be noted

that additional research might illuminate issues related to other aspects that constitute the Malays' communication during a disaster.

Further research is desired on the longitudinal effects of flooding on people's mental health, the effects of successive flooding on the populations, and the effects of flooding on the mental health of children, young people and older people as well as those who respond to the needs of other people in the aftermath of disasters.

BIODATA

Che Su Mustaffa is a professor of Communication at the College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Email: chesu402@uum.edu.my

Najib Ahmad Marzuki is a professor of Psychology at the College of Arts and Sciences, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Email: najib320@uum.edu.my

Mohd Sukeri Khalid is an associate professor at the School of Government and International Studies, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Email: sukeri@uum.edu.my

Mohd Fo'ad Sakdan is now the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Student Affairs and Alumni) of Univesity Malaysia Perlis. Email: *foad@uum.edu.my*

Sapora Sipon is an associate professor at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia. Email: sapora@usim.edu.my

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