

MALAY-CHINESE INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIA: AN
ANALYSIS OF SENSEMAKING IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

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MALAY-CHINESE INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIA: AN
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This dissertation explores everyday communication patterns among ethnic Malays and Chinese in multicultural Malaysia. Specifically, the study examines communication strategies and the concept of sensemaking (Weick, 1969, 1979, 1995) in interethnic interpersonal communication processes. Because interethnic communication requires individuals, as social organisms (Blumer, 1969), to possess intercultural sensitivity (Condon & Yousef, 1975; Orbe, 1995), the notions of ethnicized knowledge and sensemaking in interactions involving different Asian groups merit further examination. In order to engage in this work, researchers must get inside the defining process of the socially diverse actors to further understand their symbolic (inter)actions (Blumer, 1969).

This study demonstrates how ethnic sensemaking is co-constructed and represented through the dynamics of negotiated strategies including tactical ambiguities in interpersonal interethnic relationships. Data for the study were collected through a qualitative interpretive approach which included in-situ observations in a natural setting and in-depth interviews among selected individuals from two ethnic groups, and a study of relevant government documents and media coverage on the subjects. The data were analyzed using a rhetorical framework that focused on sensemaking. The study

demonstrates that an understanding of interethnic communication as a social phenomenon is very critical in programs promoting societal integration in multicultural contexts.

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Preface

Analytical autoethnography, as advocated by Anderson (2006), allows me to delve into what has been a long standing, personal concern with the tendentious ethnic consciousness in the Malaysian society which, intersects with, and at times, inhibits my natural ability to engage in interpersonal communication with others. My late father, to whom this dissertation is dedicated, was always spirited in his desire to see me communicate with anyone who is civil and equally desirous of connecting positively. My own social experience with cross-cultural and interethnic relationships so far, however, is more complicated.

I have come to terms with the gloomy pictures presented in gossip, blogs and even academic writings that contrast sharply with my own experience. This experience has led me to believe that productive interpersonal communication, whether with one's family members or with strangers from other ethnic groups, depends on what is perceived and enacted, as well as on the reactions received from other interlocutors. On the higher plane, despite much ado about civil rights and nation-building based on the multicultural rights, there is an unfortunate oversight of the obvious, that is, an understanding of *how* ethnic individuals communicate with one another. The attainment of these loftier goals depends on a deep understanding and appreciation of the nature of communication as necessary social skills at the individual level in multiethnic societies. Policymakers must, therefore, take interethnic communication seriously and start planning and building from the grass roots level up.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“There is always a connection between individuals and others that reveals selfhood, and in turn, forces an adjustment in the construction of identity” (Ellis, 1999, p. 154).

Background

The symbolic interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1969) posits that the social action of the actor is not only constructed by him/her but affects his/her identity (Ellis, 1999). Stemming from this view, the main purpose of this dissertation is to examine how ethnic perspectives affect everyday interpersonal interactions. Research has shown that, as long as society continues to define social divides in terms of ethnic origin, one’s ethnicity will always be a focal point in any tensions (Brubaker, 2004; Ellis, 1999; Kim, 1994; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Shamsul, 1998c; Simonsen, 2005; Tan, 1982). However, some would argue that ethnicity might not always be at issue in interpersonal encounters (Clement & Giles, 1994; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Such a scenario underscores the varied roles of ethnicity in interethnic communication.

Overall, when an ethnic frame is established, people view conflict and violence not only in ethnic terms but also under the influence of groupism—the consciousness of the community to which one feels a sense of belonging. To understand more about the dynamics of ethnic differences, researchers need to understand the nature of groups (Eriksen, 2002) and go beyond the groupist syndrome, as Brubaker (2004) argued, which is “the tendency to take bounded groups as fundamental units of analysis (and basic

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