MALAY-CHINESE INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIA: AN

ANALYSIS OF SENSEMAKING IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES

A dissertation presented to

the faculty of

the Scripps College of Communication of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Minah Harun

March 2007

This dissertation entitled

MALAY-CHINESE INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIA: AN

ANALYSIS OF SENSEMAKING IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES

by

MINAH HARUN

has been approved for

the School of Communication Studies

and the Scripps College of Communication by

_____

Claudia L. Hale

Professor of Communication Studies

_____

Gregory J. Shepherd

Dean, Scripps College of Communication

Abstract

HARUN, MINAH, Ph.D., March 2007, Communication Studies

MALAY-CHINESE INTERETHNIC COMMUNICATION IN MALAYSIA: AN

ANALYSIS OF SENSEMAKING IN EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES

(370 pp.)

Director of Dissertation: Claudia L. Hale

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.

Approved: _____

Claudia L. Hale

Professor of Communication Studies

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.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation marks the beginning, not the end, of my interethnic and sensemaking pursuit. Without willing individuals, supportive committee members, and committed family members, my research would not have been completed. My heartfelt thanks to my informants for their generous assistance; their time, contributions, and "friendships" will forever be cherished.

Thank you to my doctoral committee members for their encouragement and support. Thank you to Prof. Dr. McKerrow who gave me strong encouragement and helped to sketch the tentative schedule which kept shifting as I progressed through my work. Thank you for being patient. Thank you to Assistant Professor, Dr. Devika Chawla, for her strong support and ideas. Thank you to Prof. Dr. Drew McDaniel for his willingness to serve on my committee. His feedback was always valuable.

A special thank you to my advisor, Prof. Dr. Claudia Hale, who has always been encouraging and my number one supporter since day one; who led me to Weick's "sensemaking," who pointed out the missing "commas," the necessary punctuations, and phrasing—this, she did, all too patiently. Her "there are twenty four hours in a day," and "great to hear from you as always," have been words of encouragement for me in completing my dissertation. Thank you very much for your wonderful guidance.

Last but not least, I thank my two "precious jewels," Hazwan and Aisyah, for their love, patience, and "sensemaking," and my husband, Kadir, for his full-time commitment; for taking the children to the park, for making me countless cups of coffee to help me "stay awake" during the final write-ups, for reading my drafts, and transcripts, and for many, many more. Thank you, honey, for everything.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

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

constituents of the social world)" (p. 2). Similarly, with reference to Malay-Chinese relations in Malaysia, Tan (1982) claimed that "an analysis of ethnic relations only at the group level, as most people have done, is rather misleading" (p.56). These two arguments suggest that we ought to go beyond group analyses in trying to understand individual interaction. Following this, I hope to elucidate that such a perspective is pertinent especially when the focus of attention is on the members of a collectivistic society (Hofstede, 1980, 1997). Malaysia serves as an example of a culture where three major ethnicities—Malays, Chinese and Indians—reside alongside other groups.[1]

Hofstede (1980) revealed that, in a collectivist culture, individual enactments interweave with other factors, for instance, family, society, and religion. The emphasis is more on responsibility to families and society—a somewhat dialectical relationship—that affects, in some ways, individual social behavior whereas, in an individualist culture (e.g., the United States), responsibilities are confined primarily to the person, giving the impression of a much freer social enactment of the self (or even personalities). However, as in any construct which by nature is a generalized notion, Hofstede's ideas have received considerable criticism on several fronts, mostly drawing attention to the situatedness of any culture (e. g., Kagitcibasi, 1994; Schwartz, 1990). As such, the individualist-collectivist notion remains problematic; hence, it continues to be interrogated (see also Lu, 1998).

A case in point: individual social enactments are most likely influenced by a person's upbringing (culture, etc.) which, in turn, influences his or her self presentation.

---

[1] With 24 million people, Malaysia also encompasses many ethnicities, including Iban, Kadazan Dusun, and Bajau (Malaysian Population and Housing Census, 2000).

Public self presentation, as observed by Goffman (1959), is governed by perceptions of self, referent group, and the current situation. Given that ethnicity is about inclusion, as Ellis (1999) noted, a pressing need is to know how researchers should begin to understand individuals and their behavior beyond the group level in the interactional realm (Ellis, 1999).

In the same vein, I argue that inclusion, by definition, has the connotation of being both included and excluded at the same time. Inclusion allows the notion of "we" thinking that pertains to "our people" versus "others" ("us" versus "them"). That is, what is going to be shared will be for the betterment of "our" people. In material terms, this means giving preferential treatment to ethnic kinsmen over others. In that way, intentionally or otherwise, people discriminate in favor of their group members and/or against outsiders. Inclusion can be viewed in terms of sharing social capital such as networking, favorable treatment, emotional and sentimental commonalities, or mutual aid. The Chinese term associated with this group bond is *guanxi,*[2] which is vital in everyday life, and although there is no equivalent term in the Malay[3] language, a closely similar concept is *bangsa kita* (i.e., our people) as Malay Malaysians are normally described.

To appreciate the relationship between communication and ethnic structure (Ellis, 1999) as well as interethnic communication, the term "ethnicity" needs to be critically

---

[2] The term *guanxi* is complex—thus fluid—as it means more than personal connections. According to a Chinese friend (from mainland China), *guanxi* is not necessarily limited to those in the group. But, people in the same group might have very good *guanxi* or relations/connection. The reciprocity is not immediate as *guanxi* usually is maintained and established as a long term relationship. See Chen and Chen (2004) and Tsang (1998) for details.

[3] Malay refers to both a language largely spoken by Malays, that is, *Bahasa Melayu,* and an ethnic group which constitutes the majority in Malaysia, known as *Bangsa Melayu*.

examined (e.g., Brubaker, 2004; Kim, 1994). This is especially pertinent given that social

structures, such as ethnicity, are (co)constructed in the interactional realm (Ellis, 1999;

see also Banton, 1997; Brubaker, 2004). As Brubaker (2004) aptly remarked, "[e]thnicity

is embodied and expressed" in daily encounters (p. 2). Because ethnicity is akin to

cultural differences, which are often considered irritants as Kochman (1981) argued,

these differences tend to lack the necessary attention that is otherwise directed toward

salient points in the interethnic communication process as demonstrated by Black and

White communication conflict styles in the United States (Kochman, 1981, 1986; Ting-

Toomey, 1986).

Kochman's study, along with many other studies that could be cited (e.g., Gao &

Ting-Toomey, 1998, on the problematic areas of communication between Chinese and

North Americans), revealed how African American and White American college

students' communicative acts are guided by their perceptions of others' behaviors in the

communication process. As such, Blacks' intentions are often misconstrued by White

students and professors. Similarly, Whites' intentions are often misconstrued by Black

students and professors. By understanding communicators' intentions in a particular

context through a series of in-situ observations and in-depth interviews, Kochman's work

has underscored useful insights into ethnic (Black and White) differences in interactional

situations.

Significantly, while such a study reveals that cultural factors help shape the

patterns and attitudes of individuals, these cultural factors are often ignored by hearers

and/or observers when talking about interactional behavior (see also Hall, 1959, 1966,

1976/1981). Hall (1976/1981) contended that the legal systems in Japan (a high-context culture with an indirect/circular communication pattern) and the US (a low-context culture with a more direct/linear communication pattern) can provide points of contestation in terms of the distinctions between insiders and outsiders, individuals' expectations of others, and power distribution. In essence, such studies demonstrate the importance of understanding how various communicative acts or strategic communication work(s) in ethnically diverse social interactions (Berger, 1996).

In light of the above findings, research which demonstrates how individuals in a collectivistic society make sense of (each other's) interethnic interactions and negotiate tensions in everyday life can generate awareness of the sense and the presence of the "other" in the interactional realm (Blumer, 1969; Ellis, 1999; hooks, 2001; Mead, 1934). Together, the communicators, the situation, and the environment are important dimensions of interethnic communication (Kim, 1994). Because dialectical perspectives view individual daily tensions, consisting of pull-and-push forces, as normal and necessary for relationship development (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), researchers focusing on interethnic communication should examine the idea of sensemaking. Although this (Western) construct has been the focus of attention in organizational contexts (e.g., Weick, 1995; Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005), we need to devote more attention to mundane situations involving interpersonal communication.

While researchers have provided numerous examples of individual differences in Western versus non-Western contexts (e.g., Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Gudykunst, 2001; Hall, 1995; Hofstede, 1980, 1997; Kim, 1994, 2001), little is known about how the

Asian interactants in this study, namely Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians,

symbolically use strategies in making sense of interactional processes in daily situations.

Given that neither group is homogeneous (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Nagata, 1979;

Reid, 2004; Shamsul, 1998a; Syed Husin, 1984; Tan, 1982, 2000a, 2004), making sense

of individual sensemaking underscores the notion of polyvocality—that is, the

involvement of a multiplicity of ethnic voices in defining a situation.

At the same time, since these members share a common space (i.e., physical

landscape), they have some conceptual similarities (Ellis, 1999). For example, most

Chinese and Malays in Malaysia have shown appreciation for what the government is

doing with respect to environmental conservation programs. Chinese Malaysians in

Kelantan and Terengganu tend to assimilate[4] into Malay culture more than their kinsmen

in other parts of Malaysia (Syed Husin, 1984; C. B. Tan, 1984, 2000a, 2002; E. K. B.

Tan, 2001; Teo, 2003; Winzeler, 1985). However, the Chinese still retain their identity as

C. B. Tan argued (2002; see also Raybeck, 1980; Teo, 2003).This might not be surprising

as the term "assimilation" has many meanings (e.g., Jacoby, 2004). As observed by Smith

(1964), Malays and Chinese differ greatly in their attitudes and way of life[5] (see also,

Maeda, 1967). Intermarriage between Malays and Chinese, for instance, is minimal.[6] In

an interesting study of Malay-Chinese relations in rural Kelantan,[7] Raybeck (1980) noted

that the Chinese accommodate[8] the Malay cultural traits as a front-stage performance

---

[4] Indeed, it was more of acculturation than assimilation as evident by Raybeck's (1980) study.
[5] See more concerning this issue in subsequent chapters.
[6] See Charles Hirschman (1975, p. 11) for details; also Maeda (1967, p. 67) who reported no evidence of intermarriage between Chinese and Malays in *Alor Janggus* (Chinese) community in Kedah (Northern state, in the West coast of Malaysia).
[7] Kelantan is situated in the East coast of Malaysia.
[8] Raybeck preferred the term "accommodation" to "assimilation" (see Raybeck, 1980, p. 263).

(e.g., speak fluent *Kelantanese*/local Malay dialect) while they retain their Chinese

traditional practices backstage (e.g., speak Hokkien/Chinese dialect, drink alcohol, eat

pork[9]) for reasons that are less apparent.

In so doing, the Malay Kelantanese trusted and accepted these Chinese as "our

Chinese," *orang Cina kita,* or "Chinese of here," *orang Cina sini* (Raybeck, 1980, p.

254), for the latter's personal and direct contact with the former, as opposed to the

outsider Chinese or Malays. Raybeck argued that the small size of the Chinese population

and their dependence on the Malays' goodwill for economic success[10] account for the

front stage and back stage acts (Goffman, 1959) which, in turn, contributes to good

interethnic relations at the village level. Whereas in Kuala Lumpur (as it is predominantly

Chinese), Tan (2004) asserted that the Chinese "do not have to 'concede' so much socio-

cultural adjustment to the Malays" (p. 136-137) although he cautioned that sensitivity is

very much required. In this sense, assimilation or acculturation is a matter of choice. But

what is more important, this scenario exemplifies a certain degree of adaptation with

respect to one's economic status.

Overall, gaining insight into the uniqueness of these interactants would allow

further theorizing about sensemaking as a retrospective process (Weick, 1995; Weick,

Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005) in a non-Western multicultural context (Gudykunst, 2003).

As contended by Weick (1995), "people [organizational members] *can* know what they

are doing *only after* they have done it" (p. 24; emphasis added), even if, as I would argue,

---

[9] As Muslims, Malays do not eat pork.

[10]Raybeck contended that, due to the minor British influence, the Malays in the village (*kampung*) in Kelantan were free to run their own businesses; hence, the Chinese adhered to the Malay power structure unlike in the urban areas or in other states of Malaysia.

that knowing is limited. This study ascertains whether and how these ethnic individuals

strategically interact in everyday life. Given the fluid nature of ethnicity (e.g., Eriksen,

2002) combined with individual strategic ambiguities (Eisenberg, 1984), it makes sense

for researchers of ethnic Malay and Chinese origins to closely examine acts of meaning

making in daily interactions to further understand human intentions.

I contend that researchers who are, themselves, members of the cultural group

being examined (myself included), have the advantage of using both *emic* (inside) and

etic (outside) perspectives, to borrow Pike's terms (1954/1967). The terms emic and etic

originated from the words "phonemic" and "phonetic" which, according to Pike

(1954/1967, 1966), refer to the intrinsic and extrinsic cultural concepts that provide

meanings to the members of the society being studied and the researchers, respectively.

To illustrate: As a member of the imagined community, borrowing from Anderson

(1991), I fully utilized my "insider perspective" (i.e., a Malay and Muslim by official

definition, Malaysian, Malay-Chinese descent) to acquire significant information (e.g.,

hindsight), and my "outsider perspective" (i.e., I am not accorded the identity of Chinese

by others). While being an "inside" researcher makes me more aware of my own biases

and the cultural specifics that might easily be taken for granted, the "insider status" also

allows me to immerse myself in the local culture unlike outside researchers (see Merton,

1972). Efforts to study the everyday-defined reality of individual actors enable the

theorizing of mundane situations as opposed to the authority-defined realities (Shamsul,

1998b, 2004a, 2004b).

While anthropologists might engage in endless debates about researchers researching their own culture (e.g., DeAndrade, 2000; hooks, 2003; Suryadinata, 2004; Tan, 1983; Young, 2004), I intend to examine how environment and (re/de)construction of the self and the other affect communication in the context where I live. How people in my culture make sense of events in their daily lives should be as significant as how others in a different culture make sense of their environment. The local society is not monolithic. The society consists of elements of strangeness. We might be outsiders even amongst members of our own culture/community. Crafted differently, one can still be a stranger in one's own community. Being an insider and a researcher makes me a "familiar stranger".[11] In essence, this dissertation is written from the point of view of a Malay and Malaysian whose purpose is to offer insight into the dynamics of interethnic sensemaking.

Specifically, this study analyzes individual speech and behavioral acts as well as conversational ambiguities in the sensemaking process. More important, when this type of study is carried out, the lens applied should not be one's own (as I constantly reminded myself) as such a lens is most likely tainted with pre-conceptions and biases as revealed in most written texts (e.g., Foucault, 1972). Rather, research concerning interethnic communication requires the researcher to educate him/herself concerning the very cultures he/she is interrogating as well as his/her own culture, and apply these cultural lenses when making interpretations (Hall, 1959; see also Condon & Yousef, 1975). How researchers (and participants) frame their understanding of everyday situations should be

---

[11] Jonathan N. Lipman (1997) wrote a fascinating book on 'Familiar Strangers', the history of Sino-Muslim of Northwest China.

beneficial not only to them but to society as a whole. In this regard, researchers can be more appreciative of others' differences and avoid the trap of ethnocentricity (Eriksen, 2004; Hall, 1959; Steinfatt & Christophel, 1996).

Similarly, Hall's ethnographic work (e.g., 1959, 1966, 1995) promotes the culture of interest, or rather, the *desire of knowing*, not the culture of ignorance or *otherizing*, which requires a researcher to learn more effectively about other cultures through a meaningful understanding of one's own culture. As attested by Said (1997), there would be no interpretation, understanding, and knowledge without interest. In this sense, interest acts as a bridging agent between the familiar and the unfamiliar. With interest, the strange becomes familiar; familiarity, hopefully, breeds love.

Given that there is no *one* way to describe Asians, let alone Asian Americans (see Gudykunst, 2001), and Chinese or Malays in Malaysia (e.g., Ang-Lygate, 1996; Shamsul, 1998b, 2001a; Tan, 1982, 2000a, 2004), this dissertation addresses the everyday interactional realm, a site where sensemaking is continuously occurring but where sensemaking is often taken for granted (Weick et al., 2005). Because Chinese Malaysians share some similar values with their Malay counterparts[12] as opposed to, say, mainland Chinese or Chinese Taiwanese (see also C. B. Tan, 1982, 2000b; T. J. Tan, Ho & J. L. Tan, 2005) or Chinese Americans (e.g., Gudykunst, 2001; Kwong & Miscevic, 2005), this dissertation examines how the former makes sense of each other's presence through acts of interpersonal communication. As such, the dissertation underscores the notion of sensemaking among individuals in a pluralistic society, where people are assumed to

---

[12] See Raybeck (1980).

interact only in the marketplace as Furnivall (1948/1956) contended. This scenario would suggest some degree of polarization, be that social, physical or even emotional.

Overall, my concern here is not so much with polarization even though the reasons for minimal interaction could be due to a lack of interethnic exposure. Rather, this study focuses on how individuals from the two ethnic groups make sense of daily interaction. Echoing Weick and associates (2005, p. 410), "what does an event mean?" Given that individuals might (dis)associate with others (Kim, 1994, 2005) in the relationship cycle, research concerning sensemaking in everyday life articulates much about the front stage and back stage realms of the social enactment of individuals (Goffman, 1959); who matters to whom, in what context, and why? What goes on in the minds of these individuals as they interact should affect social behavior and, in turn, should influence the sensemaking process. Because the communication approach recognizes that no two individuals in an ethnic group are identical in personal attributes, including ethnic characteristics, and subjective identification with the ethnic group (Eriksen, 2002; Kim, 1986), understanding how individuals make sense of daily negotiations in a multicultural realm is the main focus of this study.

<div align="center">Problem Statement</div>

Malay-Chinese Interethnic Communication

There has not been a consensual definition of interethnic communication (Kim, 1986; Ross, 1978), which leaves the domain wide open for speculation about its dimensions. With few exceptions (Dahlan, 1976; Daniels, 2005; Syed Husin, 1984;

Mansor, 1999; Raybeck, 1980; Tan, 1982; Ting, 1976),[13] there has been very little work on interethnic communication, especially qualitative research pertaining to Malay-Chinese interactions, focusing on sensemaking, and communicative strategies. The existing research has focused thus far on ethnic relations and has addressed either the researcher's group or other groups, but never conjointly combined the two (e.g., Abraham, 2004; Carsten, 2005; Comber, 1983; Crouch, 2001; Lee & Tan, 2000; Nagata, 1979, 2004; Shamsul, 1996, 1998a, 1998b, 1998c, 2001a, 2001b, 2004b; C. B. Tan, 2000a, 2000b, 2002, 2004; E. K. B., Tan, 2001). More often, such discussions tend to be highly politicized.

Broadly, areas that have been examined include a range of subtopics such as ethnic identity, ethnic conflict, ethnic relations, perceptions, and attitudes that affect individual relations at various levels, particularly relations involving ethnic Malays and Chinese (e.g., Daniels, 2005; Lee, 1972; Lee, 2004; Mansor, 1999; Raybeck, 1980; Shamsul, 1998b; Tan, 1982, 2001, 2002; Ting, 1976). This suggests that interethnic communication, as a domain, is diverse and multidisciplinary in scope (see Gumperz, 2005; Kim, 1994; Rich, 1974; Ross, 1978), and begs for more situated research. With such a wide spectrum of interests and approaches, how one chooses to study communication between two or more individuals in the socialization context becomes very critical in today's globalized world. In light of the present scenario, it is important to recognize communication patterns of ethnic individuals as a useful text or tool for understanding ethnicized knowledge in order to facilitate better interaction in the future.

---

[13] A closer examination of these indicates that Daniel's (2005) and Raybeck's (1980) works cover the qualitative research pertaining to Malay-Chinese relations more fully than the others cited.

While there is a growing body of literature pertaining to communication patterns among Asian (American) groups (e.g., Gudykunst, 2001), or other non-native speakers of English (e.g., Broeder, 1993; Gumperz, 1978, 2005), very little is known about the sensemaking process and how that works for individuals within interethnic contexts. The (sensemaking) narratives of the non-native speakers, for example, are less explored than are the latter's lack of competence in English and the impact of that situation on the English speakers.[14] Nevertheless, drawing upon the above studies, I argue that ethnic consciousness is further strengthened through an identification of self with an ethnic other through symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1969; Ellis, 1999; Goffman, 1959; Gudykunst, 2001; Mead, 1934). Given that individuals have expectations for "how communication messages should be structured" (Gudykunst, 2001, p. 136), the ways in which people choose to interact should be eye-openers for future qualitative research concerning interpersonal communication.

Overall, this study examines how ethnic voices are (co)constructed and articulated through the sensemaking process, that is, how individuals make sense of interethnic interactions and their negotiated strategies. Broadly stated, how much and in what ways do the exchanges and positionality of Malays and Chinese in Malaysian society influence progress towards national integration? Chapter Two addresses the rhetorical framework and interethnic communication research among Malay-Chinese individuals. I also discuss several rhetorical elements, which include the author/speaker, the intention, the audience (or hearer/observer), the content, and the form.

---

[14] See the details in Chapter Two, p. 125.

Taken as a whole, my discussion calls into question core concept(s) of interethnic communication with regard to sensemaking. The notions of ethnicity and ethnic identity within social interactions become pertinent in discussing not only interethnic relations but, more importantly, interethnic communication. The informants' perspectives should reveal useful insights into the nature of sensemaking in interpersonal interethnic interaction in terms of not only ethnic understanding but also power dynamics (Weick et al., 2005). Suffice it to say, discussions of issues pertaining to minority and majority rights in the larger political spectrum are available in the literature but very little is said about minority/majority interpersonal relationships in everyday life. It is the contention of this study that any form of interaction (or lack thereof) articulates much about sensemaking in a multi-ethnic situation given that "sensemaking is never solitary" (Weick, 1995, p. 40).

Therefore, interethnic communication calls for a more serious approach to how we address interethnic relations and interactions, particularly in the communication discipline, which is considered a relatively new addition to the field of interethnic studies (Kim, 1994). While the dynamics of human interactions might also be discussed under the rubrics of psychology, sociology, and linguistics (e.g., Broeder, 1993; Gumperz, 1978, 2005) as well as in the cognate fields of international, cross-cultural and interracial communication (see Condon & Yousef, 1975; Orbe & Harris, 2001; Rich, 1974), the emphasis tends to be more on how ethnic individuals who are non-Whites, (un)successfully interact with Whites (e.g., Gumperz, 2005; Hall, 1995; Kim, 2002; Kim, 1986, 1994; Kochman, 1981; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Rarely does the research explore how

the sensemaking process works within the realm of interethnic encounters (e.g., Asian heterogeneous members) from a communication perspective. More often, any discourse emerging from different ethnic groups tends to be group-centered, which "otherizes" outsiders who differ from the subjects. The hidden transcripts or back stage talks are assumed to otherize referent categories regardless of intentions (e.g., Murphy, 1998; Scott, 1990).

In line with the above assumptions, this study considers individual social grouping. The term "ethnicity" is explored as people make sense of their interactions. Sensemaking most likely affects and is affected by individual residential background as well as sense of belonging. As Cohen (1974) put it, "…ethnicity is a matter of degree. There is ethnicity and ethnicity" (p. xiv). This being the case, ethnicity influences how individuals view themselves and others (Gudykunst, 2001). Ethnicity is a dynamic entity (Eriksen, 2002; Martin & Nakayama, 1997), which lends itself to "self-perception" (Toale & McCroskey, 2001, p. 71). This suggests that ethnicity is not fixed socially or spatially. Rather, ethnicity is considered a meta-power that is constantly negotiated between state and self, as exemplified by Chinese Muslims and the nation-state in China (Gladney, 1991). For the Hui community[15] and the Uygurs[16] in China, Islam is their ethnic marker; meaning, "to be Hui, is to be Muslim" (Gladney, 2004, p. 167), which makes them distinct from the larger non-Muslim Chinese (Han) population. In this sense,

---

[15] The Hui are the third largest minority in China. They are increasingly exerting their rights as Hui and importance in entrepreneurship and craft specializations (see Gladney, 1998a, 2004). The Hui are mainly Muslims, comprising about 9 million (see McCarthy, 2005); they consider their community distinct from the majority Chinese in China (see Gladney, 1991; Dillon, 1999).

[16] See also Gladney (1998b).

it is interesting to find out how ethnicity is constructed and enacted by Malay Malaysians

and Chinese Malaysians through their communicative acts.

Martin and Nakayama (1997) explained that ethnic identity is created through

one's relationship with others in society. Meanwhile, Ellis (1999) offered the following:

Ethnicity is a discursive categorization. That is, ethnicity is a category to which

one is assigned on the basis of various phenotypical, group, and cultural tokens

that have pragmatic meaning. Meanings for these tokens have achieved some

intersubjectivity and become interpretive frames by which we make sense of

things. (p. 152)

The fluidity of ethnicity, then, means that ethnicity is contingent upon many other

elements.[17] Interethnic communication processes require individuals to understand others

effectively as well as to make sense of selves and the cultural rules that govern

interactions (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Together, self-presentation, impression

management, and/or face work strategies (Goffman, 1956, 1959; Ting-Toomey, 1999;

Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001) work together with other tactical communicative

maneuvers in everyday life to comprise interethnic social interactions.

To date, not much is known about how Malay Malaysians and Chinese

Malaysians make sense of their daily interactional realm without that realm being

inflamed by politics.[18] Is political interpretation inevitable in a context where different

ethnic individuals thrive (or compete) to survive? This study demonstrates how

---

[17] See for instance, Patterson (1975).
[18] The Chinese Opposition Party, i.e., Democratic Action Party (DAP), has been and is the loudest in demanding everything for the chauvinist Chinese in Malaysia including questioning the rights of the Malays as enshrined in the Constitution despite the fact that a large sector of the Malaysian economy is controlled by the Chinese elite (see Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969).

interethnic communication is understood in the everyday context of not only *what*

someone says but, also, *why* he is saying it (see Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Scollon and

Scollon contended that the causes of interethnic problems rest mainly in the latter, not the

former. As Berlo (1960) remarked, "*meanings are in us,* not in messages" (p. 175;

emphasis original). The study also directs attention to issues pertaining to otherness and

negotiated strategies within the interactional realm, which reflect two significant points:

(1) *ethnicized* strategies (actions) and (2) ethnicized *personas* (individuals). The study

elaborates these points building on their emergent stage of inquiry.

As we seek more in-depth explanations of the inquiries made, interethnic

communication processes become more crucial as such inquiries closely intertwine with

ethnic identity (Hetch, 1993; Orbe, 1995). More important, such a communication

process must be observed in its naturalistic setting. The politics of interethnic

communication typically draws attention to the notion of dominant and subordinate

positions within a social setting. This, then, becomes highly politicized as, more often,

the issues are blown out of proportion which, in turn, affects interethnic relations.

Inevitably, the communication processes between ethnic individuals are affected, either

negatively or positively, within the larger multiethnic group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

The different group memberships and individual characteristics determine in

some ways the nature of the (inter)ethnic interactions that occur (Tajfel & Turner, 1986).

Interethnic encounters take place in the dynamic interplay of communication behavior

and situational factors alongside the intergroup-interpersonal continuum. Such queries as

who is speaking to whom and with what power need elaboration. For instance, how has

the social standing of individuals influenced the communication process (see Eriksen, 2004)? What conclusions, if any, can we draw from the perspectives of ethnocentrism and communication apprehension? Ethnocentrism has been found to have a moderately strong positive relationship to interethnic communication apprehension (Toale & McCroskey, 2001); hence, ethnocentrism cannot be ignored when initiating interethnic communication research, particularly when one's identity is in question (Rusen, 2004).

More significant, how can the non-Western understanding of human communication inform us about sensemaking, particularly in the realms of silence versus active communication (e.g., Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Kim, 2002; see also Oliver, 1995; Yousef, 1978)? What can we say about Asian rhetoric that might influence or be influenced by sensemaking? According to Oliver (1995), "the key to understanding the Asian mind and Asian civilization is their *manner of talk: how they addressed one another and why, under what circumstances, on what topics, in what varied style, with what intent, and with what effects*" (p. 354; emphasis original). Ultimately, the Asian mind (and civilization) should *not* be regarded as homogeneous, for example, between the Chinese (as largely non-Muslims) and Malays (as Muslims), or between the Chinese Muslims and non-Muslim Chinese in Malaysia. Should nonverbal elements of the sensemaking process, then, be seen as part of the interaction/negotiation process or should they be highlighted in isolation since the notion of silence might have different interpretations in different cultures? This study brings to light the different perspectives concerning communication patterns when ethnic individuals construct and (sub)consciously conform to the idea of sensemaking in everyday interaction. By

studying the interactional realm in its entirety, this study reveals the significance of any ethnic or cultural peculiarities.

Malaysia: A Multicultural Mosaic

Out of the total Malaysian population, Malays constitute the majority (65%), followed by Chinese (26%), Indians (about 8%), and other subgroups.[19] Not surprisingly, scholarly debates very often involve a measure of "ethnicizing" discourse or selective analyses of identities (e.g., Chin, 2001; Nah, 2003; Shamsul, 1998b, 1998c, 2001a, 2004a; Tan, 1982, 2000a, 2000b; Zawawi, 1998) pertaining to Chinese and Malays. For instance, Chinese Malaysian writers as well as outsiders emphasize the notions of political equality and justice but devote very little attention to the economic dominance of the Chinese elite (e.g., Carsten, 2005; Chin, 2001; Freedman, 2001, 2003). In reverse, Malay scholars stress Chinese economic dominance as well as Malay-related problems and rights,[20] and rarely reference Chinese grievances and dissatisfaction (e.g., A. Kadir Jasin, 2004; Shamsul, 1998c). Here, we witness instances of polarization in terms of not only language or religion[21] but authorship. Both groups express fears about being dominated, but with different, or rather, ethnocentric, angles to such fears.

The debate became prominent especially after the May 13, 1969 riot between Malays and Chinese, which largely erupted in Kuala Lumpur (the capital city), where the residents, at the time, were mostly non-Malays (e.g., Chinese). Very often, the reason

---

[19] See Footnote #1, p. 13.

[20] As I write, I learned that the Malay Agenda pertaining to rights, etc., is to be high on the discussion list at the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) 57th Annual General Assembly; see *Utusan Malaysia* [Online], November 10, 2006.

[21] All Malays are Muslim in Malaysia. The language spoken is Malay. Majority (about 80 to 90 percent) of the Chinese in Malaysia are followers of various Chinese religions, which include Chinese Buddhism and Taoism (see Tan, 1983); others include Christians, Hindus, and Muslims. The language spoken is mainly Mandarin.

given for the racial riot—and riots elsewhere—was the inability to tolerate others. But, to

be sure, in the 1969 Malaysian general election (which led to the riot), the Alliance party

(multiethnic but Malay-led) lost for the first time to the Chinese-based (opposition)

parties (Gerakan and DAP)[22], and was made to witness the "festive" (some might say

"gloating") celebrations of the latter's victory (see Abdul Rahman, 2005;[23] Lee, 1972).

The huge, public celebration blocked many of the major roads and was held without a

police permit (Comber, 1983; National Operations Council, 1969; Tunku Abdul Rahman,

1969).

Significantly, a majority of the police force were (and still are) Malays. The

disobedience could thus be interpreted as an ethnic factor. Between February and August

1951, over 10,000 Chinese youths in Malaysia fled to China to avoid a call-up for the

police enrollment (NOC, 1969).[24] The National Operations Council (NOC) Report states

that the Chinese were not interested in lower ranking areas of employment, such as that

of the police constabulary. In fact, most were not interested in the local population or the

nation unless their employment brought a measure of pecuniary rewards (see also Lee,

1972).

Evidently, the parade was seen as insulting and as a threat by Malays, especially

when the opposition party members made highly provocative remarks (Comber, 1983;

Daniels, 2003; NOC, 1969). The report revealed that insensitive Chinese party members

shouted out at every Malay who was seen: *Kita hentam lu, sekarang kita besar* (We'll

---

[22] DAP demonstrated its tension with the Malays by aggressively campaigning about Chineseness and their rights prior to the election (see Heng, 1988). The Gerakan Party leader, Yeoh Teck Chye, admitted to the massive disturbance caused (Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969).
[23] See for instance, pp. 345-350 (Abdul Rahman, 2005)
[24] See NOC (1969, p. 10).

thrash you; we are now powerful), *Buang semua polis Melayu* (Sack all Malay

policemen), *Malai si!* (Death to the Malays!), *Melayu balik, pergi mati* (Malays go home,

go and die!), *Ini negeri bukan Melayu punya* (This is not a Malay country), which

insulted the Malays (see NOC, 1969, p. 28-35). As narrated by an informant in this study

who survived the tragedy,[25] the chauvinistic Chinese members (also believed to be

among the Communist Youths by Tunku Abdul Rahman[26]) yelled at the Malays:

(Melayu) balik kampung lah (Malays, go back to your village). Comber (1983) attested

more fully:

> This unruly mob slowly wound its way through town, past Kampung Bharu, the
>
> largest Malay residential area in Kuala Lumpur, where some thirty thousand
>
> Malays lived, hurling abuse and insults as it went, such as '*Melayu sudah jatuh*'
>
> (The Malays have fallen)*, Kuala Lumpur sekarang China punya* (Kuala Lumpur
>
> now belongs to the Chinese), '*Ini negeri bukan Melayu punya, kita mahu halau*
>
> *semua Melayu*' (This country does not belong to the Malays, we want to chase out
>
> all the Malays)*, and the like. (p. 69)

Because ethnic tension can easily turn into violence (with zero ethnic sensitivity),

a racial slur is, indeed, a powerful trigger. I found it extremely shocking that this

happened in Malaysia with supposedly "Asian values," that I shed tears and had to pull

myself together to write this dissertation. The insults[27] were too much to bear. At the

same time, I wondered about the plight of my late father who was in the police force

---

[25] See Chapter 4, p. 213.

[26] The Malay Royal prince who became the First Prime Minister of Malaysia; he resigned from the post after the riot. His trust in the Chinese population was felt to be taken for granted by the Chinese who initiated the riot (see Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969, for details about the tragedy).

[27] See also Tunku Abdul Rahman (1969).

given that we never talked about the situation. As a toddler at the time, I had no

memories of the riot. I knew very little about the incident until I started reading about

Malay-Chinese relations for the purpose of understanding interethnic communication.

It must be mentioned that, during this time, all Malays, including those who

mainly lived in the rural areas or villages, were mostly peasants and fishermen;[28] yet,

they were much hated by the ethnocentric Chinese despite living in a multicultural

society (see Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969). With that said, such hate-speech should not be

dismissed when to date only one ethnic group (i.e., Malay) is widely condemned in

mainly Western and anti-Malay intellectual selective discourse pertaining to only the

rights and justice of the Chinese in Malaysia. As Tunku Abdul Rahman (1969) cautioned,

"…smoldering fires need careful watch" (p. 11). Van Dijk (2000) argued that "[c]ontrol

over influential public discourse implies more power over other people's minds, hence

more symbolic power" (p. 74). Control over mind, in this sense, is as powerful as (if not

more powerful than) the control over the economy.

While history remains a thing of the past, such crude insults toward Malays in

their homeland should not be dismissed in any discussion pertaining to Malay-Chinese

rights in Malaysia. I argue here that the riot functions as a reminder for *all* Malaysians to

embrace considerable sensitivity, trust, and respect, among both Chinese and Malays (see

Lee, 1972). Ethnic hatred is dangerous as it spreads like a wildfire. But, unlike visible

wildfire, ethnic hatred is deeply ingrained for generations to come.

We cannot ignore the historical context in which the anti-Malay rhetoric exists

given that ethnic tension escalated when a group of Chinese party members verbally

---

[28] See Hirschman (1975).

attacked *all* Malays including the police officers (NOC, 1969). The riot took away the

innocent lives of *both* Malays and Chinese. Several other minor riots—not major ones as

exaggerated by some foreign media[29]—also erupted prior to and during the tragedy in

Melaka and Kelantan, for instance, with Chinese and Malays hassling with and even

killing each other.[30] Once it erupted, the riot did not distinguish between friends and foes.

Truly enough, emotions are responses to events (Frijda, 2000). Malays and Chinese

became entangled in a web of ethnic hatred. It would be wrong for anyone to perpetuate

the idea that Malays are solely to be blamed, a position championed by many writers as

will be illustrated.

The reality points towards how Malays were provoked to retaliate by anti-Malay

slogans on the street and outside their homes (Abdul Rahman, 2005; Comber, 1983;

NOC, 1969). The ethnic hatred was strongly embedded within the segment of the Malay

Chinese population that was promulgating the slogans. Despite this poignant Sino-Malay

cleavage, there were reports of unsung heroes, with many Malays and Chinese coming

forward to help victims of the other group by providing shelter, food, and protection.

Thus, any discussion pertaining to the tension must be seen *in situ*. Any policy created,

thereafter, should be more mindful of the ethnic clash and its reasons. In keeping with

harmony, Malaysians (and outsiders alike) must be more mindful of ethnic sensitivities.[31]

---

[29] See Tunku Abdul Rahman (1969, pp. 167-180).

[30] See Tunku Abdul Rahman (1969); Raybeck (1980).

[31] The Malaysian Prime Minister (past and present) often reminded all Malaysians about this; see *The Star Online*. 'Mind what you say'. Retrieved November 14, 2006 from http://thestar.com.my/news/story. Also, the Chinese newspapers were reminded not to evoke racial hatred, see http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/content.asp?y=2006&dt=1124&pub=Utusan_Malaysia. November 24, 2006.

Yet, in biased academic discourse, writers have tended to highlight only one event/group and to "otherize" the other. Amy Freedman (2003), an American of Chinese descent, claimed that the "victory" parade was "perceived as abusive to Malay sensibilities" (p. 122; also Freedman, 2001, p. 417). But, Freedman offered no details as to the reasons for such a perception on the part of Malays, and the kind of "victory" that was displayed by the oppositional Chinese parties. Nor did she cite the NOC (1969) or others (e.g., Comber, 1983; Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969) who wrote about the riots. The abusive remarks (as part of celebrating victory) thrown *only* at the Malays were missing from Freedman's rhetoric.[32] As a result, the more informed reader might think that she was less knowledgeable about the riot or that she was driven by her ethnocentric values. It might even be both.

Freedman (2001) wrote authoritatively that "…rioting ensued in which 1,000s (mostly Chinese) were killed, property was burned and looted" (p. 417). However, she did not provide the reader any evidence to attest to that claim.[33] The same remark was made in her entry on the Malaysian conflict in the *Encyclopedia of Modern Ethnic Conflicts* (2003) yet, again, without a credible source to support the claim. In contrast, Tunku Abdul Rahman (1969), the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, attested in 1969:

I obtained the official figures of the casualties from the Police Headquarters as of August 15th, three months and two days after the riots began. The official figures

---

[32] She also championed the outspoken Chinese members Lim Kit Siang and Kua Kia Soong for their various actions to promote Chinese chauvinism (see Freedman, 2001).

[33] Thomas Sowell (1996) made a fairly similar comment, but he was not cited by Amy L. Freedman nor did he cite any source to support that statement. Both tended to write with presumed authority.

on that day were – Killed, 184; wounded, 356; cases of arson to buildings, 753;

and vehicles destroyed or damaged, 211. (p. 177)[34]

Freedman (2001) further claimed that the "…riots broke out that spring in part

because Malays feared that the election results indicated growing Chinese political power

outside of the multiethnic coalition" (p. 430). This statement is misleading. Clearly, the

riots did break out, but they broke out at least in part as a reaction to the illegal parade

and what was perceived by many Malays as public provocation. Instead of describing the

riots, she provided an interpretation that, arguably, was influenced, in at least some

respects by her *ethnic* perspective. It must be mentioned that there must be a limit to

Malays' sensibilities (as others' elsewhere). Given that the parade was loud and focused

on hurling insulting messages concerning Malays, it was not at all surprising that some

Malays responded with fears as to the biased and chauvinist nature of the Chinese

sentiment. In the name of "victory," the Chinese party members had demonstrated a

racist discourse, that is, an anti-Malay sentiment in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, and as

unthinkable as it might have sounded to many, participants in the parade threatened to

"chase" the Malays out of their own land. Shouldn't such a discourse, then, be contested

and fully examined for further sensemaking by scholars? More specifically, shouldn't

such a discourse be critically examined from all possible angles?

Malays are clearly condemned through Freedman's selective discourse. By not

acknowledging the abusive insults and the fears created by those insults,[35] Freedman

---

[34] The actual number of casualties remains a subject of speculation; whatever the number given, it must be based on some credible source. More importantly, how do we draw the line or differentiate between ethnic representation/voice and the actual occurrence?

depicted Malays as intolerant. Within Freedman's limited description of events, Malays are portrayed as the culprits, i.e., the instigators of violence, while the Chinese (who sowed anti-Malay sentiment and controlled most of the economy at the time)[36] were positioned as innocent victims. I argue that scholars owe their readers full coverage—a balanced view—of the Malay Malaysian and Chinese Malaysian "sensibilities". Put simply, how would Freedman (or any scholar, for that matter) categorize racial insults issued in the name of "victory"? How would she (or any scholar) define "sensibility" within the framework of an unruly racist parade? The reader might ask: What was the motive for the premeditated act of the parade and/or the anti-Malay slogans that were promulgated? Surprisingly, many writers, including Freedman, have chosen not to deal with the details of the situation.[37]

Alex Lee's (1972) rhetoric concerning the dilemmas posed by the Malays versus Chinese situation is, perhaps, an exception. He was modest in portraying the event. His description was fairly consistent with the NOC report, Comber's observations and even Tunku Abdul Rahman's narrative. Lee argued that, due to chauvinist Chinese demagogues who generated anti-Malay sentiment, the riot caused both Malays and Chinese to become (more) insecure and suspicious of each other. As a result, government authorities made it clear that the Chinese-based opposition parties could no longer stir up

---

[35] Rather than acknowledge the real fears of both groups, Freedman focused on only the fears of the Malays concerning the growing power of the Chinese party. For the fears of the Chinese, see Abdullah Dahana (2002) for details, p. 156; also Alex Lee (1972); Tunku Abdul Rahman (1969).

[36] With the Chinese owning about 22 percent of the economic shares, Hirschman (1975) argued that ethnic selectivity is present when it comes to occupation, which leads to possible discrimination (see p. 71); also see Silcock, (1963); Silcock & Fisk. (Eds.). (1963); Wilson (1967).

[37]Neither Amy Freedman nor Tan (2004), for instance, dealt with the details of the riot (see Tan, 2004, p. 141); also, both James Chin (2001) and Amy Chua (2003) described the 1969 riot as anti-Chinese, but offered no further details.

racial sentiment as exemplified by Gerakan and DAP (with their anti-Malay rhetoric).

The Malays' plight was, then, taken more seriously by the government, and for the first

time, Lee claimed, the Chinese community felt that their existence was threatened as was

their initial dream to make money and prosper in their new land. Significantly, Lee's

rhetoric persuasively called for the Chinese and Malay dilemmas to be viewed from a

national angle.[38]

In essence, Freedman's ethnic rhetoric articulates a hidden message that is

reflective of the heavily embedded tensions between Malays and Chinese that existed

prior to 1969. From a historical standpoint,[39] such tragedies must not be ignored in

pursuing an understanding of Malay-Chinese sensemaking. Due to the cultural

exclusiveness of the Chinese,[40] most of the economic sectors were controlled by the

Chinese entrepreneurs (small, big, and as middlemen) as contended by Silcock and Fisk

(1963). Silcock and Fisk asserted that a majority of the Malays remained in the rural

areas as peasants and became disadvantaged in their own country. With an unequal

economic footing (see also Fisk, 1964), the plight of the Malays should not be dismissed

when championing the course of the other as Tan (2004) reminded us.

While a reader adopts a dominant-hegemonic, or oppositional position, to use

Stuart Hall's (2001) words, based on the context a writer selects, I contend that a

negotiated or critical reading works best when exploring ethics and ethnic sensitivity.

---

[38] See Lee (1972, p. 571). I also deal with this more in the final chapter.

[39] Malaysia was formerly known as *Tanah Melayu* (The land of the Malays) or Malaya, as such, the sentiment of the Malays at the time cannot be ignored with a large influx of immigrants brought by the British.

[40] See Hirschman (1975) about father to son occupation and Patterson (1975) on the Chinese trading culture.

Through a negotiated reading, we can better situate the rhetoric of the riot during its various phases—pre-, during, and aftermath. In this spirit, it makes sense to examine the two ethnic groups' interaction processes through their verbal narratives in the present situation. Such narratives, to echo Beck (2005), represent the "…voices of others and aspects of ourselves that intersect and intertwine throughout our complex and multifaceted existences" (p. 63).

As I edit this chapter, I recall the story of a White American Muslim female convert on CNN Good Morning America; she said, "…I heard a woman say…I want to bomb these Muslim bastards. I heard her say that and I was struck by it. And I said to myself, I am one of them, I am one of them" (Thursday, October 5, 2006). *No comments were made after the shocking narrative, but I wondered about the motives for bringing it to the viewers. Obviously, the narrative speaks volumes about how Muslims and Islam are viewed in the United States at the present time as I quietly wondered about our (my and her) future. I, too, felt stricken by the words. I realized that my emotions have somewhat intersected and intertwined with those of the American convert.*

<div align="center">Research Purpose and Questions</div>

The overall aim of this study is not only to examine the nature of everyday communication patterns (i.e., the content) between the two main ethnic groups (i.e., Malays and Chinese) in the plural society of Malaysia since its independence in 1957 but, also, to identify the ways in which these groups construct reality, particularly in the interactants' own environment. That is, how are issues raised and exchanged? This research involves studying the ordinary scene, hence the need to observe all

communicative aspects—the behavioral, emotional, and so forth—in which individuals are engaged. That is, how do individuals negotiate (unspoken) tensions and the influence of environment on actors' communications?

Specifically, this study pursues the following objectives:

1. To examine the validity of a plural society as a conceptual framework, that is, looking at a contemporary conceptualization of interethnic communication and its theoretical underpinning.

2. To analyze the patterns of communication between Malays and Chinese at an empirical level that requires the researcher to observe the public and private space, work (or study) and leisure sphere, as well as manifest and symbolic meanings, if available.

3. To deconstruct the essential features of interethnic communication policies in Malaysia—the precepts, objectives, strategies, instruments, programs, actors and feedback.

4. To identify research issues and gaps in contemporary knowledge concerning interethnic communication. For instance, what is meant by an "Asian perspective"?

5. To discuss the findings and their implications for nation building efforts in Malaysia.

These objectives draw attention to the notion of ethnic space, particularly the interactive context. In the case of Malaysia, this space is defined mainly in terms of religious and linguistic polarization between Malays and Chinese. As space is fluid, the

realm for them to interact/meet can and will be anywhere, not only the market, which is a contrast to Furnivall's contention (1948/1956). He claimed that Malaysia's plural society is a product of colonial power in which ethnic groups are confined into their own social cells. I contend that the scenario today has changed considerably, depending on the position of the individual in society.

As such, the dissertation analyzes the common ground shared by individuals from different ethnic backgrounds to surmise the direction towards which such changes move. I observed and asked about the (shared) activity space of the individuals. In making sense of the individuals' sensemaking, several queries were generated and explored in terms of the participants' background and everyday experiences, the communication patterns among Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians, the social, political, emotional and spatial, and the nature of the individuals' community, whether it is segregated, integrated or hybridized, so to speak. Specifically, the dissertation explores the following questions:

RQ1. Where and why do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians interact with each other in their everyday life?

RQ2. What strategies are used by Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians in negotiating differences within interethnic encounters, and why?

RQ3. How do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians make sense of interethnic interactions?

RQ4. When and how do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians manage/negotiate communication strategies within interethnic encounters?

RQ5.   In what way do the positionalities and exchanges (negotiations, bargains,

pleasantries etc.) of Malays and Chinese in the society affect the nation's

progress towards national integration?

These inquiries should lead the researcher, to some degree, into the individual

(i.e., respondent's) understanding of the other. The participants come from a pool of

ethnic Malay and Chinese individuals. I obtained the individuals' viewpoints to generate

further insights into Malay and Chinese cognitive and behavioral acts in social

interactions in a real living environment, and explored how they negotiate tensions as and

when those tensions arise. I identified the communicative acts and choices that these

individuals resort to when they interact, and why they do what they do. Malay

Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians have gone a long way in defining who they are and

what they possess in the same nation-state, perhaps, with rather distinct ethnic visions

(e.g., Dahlan, 1976; Lee, 1972; Lee & Tan, 2000; Rustam, 1976; Tan, 2004; Tan, Ho &

Tan, 2005; Ting, 1976). Yet, they bear the same sentiment; that is, to hope for a better

Malaysia. As such, a study addressing these ethnic groups should yield useful insights

into ethnic integration/separation or the centripetal-centrifugal ethnic forces in the

increasingly complex society.

Significance of Malay-Chinese Interethnic Communication Research

"Given our condition as mortals, communication will always remain a problem of power, ethics, and art" (Peters, 1999, p. 268).

Rationale for the Study

The rubric of interethnic communication informs the theoretical underpinnings of interethnic relations as well as the sensemaking concept for these ethnic individuals. Interethnic relations will always remain crucial when investigating interactions between culturally diverse others. At the same time, we do not wish to risk overlooking the interaction process that goes on between the interactants in mundane situations. This awareness then becomes the basis for my dissertation.

In order to examine interethnic communication, the term must first be clarified. For instance, what can we say about the role of interethnic communication in the long-term evolution of both the communicator and the environment (Kim, 1994)? By studying interethnic communication and mundane social interactions, we can gain insight into various confounding elements such as social groupings. Further down the line, we can examine one's identity in such a grouping, the communicative choices, and the perception of conflict within diverse groups. As a student-researcher of interethnic communication, I intend to fill an important gap in interpersonal interethnic communication theory, particularly concerning sensemaking.

With a sensemaking perspective, I intend to gain a much fuller view and conception of interethnic communication. Malay-Chinese interethnic communication is the platform for such a conceptual understanding. Given that the human being has a self,

as posited by Mead (1934), how the self interprets and defines the other's intentions

(Blumer, 1969) and the situation as a whole, speaks volumes about sensemaking. If

ethnic differences are emphasized, we need to examine the centrifugal issues. Similarly,

if ethnic convergence is emphasized, we would wish to know the centripetal elements

that bind the individuals together, and make interethnic communication work, at least in

the actual time-space context within which interethnic interpersonal communication

occurs. Put simply, understanding elements that can help diverse individuals interact, or

even ignore each other in sensemaking—which is an ongoing process (Weick, 1995;

Weick et al., 2005)—will lead to further research in human interaction. As viewed by

Clement and Giles (1994), interethnic communication is more than simply an encounter

between two (dis)associating individuals (also Kim, 1994). Rather, it is "an exchange of

the multilayered representations of [the individuals] via strategies whose impact is

fostered by their particular combination" (Clement & Giles, 1994; p. 543).

The understanding of these forces of divergence and convergence will

undoubtedly offer insights to planners and decision makers who are vested with the task

of managing ethnic conflict, whether it is for the purpose of social integration or for the

purpose of upholding the charters of civil rights. A typology of interethnic

communication can also be drawn from the research that might better inform researchers

and ethnic communicators alike about how to engage in effective interethnic

communication. From such a typology, we can further examine sensemaking in

interethnic communication at various points, that is, the micro level (interpersonal), the

local political group, the intellectual opinion-makers in society, and the official/state

level. We can make further assumptions about the ideals and realities of interethnic communication, that is, the everyday-defined scenario versus the authority-defined constructs. For instance, how are ideals verbalized?

Therefore, it is pertinent to have a clear way of framing the subject which calls for a thorough scrutiny of underlying elements. An obvious effect of theorizing nowadays is that it allows researchers—myself included—to broaden the lines of scholarly inquiry by inserting our own subjective orientation into research. The theorizing encourages us "…to partake in the broader barter of ideas" as argued by St. John, Striphas and Shepherd (2006, p. xx). My inquiry highlights the theorizing of communication as a social and personal experience (i.e., interethnic sensemaking) that needs to be understood both for knowledge, and for various applications in modern life.

Rationale for the Sample Choice

The focus on Malay and Chinese interethnic communication was chosen for several reasons, partly personal and partly situational. Personally, I have been drawn to interethnic communication since I knew that, somewhere along ancestral lineage, there once existed a family member who was not Malay. My great grandfather, of Chinese origin, came to Melaka (Malaysia) with his father from China[41] in a small boat or "junk." He then met and eventually married a local (Malay) woman, living in Melaka until he died in 1951. This story, which I took for granted, was shared by my deceased father years before his passing in September, 2003, which happened a month after my arrival in the US and while I was trying to cope with the new found challenges of graduate studies.

---

[41] The migration of the (mainly male) Chinese in Melaka started after the fourteenth century; since then, Melaka has consisted of the local-born Chinese and China-born Chinese (see Sandhu, 1983).

Incidentally, I recall discussing life and death in my communication theory class, *phantasms of the living, dialogues with the dead*, an insightful chapter by Peters (1999), while, at the same time, concealing my sad emotions. I bemoaned the loss of my father privately as I construe grief as private.

Ideally, how does one articulate her (or his) sorrow? There must at least be an avenue—other than the media—to encourage such personal narratives of an ordinary person[42] to take place in everyday life. As noted by Oatley (1996), emotions are functional and dynamic: they have personal and social functions, and they move on a continuum which is based on how we appear to others. Meanwhile, Frijda (2000) contended that emotions are responses to events. My father's passing was indeed shocking, especially when he appeared healthy when I left for my studies in the US. His death was a great loss, especially to my mother. She could no longer stay in the house that had been her nest for about twenty years. She decided to sell that home and move to another locality in the same state, nearer to my father's side of the family; the move provided a *placebo* effect, so to speak. I recall being informed upon returning from class that my father died of a suspected brain hemorrhage when he fell in the bathroom the day before. However, my family members still felt they were left in the dark as to the actual cause of death, which was not consistent with the prior treatment given on the day he was admitted to the hospital. Had I not concentrated on my studies, I would have returned home and interrogated the medical staff. (Perhaps, interethnic health narratives should be

---

[42] This is to contrast with the public diary of the US journalist, Cathy Heiner, who died of breast cancer in 1999; she courageously wrote about her predicament (during the periods of 1998 to 1999) in *USA Today* (a local newspaper) which underscores her spirit as a reporter (see Beck, 2005, for a heartening discussion on Heiner's health narratives).

my next pursuit). But, the distance was too much to bear as the burial had to take place soon.[43]

Part of my loss that I have still not come to terms with is the fact that his reminiscing about our distant yet significant Chinese descent was lost with his death. His genealogical chart could not be traced. I could no longer listen to his repeated stories about my paternal great grandfather who lived as a Muslim; I only knew the latter as "Ng" (or Abdullah)[44] whose grave was in the same vicinity as that of my grandfather. Losing my father unexpectedly did not end my desire to pursue theorizing about Malay-Chinese sensemaking narratives. Indeed, his death marked the beginning of my journey into interethnic sensemaking and continues to burn my desire to pursue this area more fully.

As the story resonates with me and about who I am becoming (unknowingly, I am becoming part of the interethnic narratives that I examine), it has inspired me to pursue the subject. Ever since my school days, my friends have always been Malays, Chinese and Indians. My wonderful years at *Assunta Convent* Primary School (with its White male principal) and fond memories with my Malay and non-Malay friends will forever be cherished. I had more Chinese (male) friends in high school when I joined the science class. Even at the school where I taught English for a year, I had more Chinese students than Malays. The former (mainly Form Four Science One—high school—students)

---

[43] This is in accordance with the Islamic burial. My father had to be buried on the day of his passing.
[44] His Muslim name; I could not confirm whether he was a Chinese Muslim (from China) or a Muslim convert. Nor could I verify the religion of my maternal great grandmother. She was, however, assumed to be Muslim.

would visit me on Eid celebration.[45] Apart from Malays, I have had both Chinese and

Indians as my close friends at various stages of my life. I even had wonderful groups of

Malay and Chinese students at the university where I teach *English Hospitality*; the first

batch of students was mainly Chinese. I consider these (ethnic) individuals a precious

resource in society.

In retrospect, I wondered (at times) whether speaking English in Malaysia has

something to do with having non-Malay friends. I also wondered about the role of

Bahasa Melayu (Malay language), as a national language, in the future. I realized that

interethnic communication is not just about two different ethnic individuals interacting,

but more so, the personas of the individuals who are interacting. Stated differently, the

actors who participate in the interactional process are crucial given the idea that self is

relational and the (our) social action(s) is constantly being (re)interpreted (Blumer, 1969;

Mead, 1934).

The other reason for pursuing this topic arises out of my own awareness of the

current situation in the world today (e.g., the Iraq-US conflict, Iraq civil war, Palestine-

Israel conflict, US- Afghanistan endless debate, Lebanon-Israel crisis). To be sure, all of

these crises bear the "ethnic" and/or religious tag. Having lived in the US, I am drawn to

the idea that being Malay holds no significance; I am viewed simply as one of "those

Asians." In this sense, ethnicity is truly a matter of degree (Cohen, 1974). Asian citizens

here are labeled as "Asian Americans." The specific identity of an Asian (I felt) is "lost"

with the generic ethnic tag. Superficially, people are lumped together as one big *tuna*

---

[45] *Aidil Fitri* or *Hari Raya*, as it is known in Malaysia (or Eid)—a celebration to mark the end of Ramadan for Muslims.

chunk, if you will. (When you break the tuna, you will get the layers. Only when you meet with the person on a one-to-one basis do you become acquainted with his/her ethnic affiliation.)

A video program called *The Color of Fear*[46] conveys a similar sentiment, if not deeper, sentiment. The American citizens[47] depicted in the program, expressed strong sentiments about how *they* wanted to be identified (be that Chinese American, African American or another group). Only one (White) individual chose to be identified as "American" unlike the rest who chose ethnic consolidation over a national identity. In this context, ethnic identity becomes the crucial primary identity for self. As such, I see the need to examine sensemaking among Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians as I engage in theorizing about interethnic sensemaking in public discourse.

Finally, another issue that comes out strongly to me is that one has to courageously withstand not only being a Malay[48] but, also, a Muslim, especially in the US given that the media, since the events of September 11, widely and freely talk about "Muslim" terrorists. The rhetoric is such that "Muslim" has become a primary item of scrutiny while the label "terrorist" has become an accepted secondary attachment, as attested to by the female American Muslim rhetoric[49] mentioned earlier. The cost of

---

[46] A 90-minute USA documentary program by Lee Mung Wah (1994).

[47] Eight individuals participated; two were White.

[48] I have always been brought up as Malay (Muslim), and to know Malay culture, which interweaves with Islam in everyday life in Malaysia.

[49] As though that was the intention or felt by the media, on the morning of October 5, 2006, *CNN Good Morning America* portrayed the life of two White American (Muslim) converts in the US and asked how they thought they were perceived by others (significantly, this was aired during Ramadan, a month of fasting for Muslims). See also p. 39 (this dissertation).

being Malay and Muslim in the present situation takes a much heavier toll.[50] While we are becoming more global, multiculturalism (or multi-religiosity) is inevitable. However, many perceive that move to multiculturalism as a threat or as competition.

While we recognize the importance of ethnic survival, the very notion of survival has much to do with the process of relating, and perhaps, understanding the mindset (Fisher, 1988/1997) or individual cultural frames of reference (Kimmel, 2000). That is, how individuals (or Malaysians) relate with each other while, at the same time, constantly making sense of the situation (e.g., Ling et al., 1988; Shamsul, 1998b) through an ethnic lens. Peters (1999) contended that "[m]ost of the time we understand each other quite well; we just don't agree" (p. 269). Do we really understand each other? I have my doubts about that but in that spirit, ethnic or religious affiliation somewhat enacts with Peter's idea.

Evans (1973) demonstrated that "[e]thics, good behavior, and sensitivity towards others are as much components of a personal communication policy as they are of a policy of an organization" (p. 27). The components function as a must-have recipe for good relations; why we want to communicate and with whom speak volumes about interethnic sensemaking. I believe that who we are willing to interact (or identify with) reveals much about our becoming. Meanwhile, one's ethnicity influences and is influenced by social action which, in turn, reflects the retrospective nature of sensemaking. In this sense, American sociologist Thomas Isaac's famous dictum fits in nicely: if we define a situation as real, it is real in its consequences (see Merton, 1995 for

---

[50]Apart from the US or many other Western countries, in "multicultural" Singapore, Malay (Muslims) in general and, in particular, Malay (Muslim) women who wear headscarves are often discriminated against (see Lily Zubaidah, 1998 for details; also Law 2003 on the headscarf issue).

a review on Thomas' work). A much bigger question is: what does that mean to a person who does not relate to other ethnic individuals in everyday situations?

<center>Theoretical Framework</center>

Symbolic Interactionism and Sensemaking

"Sensemaking involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409).

A number of theories have influenced and are influencing the direction in which this dissertation heads suggesting that, when dealing with everyday communication, no single theory can accurately explain what goes on in any situation (Baldwin, Perry & Moffitt, 2004). Work by Goffman (1959), Foucault (1972), and Bateson (1972), for instance, greatly influence this study in the sense that they bring awareness to the self as a performer who engages in actions that relate proximately to the environment. These scholars were influenced by Mead's (1934) and Blumer's (1969) notions of generalized other and symbolic interaction in which the self is constantly in the making as a result of the other.

To illustrate, as Mead posited, the concepts of "I" and "me," individual and society, self and social indicate a certain degree of understanding that what we do and why are inter-related. In other words, what and how we affect ourselves as well as others must be examined in conjunction. Mead (1934) asserted that the social act is a dynamic process which is seen within a triadic structure. The action enacted is interpreted not only by us, but also, by others. That is, we interpret each others' actions, and in turn, we (re)act by (re)adjusting our behaviors. Mead's symbolic interaction leads to the

exploration of the self, the personal "I" and the social "me." He posited that we have to take the attitude of others in a group to belong to a community. There is a role expectation that one is expected to perform according to the societal rules. As argued by Mead (1934), "[i]t is only after we have said the word we are saying that we recognize ourselves as the person that has said it, as this particular self that says this particular thing" (p. 203).

Mead's contention is that the mind works in relation to others and the surrounding. The point to drive home here is what we do is always a result of context specific social processes in which we live. Psychologically, we ensure our behaviors are accepted by others by performing the expected role. Practically, how we perform might not be certain until others witness, to some extent, (and approve) that performance. With the retrospective nature of sensemaking, the symbolic interactionist perspective lends further insights into theorizing about the former in interpersonal interethnic communication. Weick (1995) explained that "[s]ensemaking is what it says it is, namely, making something sensible" (p. 16). Sensibility comes from the result of doing or experiencing something. This is a continuous process. The act is initiated by the occurrence of an event. Given that sensemaking is about the interplay of action and interpretation (Weick et al., 2005), this study examines the meaningful lived experiences of individuals who collaborated in the research.

Bateson (1972) analyzed how the mind works in everyday situations; why, for instance, certain people move their hands a lot when they talk, and why things have boundaries. He argued that "the message must come into an appropriate structure" (p.

401), and with that structure, there must be a sense of readiness to comprehend the message. Given that knowledge generates power, as argued by Foucault (1972), our way of framing things might most likely be tainted with ethnocentric perspectives. Frames, considered matters of perspective (e.g., Deutsch, 1973; Entman, 1993; Jeong, 1999), are sets of superordinate messages about how communication is intended (Tannen, 1984).

Scope and Delimitation

Because the study was qualitative in nature, the data consisted mainly of the voices of the participants (Creswell, 2003) or informants (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) who volunteered to participate in the research. Following Deetz's (2001) communication model, I began with an *emergent* perspective as I pursued the fieldwork. My intent was to expose as many details as possible about communication patterns of Malays and Chinese and their negotiated strategies; that is, what is negotiated, and why. Gradually, I combined my findings with an *a priori* assumption derived from the literature about the symbolic nature of interaction, and my own narratives about how I make sense of what I see and hear. The following chapter elaborates the research design and data collection procedures.

Given the present circumstances in Malaysia, ethnic views would most likely be shaped by the ongoing political environment. Yet, this environment is crucial to the researcher as part of individual sensemaking. Thus, only ethnic Malays and Chinese individuals were selected due to the historical and highly competitive nature of the two groups, at least, in the political realm, and the researcher's embedded interest in these two groups. As to whether the individuals are of Malay or Chinese origin, I adopted a

combination of personal judgment and the individuals' own claims to ethnic identification or affiliation. Given that Melaka is my hometown, the participants come from the same vicinity (see Figure 1.1).

Figure 1.1: Map of Melaka

Source: Melaka State Government (2004, p. 4)[51]

Research Design

The study provides useful insights into Malay-Chinese negotiated strategies which can only be obtained fully through qualitative research. This includes observations and interviews with selected participants in their living environment. The dissertation investigates the sensemaking process of interethnic communication through qualitative interpretive research in order to obtain a thick description of the situation (Geertz,

---

[51] Melaka State Government. (2004). *Visit Historic Melaka.* Melaka: Tourism Promotion Division.

1973).[52] Such a study posits the relationship between the "knower" and the "known" (Sanger, 2003, p. 30) through ethnographic research.

The central thrust in the study focuses on the construction of the "other" and how such a construction reveals aspects of power, objectivity, reflexivity, and polyvocality (Sanger, 2003). In doing the research, I tried to minimize the effects of "objectivity" as I could not help but engage in a process of reflexivity, which "involves an explicit discussion of how the self effects [sic] and is effected [sic] by the research and writing processes" (Sanger, 2003, p. 36).[53] This deals with negotiating tensions between "writing a culture" (Sanger, 2003, p. 37) and constructing the other's (and my) culture. My intent is to share others' (and my) narratives in the construction of the sensemaking episode. The more specific interview questions depend on the actual study (Glesne, 1999) and the close rapport between researcher and informants (Patton, 2002). My research pursuit required that I go beyond the conceptualization of interethnic communication which is critical in understanding human interaction.

The study is exploratory in nature. Meaning, with my limited knowledge of the existing relationship between sensemaking and symbolic interactionism, I pursued the study with an attitude of making sense of the whole thing (see Dervin, 1992, 2003). I combined that with the theoretical knowledge I have about sensemaking and the societal culture. I adopted Geertz's (1973) attitude that one always *has* a perspective when one starts to study a culture. Yet, I attempted to understand others' views and write about

---

[52] At the time of completing this dissertation, the sad news about Clifford Geertz's passing was circulated. He died on October 30, 2006. Significantly, he left us with a thick description of culture and what it means to communicate in an ethnically diverse world. May his soul rest in peace.

[53] The writer used "effects" and "is effected" and not, "affects" and "is affected."

their story the way I see that story unfolding through the participants' eyes, that is, on our terms, as observers (Geertz, 1973) but, from their voices.

To echo Wolcott (2005), we remind ourselves of "…how much to tell of what we ourselves have seen and tried to understand and how best to present our observations" (p. 252). Bowen (1964), a White female anthropologist, concurred when she wrote, "I must learn to accept, with what patience and humility I might, the fact that their voice [the Africans], not mine, was final" (p. 100). As ethnographers, we constantly remind ourselves of the hidden dimensions of cultural practices. More important, researchers must always speak for the groups studied through the voice of the latter, not the former.

Summary and Outline of the Dissertation

In essence, how ethnic individuals enact social actions depends on how they view themselves in the eyes of others. Given that communication engages us in the process of relating (Condit, 2006) as well as meaning making, I consider (interethnic) communication as a complex realm of meaning making. That is, how one makes sense of the interaction rests considerably with the interactants. Who they are and what kind of understanding is projected towards each other in the interaction informs the continuous process of sensemaking (Weick, 1969, 1979, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). Such communication is situated and, thus, not repeated, or repeatable.

As a researcher, I examined the interactions as they occurred and were defined (and interpreted) by the informants through a series of observations and interviews. The observations and the interview data helped furnish information on the holistic nature of sensemaking which, though to be expected, is not captured in its totality given the fact

that sensemaking starts with chaos (Weick et al., 2005). As the individual self constructs

his or her social action, the orientation is also determined by how the self is accepted by

others (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). I also explored the relevant literature pertaining to

the Malay-Chinese relationship, for example, the historical/government documents,

relevant newspaper articles to get a fuller picture of the authority defined reality, and the

scholarly materials which articulate the issue. I contend that how the respondents

perceived those actions (carried out by themselves and others/authority) and the

intentions underlying those actions underscores the notion of everyday-defined reality

and the authority-defined reality of interethnic sensemaking.

Chapter Two examines existing work on interethnic communication which

(in)directly focus on Malay-Chinese ethnic relations as well as communication

exchanges. The discussion includes relevant issues pertaining to interethnic

communication, such as face-work and impression management strategies, strategic

ambiguities and whether these have implications for the nature of sensemaking as the

individuals engage in social actions. A thorough discussion of the symbolic interactionist

perspective and the rhetorical framework is provided as they inform and guide the

research. Chapter Three details the methodological orientation of the dissertation. The

interview procedure and questions are included in the Appendix section. Chapter Four

presents and discusses the findings through the multiple sources of data obtained from the

qualitative interpretive framework (i.e., the fieldwork, historical/government documents,

field notes, scholarly articles, and interviews), followed by the reflections, directions for

future research, and conclusion in the final chapters.

Definition of Useful Terms

In this dissertation, "Malay-Chinese" refers to Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians. Given that the term "ethnicity" is fluid, these individuals belong to their group based on an identification made by the authorities (e.g., in the issuance of a national identity card in Malaysia) and a participant's own sense of affiliation.

"Interethnic communication" refers to communication under conditions of *ethnic* differences (Ross, 1978). Such conditions include socialization, language, religious practices, culinary habits and other cultural preferences, mindsets, and aversions.

The analysis refers to the study of whether and how texts (or narratives) actually do affect, influence, or change an audience member's position (see Covino & Jolliffe, 1995). In this analysis, the questions include: Who is the speaker? What is the purpose? Who is the audience or listener? What is the content? How is the message delivered?

Sensemaking, as popularized by Weick (1969, 1995; also Weick et al., 2005), refers to how individuals make sense of (i.e., rationalize, think about, and essentially articulate) their uncertainties of everyday practices/actions in the environment through social interactions. As a process, it concerns plausibility, not accuracy.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

"Sensemaking is never solitary because what a person does internally is

contingent on others" (Weick, 1995, p. 40).

Introduction

As the above quote indicates, individual actions influence and are influenced by

others as they enact or make sense of daily occurrences through interaction. Weick and

associates (2005) explained that "…people organize to make sense of equivocal inputs

and enact this sense back into the world to make the world more orderly" (p. 410). This

further suggests that, regardless of how people (re)act, in an environment where diversity

is increasing, "…many events are interpreted through an ethnic frame of understanding"

(Eriksen, 2004, p. 44). Sensemaking is, thus, a process where interdependent people (in

the case of this research, of different ethnicities) make sense of everyday (shared)

experiences through interaction.

In essence, it makes sense for us to examine the dynamic discourse of Malay-

Chinese interethnic communication, particularly in a multiethnic situation such as

Malaysia. This study examines (1) how and why events are rationalized, (2) what types of

experiences are shared through different frames of reference, and (3) the ways in which

Chinese Malaysians and Malay Malaysians differ from each other in the communication

strategies enacted as part of coping with everyday interactions. While these questions are

pertinent, not much is known about the sensemaking of the two groups in terms of

interpersonal interethnic communication. I contend that interethnic communication is

communication which is contextual, relational, and situational. As such, the main purpose of this study is to understand how, what, why, when, and where Malays and Chinese interact with each other in their everyday lives.

In this chapter, I draw attention to the notion of sensemaking (Weick, 1969, 1979, 1995). This is a concept that has played a significant role in the explorations of organizational communication (e.g., Murphy, 2001; Weick et al., 2005), and it is work in the area that I refer to in theorizing a working definition of sensemaking applicable to the realm of interpersonal interethnic communication. I also review interethnic communication literature and related works pertaining to Malay-Chinese relations to provide a contextual background for the study. Whether their imagined community intersects with or differs from the other, this reflects sensemaking.

In making sense of interpersonal interethnic communication, I explore the symbolic interactionist perspective of self and other as posited by Mead (1934). Given that the research inquiry focuses on how sensemaking interplays between Malay and Chinese Malaysians in their everyday experiences, I establish the connection between sensemaking in organizational communication and sensemaking in interethnic communication—a subset of intercultural communication (Kim, 1986). Strategic ambiguity and/or negotiated strategies and dialectical tensions are factored in as part of the sensemaking process. I employ the rhetorical framework to analyze the observational and interview data, with attention given to the five canons of rhetoric, namely invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery.

Sensemaking: Towards a Conceptual Understanding

"Research and practice in sensemaking needs to begin with a mindset to look for sensemaking, a willingness to use one's own life as data, and a search for those outcroppings and ideas that fascinate" (Weick, 1995, p. 191).

Points of Departure

To begin with, two important elements emerge from my literature review as I attempt to understand the process of making sense of uncertainties and ambiguities in life. The first element involves the concepts of entrapment and liberation in organizations (Pinnington, 2004). These concepts can be applied to how we view everyday interethnic communication. The entrapment perspective is constraining when people do not allow other (constructive) ideas and voices to flourish which might affect communication. Similarly, seeing something as liberating suggests "…creating [a] culture of many sources of unity and difference" (Pinnington, 2004, p. 219) which indicates the presence of an enabling factor. As events in life can be both enabling and constraining, how we make sense of research participants speaks volumes about the diversity of sensemaking in everyday experiences.

A second element is the theorizing of organizational osmosis (Gibson & Papa, 2000) among workers who encounter dialectical tensions between maintaining personal identity and projecting the company's image in order to keep the organization intact. Such a phenomenon reveals how companies survive through a *consistent* working style, and a *consensus* among workers in the organization which contributes to the orderly manner of organizational functioning. Through interactions with family and friends,

individuals learn the culture of the organization even before they enter it. Similarly, our

social system (culture) operates through a form of osmosis. *Societal osmosis* (my

coinage) requires individuals to know how to behave in public (through association

and/or disassociation) due to the varied roles assigned which, relatively speaking, are not

as prominent as are roles in organizations, but are expected (e.g., parental role). How a

group member consistently acts, behaves, and conforms to work and living styles speaks

volumes about the culture and its hidden power, which can be taken for granted not only

from a Foucauldian perspective (Foucault, 1988, 2000) but, also, from a sensemaking

perspective (Weick et al., 2005).

Psychologically, individuals feel safe when they receive positive or confirming

recognition from community members. This psychological phenomenon is known as

"ontological security" (Giddens, 1991). Ontological security refers largely to the

dynamics of power. Foucault (2000) contended that power relations occur as a result of

our reciprocal need for each other. The constrained relationship is constructed as a result

of mutual understanding without much sense of awareness. As members of a society,

individuals accept things (e.g., power relations, responsibilities) as if those "things" are

the natural order of the world.

In fact, Foucault (1988, 2000) described society as an organized hierarchy where

power naturally flows down from the top but is also implicit in every relationship, as in

the case of community obligations. Power exists as long as the relationship holds. At the

same time, individuals are limited in their abilities to recognize the exercise of power

around them. Using the idea of *panopticon*, Foucault (2000) argued that "…surveillance

can turn submission to directives into conformity with norms" (Prado, 2000). More important, in the thinking that structuralism (i.e., the way the system is organized) is a significant part, the intention and understanding of the individual, as Foucault (2000) argued, might be seen as unimportant. The above discussion pertains to the understanding of the complex, multifaceted world in which we live, reflecting the dynamics of power relations and sensemaking among and between individuals.

<div align="center">About Sensemaking: The Theorized and Theorizing</div>

In the spirit of Weick (1995), sensemaking is about making something sensible which is grounded in individual and social activity. When people make sense of things, for instance, uncertainties and ambiguities, or even the dialectical tensions in relationships (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996), they engage in the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). According to Weick, this process is necessarily retrospective in nature. The sensemaking activity that occurs is a reflection, at least in part, of how one fits into the social system. Sensemaking is not only social but, also, instrumental (Weick et al., 2005).

Sensemaking is, then, enacted through interactions. In this regard, sensemaking becomes an issue of language, talk, and communication as contended by Weick et al. (2005). People will talk about events in order to keep the system going, so to speak, and also, to rationalize the on-goings, as illustrated in a study of how sensemaking emerges as a product of a community college president's way of framing things (Eddy, 2003). Because keeping the operation moving and intact is so crucial, it is necessary to talk

about the actions. In essence, realities are co-constructed; as such, those realities are rationalized through answers to the questions "how," "why," and "with what effects."

Interestingly, Weick (1995) also argued that sensemaking in everyday life is not synonymous with sensemaking in organizations since there are more mindful points of attention and negotiations in an organization than in ordinary situations. In this regard, sensemaking is as essential to the organization (Weick et al., 2005) as breathing is to life. This also means that organizations will not be effective, or even exist, without sensemaking. Given that sensemaking is retrospective in nature, individuals are constantly rationalizing actions when actions are disrupted due to, for instance, unfamiliarity which results in uncertainty on the part of the sensemakers. In so doing, people make choices or are forced to make choices in search for meanings or in making sense of meanings. The entire process deals with the intertwined processes of action and interpretation in which every single event matters, including the short pauses; organizing and sensemaking, in this respect, constitute one another (Weick et al., 2005).

Weick (1995) contended that there are seven properties descriptive of the sensemaking process: identity, retrospect, enactment, social, ongoing, extracted cues, and plausibility. These seven properties blend well with the relationship one has with others and the environment. One's identity is co-constructed through the enactment of these properties, suggesting that identity is constantly in the making. The sensemaking process is social and systemic (Weick et al., 2005) as people become aware of what is happening in the midst of ongoing activities through discussing, talking, communicating, and even arguing (e.g., in meetings) about what is or has happened.

More importantly, sensemaking is all about plausibility, not accuracy (Weick et al., 2005). In a later review of sensemaking, Weick and associates emphasized such elements as action, power, emotion, and labeling as these elements pertain to organizing. People can make sense of the disrupted or unfamiliar event *only* until they talk about breakdown as the popular sensemaking recipe indicates: "how can I know what I think until I see what I say?" (Weick et al., 2005, p. 416). The authors also called for increased skill at sensemaking in organizing, especially when the analyses of sensemaking indicate "…important capabilities and skills that warrant attention and development" (2005, p. 419).

It is, therefore, the contention of this study that sensemaking should not be confined only to organizational culture (see also Ojha, 2005). This is because sensemaking is about how we live life—organizational or social; life in general is ongoing, retrospective, and chaotic, perhaps more so than organizational culture when one considers such factors as ethnicity, identity, and/or diversity which seem to proceed without clearly marked boundaries (see Brubaker, 2004). If organization emerges through sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005), societal osmosis also emerges out of sensemaking as individuals' performances influence and are influenced by others. There are as many hidden transcripts (Murphy, 1998; Scott, 1990) and dilemmas in ordinary life that require sensemaking as there are in organizations (e.g., Murphy, 2001; Tracy, 2000).

To understand how one makes sense of the other, we have to examine the communication of ethnic individuals and their narratives. For instance, what can be said about one's interaction and how do ethnic individuals view each other's interactions? In

this sense, relationships are complex given that dialectical tensions are constantly

operating as argued by Baxter and Montgomery (1996). In order to understand the

uniqueness and complexity of diverse individuals, it makes sense to study their

interethnic communication patterns with others in everyday life.

Another perspective of sensemaking that might need our consideration as

researchers is the idea that sensemaking is "…a coherent set of theoretically-driven

methods for studying human sense-making" (Dervin, 1992, p. 62). In this sense,

sensemaking is considered a methodological approach to study "…the constructing that

humans do to make sense of their experiences" (Dervin, 1992, p. 67). Such an approach

is widely used in the context of audience or users in the realms of library and information

sciences (see also Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2005). Arguably, what this means is that a

sensemaking methodology encourages researchers to focus on framing questions/issues

in such a way that the questions allow stories to be generated from the vantage point of

the individual—or, following Dervin (1992), the mind's eye of a user—and not that of

the institution (Foreman-Wernet & Dervin, 2005).

Given the scenario, a more distinct feature of the sensemaking methodological approach

seems to rest with the researcher; he/she is the one who utilizes sensemaking in the

research endeavor to obtain meaningful input from the respondents (the voice from

within, so to speak). Arguably, even thinking about how to approach sensemaking is

itself a sensemaking process. Regardless of how sensemaking is approached, either as a

methodology or as a retrospective communication process examined among the research

participants, researchers should perhaps "…come to understand and question in new

ways rather than culminate in conclusions" (Watson, 2001, p. 145). Suffice it to say, sensemaking should, at least, be seen as a communication tool for further scrutiny of what goes on in interethnic interaction. Following that, it is hoped that, by exploring sensemaking in the field of interethnic communication, this study can contribute to a better understanding of the diversity of perspectives in sensemaking.

A Sensemaking Perspective on Everyday Interethnic Communication

Synthesizing and Further Theorizing

Interethnic communication research calls for more extended coverage of culturally-informed sensemaking. To be sure, the scholars who have been cited did not focus on sensemaking at the interpersonal level—the dyadic level of communication—let alone within the context of interethnic communication. Rather, a majority of the scholars just cited give more emphasis to sensemaking within organizational life. In the latter, routine practices are seen as occurring because of other interrelated connections operating within an established system (e.g., see Murphy, 2001). More often than not, the institution is clearly identified with a corporate identity (e.g., name, image, etc.), procedures, and routines.

Arguably, the term "ethnicity" is missing from the discussion of sensemaking in organizations. Even if the construction of identity is part of the sensemaking properties in organizational communication, the issue is more about the tug of war between "I" and "we" (see Weick, 1995). The collective "we" seems to be the general idea since the notion indicates loyalty (as a team). Because of that, ethnicity or one's cultural identity seems to be clouded with organizational identity (e.g., Tracy, 2000). The research scope

in this context is how individual sensemaking concerning routine practices within the organization fits within the larger realm of organizational life (e.g., Murphy, 2001).

By comparison, the focal point in interpersonal interethnic communication is how individuals make sense of the other's actions as well as their own actions in response to the other. In this sense, the individual is not only the initiator of action, but also, the responder to his or her own actions and others. A question to be asked, then, is: What are the negotiated and tactical strategies that Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians employ as a product of their sensemaking in interpersonal interethnic communication contexts? In this context, the available interethnic communication research normally includes race relations, ethnic differences, minority-majority rights, and linguistic differences, which are abundant (e.g., Gumperz, 1978; Kim, 1986; Rich, 1974; Ross, 1978; Smith, 1978) but do not emphasize or spell out the concept of sensemaking. In other words, these researches do not inform us about sensemaking and how it works within interethnic contexts.

More important, the idea of people meeting and communicating on a more cautious level gives an indication of the type of relationship that one has with the other in the living environment. How conscious are they about the other? In embracing and embellishing a constraining yet meaningful interethnic communication, the idea of *resistance of the mind*—my coinage as a result of reading Foucault (1972, 2000) and Freire (1970)—might work best in understanding the reality (from both sides). I argue that, while certain things in life are molded in such a way that we have no control over the events, individuals can still engage in some form of empowerment.

For example, we might question ourselves as to the cause and effect, and as to how we, as cultured individuals, fit into the larger system. Why do things happen the way they do, and for what purpose? Because the "constrained" relationship is constructed as a result of mutual (or forced) understanding that both parties have, I therefore argue for the empowerment of the mind in sensemaking. That is, we think sensitively, emphatically, and ethically about the ethnic discourse as we consider all individuals, especially those who we regard as a precious resource in society.

In a similar vein, the concept of civil society as posited by Gramsci (1971, 2001), refers to how the society at large (e.g., schools, institutions) and the authorities (e.g., political power) enact both the functions of hegemony and direct domination through various negotiated strategies. Such a concept might create further consciousness of the nature of human interaction. Tensions, as we have read in the literature (e.g., Haque, 2003; Shamsul, 1996, 1998b, 2004a, 2005), arise from misunderstandings because of different interpretations. (Sub)consciously, ethnocentric (oppositional) leaders or scholars can evoke racial hatred through their unbalanced rhetoric (if that rhetoric remains unchecked).

As mentioned earlier, sensemaking is not fully explored in interpersonal interethnic communication. Even though there are works that have indirectly touched on the role of culture and ethnicity in interethnic communication, and how that intersects with ethnic identity, interaction, and others (e.g., Condon & Yousef, 1975; Hall, 1966, 1981, 1995; Hall & Hall, 1990; Scollon & Scollon, 1981; Ting-Toomey & Oetzel, 2001), I maintain that a shift in focus is essential as we consider the world crises today. Rather

than focusing solely on ethnic relations or identity, we emphasize the concept of sensemaking and its processes. In other words, we center on how sensemaking—from a communication perspective—works for individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds given that sensemaking concerns with what goes on in the mind—the mindset—about actions, things, or even people (i.e., a mental construction of the other).

In this way, we might be able to better conceptualize sensemaking within interethnic contexts through the eyes of the participants and from their own voices. This means, the "soft" data collected for this study are fully described in a narrative form (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) so as to allow some scope for interpretation. As argued by Potter (1996), narrative "…should be thought of as a rather loose preliminary category that usefully collects together a range of disparate but important discursive phenomena" (p. 173). Thus, when examining sensemaking in interethnic communication, these four properties are addressed: (i) ethnic or cultural frame (as a boundary); (ii) personas (the interlocutors' ways of presenting self/personality/way of conduct); (iii) mindset (or perception); and (iv) intersubjectivity.

Ultimately, what is sensible is also intersubjective. As such, we end up having various levels of intersubjectivity because of the presence of ethnically diverse individuals. How they filter the other, if you will, is determined by preconceived ideas about or knowledge of the other. The framing influences and is influenced by one's understanding of the other. As Deustch (1973) contended, negative perceptions are difficult to eliminate. For example, a small Malay population in Singapore is often perceived as culturally deficit and is frequently marginalized as compared to the Chinese

majority in that country (Barr & Low, 2005; Lily Zubaidah, 1998). Such an image means

that the non-vocal Malay minority in Singapore is constantly urged "to learn to compete

with everyone else", especially in the education system which ostensibly uses

meritocracy as Barr (2006, p. 19) revealed. Barr contended that the subtle discrimination

practiced by the Singaporean government has portrayed/disguised the Chinese in this

country as increasingly smarter and harder working than the non-Chinese (Malays/Indian

minority).

The above revelation—I argue—is not surprising since the Malay majority in

Malaysia are often accused of clinging to their Malay "privileges" in order to succeed,

unlike their Chinese counterparts. In other words, when Malays succeed, the success is

often equated with the government's assistance—without much merit given to those

successful Malays—or by presenting misleading factors as evident in some writings (e.g.,

Chin, 2001). Ostensibly, negative perceptions of the "unsuccessful" Malay Singaporeans

are the result of their backwardness—an image which the Singaporean authority wanted

the Malays to believe as Lily Zubaidah (1998) attested. With those perceptions, Lily

Zubaidah contended that feelings of inferiority remain embedded among Malay

Singaporeans which has left them (and her) shaken. She wrote bitterly:

> Importantly, by locating the source of the 'problem' firmly within the marginal
>
> ethnic community, the racial discourse disentangles the significance of structural,
>
> institutional, and historical factors in contributing to their poverty. As the
>
> culturally deficit ethnic communities are largely responsible for their socio-

economic malaise, the onus is thus firmly on them to reform their 'deviant' and deficient ways. (p. 51)

In the same vein, Barr (2006) argued that the Malays in Singapore continue to strive in an uneven playing field without much room for resentment. According to Barr, as Malay Singaporeans are Muslims, their religious affiliation (i.e., assumed linkage with Islamic terrorists) and loyalty (to the country given their Malay Malaysian neighbor) would always be questioned. While their Chinese citizens (unconsciously) enjoy the "meritocracy" system implemented by the authority, the conscious marginalized Malays as argued by Lily Zubaidah (1998), have to combat through—what is perceived to be— the equal playing field (Barr, 2006; Barr & Low, 2005).

Unlike the large minority of Chinese Malaysians who are free to voice their opinion through their numerous associations as Tan (2004) indicated, both inside the country, and more so outside of the country (without much sensitivity from the latter), Barr (2006) asserted that the Malay Singaporeans have two barriers. One, they fear for their safety, and the other, they believe strongly that if they speak up, their condition will be made even worse. In other words, under the watchful eye—or the Foucaudian panopticon—of the predominantly Chinese ruling party and the latter's way of practising "fairness," the minority Malays and Indians subdue to the system (Barr, 2006). As a result, the reader hardly hears about the plight of the groups other than what the authorities project.[54]

In essence, the reality in Singapore as mentioned in the literature reveals two main points that are useful for an understanding of Malay-Chinese sensemaking. First, the

---

[54] See Lily Zubaidah (1998) for details.

reader is informed that the Malays are sidelined through an (un)equal playing field under the notion of meritocracy which not only favors the Chinese but also, ignores the grudges and welfare of the Malays. This is done by constantly depicting them as "not as good as the Chinese" (Barr, 2006, p. 22; see also Barr & Low, 2005), and by campaigning against the crutch mentality. As Barr (2006) contended, a hidden agenda is applied which champions only the Chinese since the recruiters (for scholarships, university enrollment etc.) already believe that someone of Chinese ancestry will excel.

Second and related to that, the situation in Singapore raises eyebrows as it pertains to a silent form of racism. There is a consistent, if subtle, portrayal of the Malay group as incompetent through such rhetoric as "compete like everyone else," as attested by Barr (2006) and Lily Zubaidah (1998). Additionally, there is an emphasis on Mandarin or other "subjective" qualities throughout institutional processes. In this way, despite the depiction of Singapore as a multicultural society with English as the national language, the reality is a society whose practices benefit *only* the Chinese majority (see Barr & Low, 2005). Given that negative perceptions are difficult to eliminate, the discrepancies that exist between Malays and Chinese are rarely articulated in many biased academic discourse. Yet, Singapore is often cited by many Chinese Malaysians (whom I know of) and biased writers as a model for multiculturalism as well as the meritocracy system which the former purportedly upholds. But, Barr's recent article raises consciousness, if not points of contestation, especially among scholars, of the "multiculturalism" and "meritocracy" conceptualizations of Singapore.

The situation in Singapore is of utmost importance in examining Malay-Chinese sensemaking in Malaysia as the former is predominantly Chinese. As such, how the majority Chinese perceive Malays (through the government's multi-pronged action) will not only affect their Chinese Malaysian neighbors but, also, all Malays who are concerned with such derogative images that are supported by the failure to present an accurate picture of the predicament of the Malays historically, socially, and culturally. As Alatas (1977) argued, the myth about the Malays with all the negative traits—as do the myths about others elsewhere—will be irresponsibly (re)cited for centuries to come. For sure, fair reporting will definitely not come from the same writers who incite ethnocentric values and racial prejudice.

To further illustrate, the situation in Malaysia is fairly similar as that in Singapore despite the fact that Malays are the majority. The word "indolent" is liberally associated with Malays which, I argue, promotes a condescending and hostile attitude among non-Malays towards the former. Alarmingly, Li (1989) revealed that even lower income Chinese in Singapore look down upon (poor) Malays![55] My literature search on Malay-Chinese relations pertains toward Malays being portrayed negatively by either Chinese Malaysian or outside/Western-based writers (e.g., Chin, 2001; Fryer, 1965; Savage, 1984; Stoney, 1989). These writers will pretentiously refer to Malays as such by referring to a selected source's opinion without much contestation (on their part) of the generalizations made (see also Freedman, 2001; Tan, 2000). Worse still, such generalizations might be based on only one event or situation. In other words, these writers conveniently use such a reference to persistently argue against all Malays and their constitutional rights without

---

[55] See Li (1989, p. 181).

holding any punches when highlighting the plight of Chinese Malaysians. It dawned on

me that, in such chauvinist discourse, the space for Malays to exist remains questionable

and limited as demonstrated by the writers' tendentious writing. The capacity to articulate

the Sino-centric perspective is stronger given their clear intellectual academic expertise

and monopoly of the international media (including the electronic media which publish

news stories concerning interethnic issues).

For example, Freedman (2001) wrote bluntly: "Why should the Chinese identify

with the Malay state if benefits are not distributed blindly?" (p. 435). Benefits, in her

sense, refer to the government/public allocations that the Chinese should receive in

relation to Malays. She went on to claim that "[h]istorically, the state has given little

reason [for the Chinese] to identify with Malaysia" (p. 435). While one can attempt to

ignore statements of this nature, as a communication researcher, I choose to take issue

with such a racist discourse. I argue that Freedman's rhetoric reflects a one-sided choice

which she made in determining "the culprit." Her use of the phrase "Malay state" clearly

singled out the Malays. And the argument (i.e., what the Chinese should get but did not)

reflected in her entire rhetoric (see Freedman, 2001) casts blame for interethnic tensions

on the Malays alone. Meanwhile, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew (the Mentor Minister of Singapore)

claimed recently that Malaysian (and Indonesian) politicians view Singapore as a Chinese

state and implied that he views it as otherwise. In his own words, "Singapore needs a

strong government…to interact with Indonesian and Malaysian politicians who consider

Singapore to be Chinese and expect Singapore to be 'sensitive' and comply with their

request."[56] In all fairness, how would one rate those conflicting statements?

While a government might be blameworthy for all sorts of things, it must be

mentioned yet again that, historically, thousands of Chinese youths left Malaysia when a

call for enrollment into the Malaysian police force was issued between February and

August 1951. Also, in 1952, the attempt to recruit two thousand Chinese youths failed

despite a fairly lucrative offer as incentive by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA),

which forms the government coalition[57] (see NOC, 1969 for details). Most of the early

ethnic Chinese who migrated to Malaysia, kept to their own space, not engaging in very

much interaction with the locals/Malays (see Maeda, 1967; Silcock & Fisk, 1963;

Wilson, 1967) except, perhaps, for some who married locals and became Muslims, and

the unique (Melaka) Babas[58](see Clammer, 1983). Lee (1972) expressed his frustration

with the Chinese community who showed disinterest in the country in which they lived

and ignored calls for participation. He argued that they were interested only in making

money. Therefore, one wonders about Freedman's motives in suggesting that the state

had given little reason for the Chinese to identify with the rest of the population.

Interestingly, Tania Li (1989), a White woman married to a Chinese Singaporean,

was cautious about placing the blame on the government when she presented the

discrepancies between Malays and Chinese in Singapore. The reader might not find this

---

[56] see *The Star Online*. Retrieved October 2, 2006 from
http://thestar.com.my/new/story.asp?file=/2006/10/2/nation/2006/002233329&sec=nation
[57] The ruling party, i.e., UMNO, MCA and MIC.
[58] Malay-speaking Chinese (born and bred locally; also known as the Straits-born Chinese); a product of
Malay/local cultural influences, not necessarily from intermarriage with the locals, but retain their Chinese-
ness in a number of ways (see also Tan, 1988a).

surprising given that the "…use of defamation lawsuits in Singapore politics is

legendary" as argued by McCarthy (2003, p. 209) who studied the political tyranny of

Singaporean politics. Li wrote, "[g]overnments, like *ordinary citizens*, contribute to the

making of history, but *not* always in circumstances that they choose or fully control" (p.

182; emphasis added). To some extent, this argument might seem reasonable even though

in comparison to Malaysia, Singapore is relatively smaller and, as such, is much easier to

control. In contrast, however, I question the blunt accusation put forth by Freedman

towards the Malaysian authority.[59] Her reference to the Malay state bears negative

connotation given that the ruling party in Malaysia is comprised of three ethnic parties.

For the purpose of sensemaking, how would the reader analyze the different rhetoric of

Freedman, Li, and Mr. Lee?[60]

By contrast, to date, I have not encountered Malay writers who openly condemn

the Chinese, at least not in academic writing. In fact, certain "workable" traits of the

Chinese, for example, *kiasu*[61] or even *guanxi*, are often considered helpful for Malays to

adopt and examine. I doubt, however, that the ordinary Malays are aware of the negative

stereotypical image of them in the literature. I argue here that the "restrained" attitude

complements the natural tendency of Malays (as Muslims) to prefer to talk about good

things. In so doing, they refrain from criticizing others, or in other words, *jaga hati*,[62] as

---

[59] As I was writing this dissertation, Singapore has banned the Far Eastern Economic Review from its circulation in the country since the publication of the July article (see http://www.feer.com/articles1/2006/0610/free/p006.html).

[60] In comparison, see Lily Zubaidah (1998) for details on Malays in Singapore; also Barr (2006); Barr & Low (2005).

[61] See Utusan Malaysia Online. *Melayu mesti "kiasu" untuk berjaya* (Malays must "*kiasu*" to succeed). Retrieved November 28, 2006 from http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan.asp?y=2006&dtpub=Utusan_Malaysia

[62] A Malay phrase; literally means to take care of the heart, i.e., sensitive to the feelings of others.

attested by Barr and Low (2005). In Malay culture, preserving respect and dignity is important not only in understanding own selves, but also others (see Alatas, 1977; Gannon, 2004). In this sense, Malays tend to contain their emotions so as not to hurt the other; hence, they are more indirect in their approaches, which should not be misconstrued as weak unless, of course, they are provoked.

Ample trust and respect should exist among Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians to eliminate the negative perceptions. Because Malays are quite reserved in their attitudes and most academic texts remain circulated among the networking group, (outside) scholars write as if they have the authority to do so, sometimes, without valid references or comprehensive knowledge of Malaysia. Rather, assumptions are made based on the writer's ethnic perceptions (or ethnic affiliation) as well as citing those writers whose intentions remain questionable. That, then, will be seen as the truth, nothing but the truth. As a result, a distorted ethnic image (or success) is promulgated/preserved.

Similarly, Steinberg (1981) argued that the ethnic myth of a group's success is often "conducted by ethnic 'insider' who seems to have a vested interest in trumpeting the achievements of their group" (p. 86). Steinberg provided the example of Betty Lee Sung's narrative about the success of Chinese in America,[63] which is "…severely criticized for romanticizing ethnic success" by Stanford Morris Lyman[64] (Steinberg, 1981, p. 86). Lyman (1973) claimed that everything a person should know about the Chinese in America is "left out or covered with a syrupy gloss" (p. 72). More

---

[63] She wrote the book, *Mountain of Gold: The story of the Chinese in America* in 1967.
[64] See Lyman (1973) for a complete review.

importantly, Steinberg contended that such glorification of an ethnic group's success "implies that groups that are less successful in the competition are somehow deficient in character or in their cultural values" (p. 87) as exemplified by the situations in Singapore and Malaysia.

With that said, as a researcher, and Malay Malaysian, I strongly contest the remarks made by Freedman (2001). I choose to strike her work off once and for all in the name of fair discourse. I argue that ethnic sensemaking informs ethnic relations, and in turn, informs ethnic perceptions as well as ethnic myths, moving in a circular manner; hence, what the individual chooses to write and ignore (i.e., select) leaves room for scrutiny. In championing ethnic-centric values, for example, Freedman's rhetoric is an example of a "my way or the highway" approach. That is, she divided the issue into the binary/ethnic realm—the *we* (the Chinese) and *they/them* (the Malays) dichotomy. This reminded me of the paradox of ethnic sentiment and ethnic goals when the culture of achievement or maximum opportunities for only one group is elevated above everything else.

A case in point: Because academic discourse is confined to a limited realm, only a selected few have access and participate. Most likely, these people work within their own network (or language) and circulate issues which they perceive they should write about. As a result, rarely do we hear about the accommodating nature of ethnic Malays or the cordial relations between Malays and Chinese in the same nation-of-intent that makes one wonder whether those writers have any real/genuine contact with Malays in daily life. I contend that Malays' goodwill, warm hospitality, and generosity as Muslims, as Raybeck

(1980) and Barr and Low (2005) demonstrated, become irrelevant when issues of benefits are raised by writers whose intentions are ambiguous while other matters pertaining to equality (e.g., economic control or access to employment by in-group members) are ignored and protected in the name of success and/or socio-economic rights.[65]

> Barr and Low (2005) asserted the following about the Malay Singaporean:
> Whether in casual conversation, in a formal interview or conducting a business
> transaction with a Malay Singaporean, one is usually struck by the gentleness and
> sophistication of the conversational skills, the reluctance to press a point or
> articulate a criticism, the comfortable sense of self-composure and friendly
> serenity. It reflects a rather *generous spirituality and humanism* that is
> commonplace within this community, but which is not in step with the dominant
> [Chinese] ethos of Singapore. (p. 178; emphasis added)

With regard to Malay Malaysians, Tunku Abdul Rahman[66] attested that "…no natives have been as friendly to immigrant people as the Malays have been" (p. 208). Even Raybeck (1980) was rather impressed with the *budi bahasa* (politeness) of the Malay and Chinese Kelantanese he studied. In retrospect, by collectively "attacking" (all) Malays, the writers are placing the Chinese Malaysian issue on the international realm (of intellectuals) to garner a wider support through a subtle yet powerful control of the mind which lacks sensitivity.

In so doing, the plight of the other (i.e., the entire Malay group) is sidelined and disrespected. Selective discourse, as the norm of chauvinistic writing, is cast as

---

[65] See Tan (2004) for a heartening yet realistic discussion on this, especially pp. 156-159.
[66] The first Prime Minister of Malaysia who spoke at the Presidential address, 11th General assembly of UMNO, Kuala Lumpur, March 1957.

acceptable given that it is written by "scholars" or "scholars from abroad." Such symbolic power reflects to some extent the embedded prejudice of ethnic individuals in everyday relations. In the long run, ethnic bashing (in the form of provocation) serves no one. Rather, it only escalates tensions as exemplified in Malaysian history in the problems that erupted in 1969.

Without an accurate portrayal of the Malay ethnic group and the everyday situation in Malaysia, there is plenty of suspicion in the rhetoric which champions "Chineseness" in Malaysia while denigrating Malays. Without balanced, rational discourse, a more likely follow-up scenario might witness individuals in both groups becoming entangled as a result of ethnic bashing. If Malay privileges are consistently quibbled, how can this type of one-sided rhetoric by irresponsible writers be viewed sensibly by civic-minded Chinese and Malays in particular? As attested by the National Operations Council report headed by Tun Abdul Razak Hussein,[67] "[n]o mention was ever made by non-Malay politicians of the almost closed-door attitude to the Malays by non-Malays in large sections of the private sector in this country" (1969, p. 24). Similarly, Mahathir (1970/1981) contended that free enterprise as practiced in Malaysia is confined to the Chinese community, which is not surprising given that they are mostly traders (e.g., Maeda, 1967). This fact should not be dismissed lightly if trust and respect are to prevail among all ethnic groups. If maximum economic gain—or a culture of achievement—is a target for Chinese Malaysians, how can we accommodate both ethnic groups in the context of fair share in this sense? Or rather, how do we define "fair share" in the context of Malaysia's multicultural society?

---

[67] The second Prime Minister of Malaysia.

More significant, details pertaining to what Chinese Malaysians lack in Malaysia and therefore should have, occupy a large amount of space of discussion in academic texts. Essentially, the predicament of the Chinese Malay community is singled out in discussions concerning the promotion of equality and justice. What kind of justice and equality are being promoted when ethnic groups strive on an already unequal footing structurally and economically? More specifically, we ask: equality and justice in relation to what? The rhetoric of biased writers often circulates around the notions of fear, marginalization, and discrimination which derive from the parent word, "minority"[68] without detailed examination of how the ethnic groups (their own and the other) fare economically and realistically in society.

As a result, Chinese and Malay cordial relations and sensemaking in everyday contexts (e.g., Raybeck, 1980) tend to be dismissed. Malays in the biased discourse are conveniently viewed as one homogeneous group which deserves discrediting and continuous criticism. In describing the tensions between and beliefs of Chinese and Malays, Silcock (1963a) argued that the "Chinese firmly believe that their wealth and Malay poverty are the natural consequences of Chinese industry, thrift, and adaptability to modern ways, and of Malay indolence, thriftlessness, and conservatism" (p. 5). If such is still true among the Chinese-centric Malaysians, how do we construct a rationalized ethnic sensemaking based on ethnocentric values in the present situation?[69]

Silcock (1963a) described the Chinese as:

---

[68] I discuss the concepts of majority and minority in Chapter 5 (see p. 292).

[69] Thus far, there has not been a specific study of how the Chinese Malaysians view Malay Malaysians (as citizens) in interpersonal communication; the studies explored in this dissertation pertain towards addressing the Malays as Malaysian or Malay State or the Malay government. In all these cases, Malays are singled out for condemnation.

…much more skilled at turning a social and political situation to their own financial advantage…In this respect, their much greater prosperity in Southeast Asia than in their own country is a result of their capacity to profit from colonial rule by others. (p. 5)

Feelings of cultural superiority-inferiority remain among the Chinese and Malays, with the roots of these feelings extending back to the colonial time. While the Malays felt deprived of access to the lucrative economic opportunities, this feeling was perceived negatively and dismissed by the Chinese. Both tended to have negative perceptions of the other (Silcock, 1963a, 1963b; Wilson, 1967). The feelings of superiority felt by the Chinese towards foreigners, for instance, was revealed by Hong Yuan in 1930 as he tried to restrain himself from such superiority-inferiority complex (see Diikotter, 1997).[70]

Meanwhile, Fisk (1964) eloquently pointed out an erroneous view commonly held by many educated Chinese Malaysians that "…the inequality and imbalance in [Malaysia] are merely another example of the rural-urban imbalance common in underdeveloped (and other) countries, and that its identification in a racial context hinders, rather than helps, the search for rational solutions" (p. 121). Following this, Fisk debunked the misconception and contended that the marked racial/income disparity between Malays-Chinese is more than simply a rural-urban distinction. Rather, he argued that the overall consumption of the Chinese, both in the rural and urban areas, is still much higher than that of the Malays. More specifically, the marked disparity indicates that the average annual income per adult Chinese male is almost three times higher than

---

[70] See Diikotter, 1997, p. 22.

the disparity between the rural-urban combined incomes of the Malays, Chinese and Indian families.[71]

In this regard, Fisk's argument pertains to the economic inequality between the local players (i.e., Malays and Chinese) in the same nation state as opposed to Putucheary's[72] arguments concerning the foreign capital dominance. Therefore, the economic dominance of the Chinese as local players in Malaysia is a reality, *not* a myth. I contend that such identification or, rather, recognition—to echo Fisk (1964)—should help the search for rational solutions. Following Lyman (1973), "an historically and culturally informed analysis of the Chinese [in Malaysia]" is needed to understand such glaring inequality.

In essence, this discussion indicates that all sensemaking—if it is to be critically examined—must consider ethnicity and/or the cultural identity of the person/author. Even though President Bush has repeatedly announced to the world that Islam is not the enemy, his governmental actions speak otherwise, at least to billions of Muslims given that any person with an Islamic sounding name arriving in America might become/is a potential suspect in the eyes of the US authority. The image of President Bush as a White, and non-Muslim, inevitably sends out numerous interpretations in the present situation regardless of his (good) intentions. While ethnicity is becoming increasingly fluid, its affiliation can provide contestation in many aspects of our life. In this sense, who speaks what and, *why* and, *how* the person speaks, becomes essential especially when politics (or economic achievement) rules. As Foucault (1972) rightly argued, knowledge is power; in

---

[71] See Fisk (1964, p. 122).
[72] See Fisk (1964, p. 122) for a discussion on Putucheary's (1960) work on ownership and control in the Malaysian economy.

the context of ethnic debates, knowledge represents the power to articulate and criticize however partial the author's position is.

Perception is, thus, affected by the person's background and life experiences. Perception also influences approach and vice-versa. Put simply, our take on events/things depends on who we are and where we come from. Similarly, our perceptions about our well being differ from others' perceptions of ourselves and vice versa. While we aim for harmonious relationships, we also need to consider what others think about the phrase. To some extent, even persona matters. (These "theorized" properties are covered more fully in the data analysis section.)

Given that interethnic relations take place within communication processes that are very much influenced by the ethnic blinkers of the social actors, the success (or failure) of any communication event depends heavily on what transpires in the interaction occurring at the time, in that particular place, between those communicators. Interethnic communication seems more intricate as the process needs to be analyzed in its entirety to obtain a thorough understanding of the interaction. So far, an understanding of interethnic communication has mostly been based on the (White) American perspective of what constitutes effectiveness in human communication (Hecht, Larkey, & Johnson, 1992; Kim, 2002; Orbe, 1995). In view of this, society needs our research (Porter, 1996), especially when ethnocentrism tends to prevail over other things. I take this to mean, researching a person's own community (for a fairer perspective). If the relating process is considered crucial in understanding sensemaking, the idea of relationships as dialogues (Baxter, 2004) should inform sensemaking in interethnic communication.

Sensemaking: The Ideals and Realities of Malaysia

As demonstrated earlier, Malaysia's multicultural realm presents a complex interplay of ethnic identities and cultural peculiarities and rules—that is, "authority-defined" reality versus "everyday-defined" reality, as often argued by Shamsul (1998b, 2004a, 2004b), and centering/mainstreaming (e.g., common top-down cultural symbols) versus the de-centering of roles and rules. Also, rural village versus urban community members might have different ways of doing or seeing things even though there is a shared cultural context. Because of the intricate nature of cultural specificities and government interventions, the situation in Malaysia might not be akin to other multicultural settings. With different social and historical constraints, solutions that might have been successful in one environment might not necessarily work in the other (see Kim, 2002). We ought to make the best out of what we have from diverse perspectives.

Given the multiplicity of cultures in Malaysia, each group has the liberty to practise its own traditions and/or belief systems. In big cities like Kuala Lumpur, for example, Chinese are free to sell and eat pork, which means the Malays have adjusted to the cultural needs of the Chinese as admitted by Tan (2004). Similarly, the Chinese tolerate the Malays in places where the latter is the majority as I witnessed in my own community, meaning they become more sensitive of the Malays' needs/religious obligations[73] (e.g., Raybeck, 1980; Tan, 2004; Tan, Ho, & Tan, 2005; Winzeler, 1985). In this sense, a good and courteous Malay-Chinese relation depends on the location and the size of the ethnic group which, in turn, reflects their *budi bahasa* (or polite/courteous language) as demonstrated by Raybeck (1980).

---

[73] I explore this more fully in Chapter Four.

Islam is the official religion while *Bahasa Melayu* is the official language. The latter is taught in all public schools regardless of ethnicity. To some degree, religion is heavily embedded in the Malaysian way of life. This is particularly true for Malays given that the words "Islam" and "Malays" are synonymous. As regards the Chinese, Chinese Religion (as a dynamic system) is part and parcel of the Chinese life as Tan (1983) explained. But, unlike Islam, Tan argued that Chinese Religion—as he described it—is polytheistic; it is not exclusive or "organized" (p. 228) as it consists of several Chinese traditions (e.g., Confucianism) that interweave with Chinese Buddhism and/or Taoism Religion. This means, the "…various aspects of Chinese Religion can be analyzed systematically as parts of a whole rather than [as] separate unrelated parts" (Tan, 1983, p. 243).

However, the Malaysian population also consists of Chinese, some of whom originally were Muslims (as descendants of Hui; see Tan, 1988b), and others who converted to Islam as they mixed with the locals. The Malaysian Chinese Muslims Association was established in 1994 to assist and protect Chinese Muslims. Rosey Wang Ma (2005), a Hui descendant, who researched Chinese Muslims (e.g., the Hui community in Terengganu, Malaysia) and the converts, argued that both Malays and Chinese have become more aware of the existence of the Muslim Chinese Malaysians now than in the past. For instance, Wang Ma explained that lack of knowledge about Islam, and misconceptions about "becoming Malay," contribute to non-Muslim Chinese prejudices toward the converts, and thus, non-Muslim Chinese reject Muslim Chinese. Meanwhile, most Malays never thought of Chinese (especially those who migrated from China) as

Muslims. These scenarios have further implications on the relationship between Chinese and Malays, with those implications contributing—to date—to the perceptions they have toward each other (see Shamsul, 2004a).

Unlike in the US, the (Malay) majority has been confined to rural areas largely as the result of two factors. First, a large number of Chinese were brought into the urban sectors of the country during the colonial period. So most (albeit not all) of the Chinese naturally occupied the urban areas—which was pretty much arranged by the British—and managed to work themselves up the social economic ladder as traders.[74] Due to this, it is not surprising to find mostly Chinese shops in big cities, and a few Malay retail stalls in small towns/villages. In most business transactions, the intermediaries for Malays would be Chinese.[75] Malays, during the colonial times, were more confined to their own space without much interaction with the immigrants, and vice versa. Second, Malays, in general, lived in localities known as *kampung* (i.e., villages) years before the British occupation. Historically, unlike the Chinese,[76] Malays engaged in different forms of work; they were either self-employed (e.g., as rubber tappers/farmers/peasants in their own rubber plots or *padi* farms),[77] or worked for others (e.g., in others' lands or as government employees). With the British occupation and manipulation (i.e., the "divide

---

[74] Historically, this was also the case in the evolution of the Chinese communities in Jamaica and Guyana where the social outcomes are very different; in Jamaica, the ethnic consolidation of the Chinese is emphasized in pursuing economic interests unlike in Guyana. In the latter, the Guyanese T'u-sheng Chinese are completely Guyanese in pursuing occupations for economic survival (see Patterson, 1975). See also Hirschman (1975).

[75] See Wilson (1967) for details and Tan (2004) for accurate picture of Chinese as 'forced' traders by the British (pp. 153-155); see also Maeda (1967).

[76] See for instance, Maeda's (1967) study on the Chinese community and occupation in *Alor Janggus*, Kedah, Malaysia. Unlike Malays who were farmers, most of the Chinese worked as businessmen, for instance as rice mill operators, general store owners etc., see pp. 37-49.

[77] A wet area/land where *padi* (rice) is cultivated.

and rule" policy), Malays and Chinese were inevitably confined into their own separate realms (see Hirschman, 1975; Shamsul, 1998b; Wilson, 1967).

Taken further, as in most postcolonial societies, the leadership had to face the challenge of nation building based on a consensus with regard to the national identity and certain ideological agreements as to what the society should be (e.g., Leong, 2003; Ling et al., 1988; Mahathir, 1993; Rustam, 1976; Tan, 1984, 2004; Tan, Ho, & Tan, 2005). The immediate challenge faced is how to build an integrated society from previously segregated modes of living inherited from the colonial past (see Watson, 1996). The words of (Tun) Tan Cheng Lock[78] to his Chinese audience in 1957 should not be ignored:

>…we may as well in all good grace include the special position of the Malays straightaway in the new Constitution, and accept the terms set out by the Alliance party in their recommendations to the Reid Commission. That we have agreed to all this indicates that we Malayan[79] Chinese want to live side by side with other Malayans in friendship and goodwill, in peace and harmony, which alone can guarantee the stability and future happiness of our great land.[80]

In the same spirit, the Malaysian government (composed of a multiethnic coalition party) has approached this challenge from many fronts. One of these is the sphere of cultural development with the aim of configuring a *nation-of-intent* (Rustam, 1976; Shamsul, 1996) that will mold the society in a manner that is appropriate to the context-specific character of the people (Shamsul, 1996). Thus, 'Vision 2020' is outlined

---

[78] Tun Tan Cheng Lock was the First President of the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and was considered a soft-spoken Baba and a good friend of many Malay politicians; he was very well respected (see Tan, Ho, & Tan, 2005).
[79] Before 1963, Malaysia was known as Malaya.
[80] Presidential Address. (May 2, 1957). MCA 9th General Committee Meeting. Kuala Lumpur.

as one of the strategies (see Mahathir, 1993). According to the vision, by the year 2020, Malaysia should be a united *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian society) which is advanced, industrialized, and fully developed (Mahathir, 1993).

The reality in Malaysia thus draws our attention to three main things: First, the society is still seen as divided even though the division is not comparable to that of the colonial period (e.g., see Abraham, 2004; Nagata, 2004; Sanusi, 1989). In everyday situations, ethnic groups are not seen as visibly integrated, particularly in academic institutions (e.g., Noran Fauziah et al., 1987; Sanusi, 1989) or restaurants as well as in other public arenas.[81] This reality raises the need to have a united *Bangsa Malaysia*. Second, the fairly strong economic standing of the country comes from a partnership of the major races with many opportunities given only to those who can grab them without proper administrative control and monitoring. There is, consequently, a need for more equal access to opportunities and partnerships in the economy where all of the races, especially the poor and needy, can work on a more level playing field towards a common goal in the public and private sectors. Third, the language used for international communication and among the educated has always been English, whereas the constitution provides for *Bahasa Melayu* as the national language. Because the Malay language is recognized as the official and national language in the government sector, it has been a constant source for questions posed by some outspoken Chinese Malaysians such as Kua Kia Soong (see Kua, 1990) or Lim Kit Siang (DAP).

Yet, critical observation of the culture reveals that many non-Malays, and even some educated Malays, rarely speak Malay among themselves. Such a scenario is further

---

[81] See Sanusi Osman (1989) for more details.

attested to by the non-Malay respondents in particular. With the former (non-Malays), a common reason given is that they have not really learned (or mastered) the language, and even when these individuals speak fluent *Bahasa Melayu*, typically, that is not the language of choice for casual conversation (Teo, 2003). As Teo attested, "[c]ommunalism has hindered the Chinese from accepting Malay, be it the standard variety or a regional dialect, as one of their languages" (p. 252).

This contrasts sharply with the situation in Indonesia. On my trip back to the US after two months of fieldwork, I witnessed how three Chinese Indonesians communicated in the Indonesian language among themselves at the international airport. Indeed, a contrasting situation was also reported among the Minahasa Chinese Indonesians who not only preferred to speak Indonesian, but they were also less assertive of their Chinese identity (see Wee, Jacobsen & Tiong, 2006).[82] One might wonder why Chinese Malaysians do not readily use Malay as one of their languages and look down upon their own members (e.g., Chinese Babas) who speak the language. *Might one of the reasons be due to the negative perceptions of Malays by some Chinese?* Maeda (1967) revealed that the Chinese in his study viewed Malays as those who "do not know their 'manners', do not think much of 'trust'…[and] think light of their parents and ancestors. And in [their] eyes, the Malays are idlers and wasters of money" (p. 96).

A case in point: Speaking Malay is often identified as being "Malay," that is, "un-Chinese," which is perceived by many Chinese Malaysians (unlike Chinese Indonesians) especially the educated Chinese as affecting their ethnic identity (Tan, 2004). In this

---

[82] See Wee et al., p. 372; also Bruner (1972).

regard, Malay-speaking Chinese (or Baba, the Straits-born Chinese)[83] are often distinguished from, and looked down upon, by the Chinese-speaking Chinese Malaysians in particular since the former speaks Malay/Baba dialect, which is not the norm among Chinese Malaysians (Tan, 1979; 1988). The Babas are considered "soft," not "fully Chinese," and "lazy" by Chinese Malaysians as Clammer (1983, p. 170) noted. Significantly, the former attributes negative traits to Malays (Clammer, 1983) for reasons that are not disclosed, at least not to date. As for English educated Chinese Malaysians, they perceive the Babas as different from them regardless of the Chinese identity retained by the Babas (e.g., Tan, 1988a, 2004).

Among some of the Malays, many reasons exist for not using *Bahasa Melayu*. Those reasons include the fact that English is spoken at home and/or at work. Conversations often involve a mixture of Malay and English, known as "Malaysian English" (*Manglish*). In other words, most educated/English speaking Malays tend to use English in their conversations with others, particularly with English speaking non-Malays, given that the majority of Malays do not speak Mandarin. As mentioned, *Bahasa Melayu* is not the typical language of choice, especially among non-Malays.

Regardless of the reason, one finds strong sentiments behind the use of a particular language in the country, especially among Chinese Malaysians. There have been numerous debates concerning the language issue (e.g., Chin, 2001; Freedman, 2001; Kua, 1990; see also Tan, 1990 for details). The political and economic realities reflect the complexities of the situation (e.g., Tan, Ho, & Tan, 2005). When the Chinese demand more things Chinese, the Malays demand more things Malay, as argued by Heng (1988)

---

[83] See Clammer (1983), Hirschman (1975, p. 11) and Tan (1988) for more details.

and Tan (2004). This will only create more contenders (from the opposite sides) and acrimony, further dividing the already religiously different groups—a scenario which also applies to the non-Muslim Chinese and Muslim communities in China, and in particular, the non-Chinese Muslims. It could very well take years to accomplish what might be called a "united nation."

If a language can really unite, the issue of "whose language" and "what language" would necessarily then become a topic of academic interest in a multicultural society such as Malaysia. For example, Ling and associates (1988) reminded the Chinese community to safeguard its own educational and cultural rights for sake of future generations. The language situation in Singapore also indicates that, alongside English, Mandarin is catching up to cater to the majority Chinese population (see Barr, 2006; also McCarthy, 2003). A similar situation occurred on a public campus in Malaysia recently when the Chinese Student Association wrote a notice in Mandarin on a publicly displayed placard; given that Malay is the language of instruction, such action was claimed to be insensitive of other races (see *Utusan Online*, 2006).[84] I wondered about the reactions if the same thing were done on the campus of a US mono-lingual university, be it in, say, Mandarin or the Arabic language. Would the situation be highly contested?

Authorship of any piece of rhetoric can be highly subjective and sociologically differentiated. In the case of Malaysia, the rhetorical voices vary not only according to individual authors' and ethnic groups but, also, according to ideological and psychological differentiations, as this chapter demonstrates. Rhetoric, in this regard, is

---

[84] Utusan Online. (2006, October). *Wajibkan kenyatan papan awam dalam Bahasa Malaysia* [Make Malay language compulsory for public announcements]. Retrieved from http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/content.asp?y=2006&dt=1013&pub=Utusan_Malaysia

culturally-based. Even within ethnic group sentiments opinions can be polarized into opposite positions. As Zuraidi Ishak (1991) contended in his analysis of the presidential addresses of the three multiracial leaders[85] on the issues of racial harmony and independence in Malaysia (Malaya at the time) between 1955 and 1957, the rhetoric revealed both a shared fantasy theme and an unshared fantasy theme.[86] The former talked about creating an integrated Malaysian society (ethnic solidarity) while the latter emphasized the rights and interests of own ethnicities (ethnic advocacy). Here, we are confronted by *collective*-defined rhetoric and *ethnically*-defined rhetoric, neither of which can be ignored. There ought to be some compromise from both sides to ease the ethnic situation. However, by presenting a derogatory image of the other especially in the scholarly intellectual sphere, the situation is only made worse, not better, as the following scenario attests.

Interethnic Relations: The Scenario

The study of differing viewpoints concerning how to promote unity includes writings about ethnic relations in Malaysia (e.g., Abraham, 2004; Khoo, 2004; Lee, 2004; Leong, 2003; Ling et al., 1988; Shamsul, 1996, 1998b, 2001, 2005; Smith, 2003; Tan, 2003, Zawawi, 1998). Work in this area focuses on several layers of emotional reaction: pride, anger, frustration, concern, and hope. This work can also be categorized according to three broad "physical" spheres: the government/official sphere, the scholarly

---

[85] In his doctoral dissertation, Zuraidi Ishak analyzed Presidential addresses of Tengku Abdul Rahman (UMNO Malay President), Tun Tan Cheng Lock (MCA Chinese President) and Tun V. T. Sambathan (MIC Indian President)—the three multiracial leaders of the Alliance Party during the period of 1955 and 1957.

[86] See Golden and associates (1997) for Bormann's works on fantasy theme analysis.

intellectual sphere, and the ordinary/layman sphere. Taken together, these spheres can be both constructive and destructive, under the multiple rubrics of "analyses."

Discussions concerning interethnic communication in Malaysia are not new although the corpus has grown considerably since the ethnic clash in 1969 (see also Chapter One). The subject has been treated under various rubrics, namely, ethnic relations, identities, nationalism, and economic disparity, with perception as the focal point. Scholarly debates, as mentioned earlier, have very often involved a measure of "ethnicizing" discourse and/or selective analyses of identities which might be considered constructive as these debates clearly demonstrate that Malaysia practices democracy. However, given the multiethnic environment where dialectical tension revolves around majority-minority contestations, the notion of democratic Malaysia is almost, if not always, taken for granted.

As mentioned, Chinese Malaysian writers or biased writers have often addressed the notions of political equality and justice, but have devoted very little attention to the economic strength /dominance of the Chinese which I elaborate in this section. Even when their economic dominance is mentioned, that dominance is often rationalized to be a matter of perception rather than reality as writers point to the fact that foreigners also occupy certain sectors (e.g., Tan et al., 2005). Even though the Second Malaysia Plan (1971-1975) stated that 62 percent of the value of equity assets were held by foreign interests (individual or company) as contended by Faaland and associates (1990), Chinese still own 11 times more than Malays.[87]

---

[87] See also Fisk (1964).

More importantly, Hirschman (1975) argued that socio-economic attainment is typically the result of the passing down jobs from parents to sons (or children). Embedded in this, then, is the ethnicity factor, which indirectly leads to discrimination into certain jobs, notably, in sales and crafts. According to Hirschman, these establishments are owned by mostly non-Malays. In other words, ethnicity is found to be the governing criterion for selecting employees, which puts Malays at a major disadvantage (Hirschman, 1975;[88] see also Elias, 2004).

In what follows, despite the structural inequality, economic expansion is often considered something gained socially, that is, through a close-knit networking or good *guanxi* (e.g., Chang & Holt, 1991). Stated differently, it is often justified that, as a group that strives for the culture of achievement, the Chinese are competitive economically due to their "business" nature as traders as described by many writers in the Southeast Asian region. As such, the reader is repeatedly informed about how the "industrious" Chinese are often *perceived* as dominating the economy by the majority population (e.g., Chua, 2003; Tan, 2004). But, given that access to the job market is largely determined by those who act as gate-keepers (e.g., Elias, 2004), how do we explain the criteria for selection with regard to Malay-Chinese relationships? While we often hear about job allocation in the government sector, similar approaches (i.e., selection criteria) in the private sectors are, admittedly, rarely discussed by some writers.

Elias (2004), however, revealed that the recruitment of managerial staff in private companies in Malaysia is deeply segmented along the lines of ethnicity. She observed patterns of racial discrimination in which the Chinese General Managers would tend to

---

[88] See Faaland et al. (1990, p. 79).

bypass their Malay executive director in recruiting Chinese supervisors through their personal contacts[89] and not based on their qualifications.[90] This was done at the expense of more qualified Malay employees[91] who were due for promotion but failed to obtain that promotion due to the absence of ethnic support from management. According to Elias (2004), one of the Chinese male training managers she interviewed only had an *SPM* (Malaysian certificate of examination) qualification when compared to a Malay female human resource executive who is an overseas graduate. The Chinese, too, she asserted would go directly to their GMs for positions and address other interests through such personal contacts (or *guanxi*).[92] Such discriminatory practice has never been articulated publicly by biased writers on the subject. Herein lies the imbalance in ethnic discourse in which these writers tend to avoid reporting on discriminatory practices in job recruitment. Rather, they focus more on the grievances of the Chinese pertaining to access to jobs in the public sector and places in public universities.

In reverse, Malay scholars have focused, quite subtly, on Chinese economic dominance as well as Malay-related problems and constitutional rights as the original inhabitants of the region (e.g., Shamsul, 1998c). Malays (through their notable party, UMNO) emphasized economic inequality when the presence of the Chinese became prominent during the British occupation (NOC, 1969). Mahathir (1970/1981) contended that "…Chinese business methods and the extent of their control of the economy of the country [are] such that competition between their community and other communities is

---

[89] This is consistent with Chang and Holt's (1991) observations of the role of *guanxi* or, *kuan-hsi.*
[90] See Elias (p. 143).
[91] Ibid p. 143.
[92] Ibid pp. 144-145.

quite impossible" (p. 56). So here, and as mentioned elsewhere in the dissertation,

economic polarization has existed as far back as the fourteenth century, regardless of

motives.

The debate has, at times, become very acrimonious, especially after the Sino-

Malay ethnic riots in Kuala Lumpur as narrated in the first chapter. But more often than

not, the rhetoric concerning the clash is abundant and lop-sided as championed by many

writers (e.g., Chin, 2001; Freedman, 2001, 2003). The event was conveniently referred to

as "…riots…against ethnic Chinese" (Freedman, 2003, p. 119), emphasizing, ostensibly,

the ill-treatment of that minority group (i.e., Chinese) in Malaysia without referring to the

available documents pertaining to the riot (e.g., Abdul Rahman, 2005; NOC, 1969;

Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969[93]). The harsh attitude of the Chinese party members towards

the Malay population was not mentioned at all.

Similarly, Amy Chua (2003)—of Chinese descent—conveniently referred to the

clash as "bloody anti-Chinese riots" (p. 36) which she claimed left "nearly a thousand

dead" (p. 36), but offered no further details. Even her references did not include specific

materials pertaining to the riots cited in this dissertation. There was no mention of the

anti-Malay parade in her discussion of the market-dominant minority (i.e., the Chinese).

Rather, I contend that her overall message exemplified Steinberg's argument concerning

the ethnic myth given that Chua emphasized how the overseas Chinese can be

economically successful despite being only a minority. And, because of that, she claimed

that the Chinese were much hated.

---

[93] Pictures of the massive unruly 'victory' parade by the chauvinist Chinese Malaysians (Gerakan Party, DAP and the suspected Communist Chinese Youths) are available in this book.

The reader might ponder on the "facts" as well as the strong rhetoric concerning the riot. Most of the Chinese/outside writers who make reference to the riot depicted this event as "anti-Chinese," either starting or concluding their discussion from that depiction (e.g., Chernov, 2003). As "scholars," they lobby for a view of the Chinese as important local players, without similarly depicting the Malays as partners who need to be addressed in the riot. In this respect, the statement contrasts sharply with what ordinary Malays would generally verbalize—that, during the time of the riot, Malays were afraid to go into the cities since many were killed by Chinese who displayed hatred toward Malays.

With the unruly mob shouting to chase the Malays out of their native land, as revealed by Comber (1983) and others (NOC, 1969; Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969), it is not surprising if Malays (at the time) perceived Chinese as a threat and, thus, as not to be trusted. Such feelings might arguably be even more prominent and justified after the riot. Sadly, the racial slurs, the acts of jeering accompanied by indecent gestures hurled at the Malay bystanders and policemen, the brooms brought along in the parade so as to "sweep" the Malays out of their land, or descriptions of the riot that are available in the literature (see Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969) were not dealt with by biased scholars in their adulation of ethnic kinsmen. More importantly, when championing Chinese rights and economic success, the Chinese remain an undifferentiated "successful" unit (or mass) (Tan, 2004; see also Lee Kuan Yew's remarks earlier).

The mention of the tragedy is usually colored with a double sense of awareness in the academic discourse. The first awareness is that the riot has somehow created the

necessity of belonging to an ethnic group (e.g., Abraham, 2004; Tan, 2000b). The other

awareness is that Malays are accorded the *bumiputera* status as a result of the Malay-

Chinese conflict which leaves the Chinese, in particular, to feel mistreated (e.g., Tan,

2000b). *Bumiputera*, a Sanskrit loan word meaning "sons of the soils," pertains only to

the Malays and the other indigenous population (see Means, 1978; Shamsul, 1998c). A

legal definition of a Malay is someone who professes Islam, speaks Malay, and practices

Malay culture while the label *bumiputera* is more inclusive. That is, alongside Malays, a

bumiputera can be a Kadazan, Murut, or even an Indian Muslim who does not have to be

a Muslim, or speak the Malay language, and practice Malay culture (see for e.g., Means,

1978).

Tan (2000b) argued that "the racial riot provided opportunity and excuse for the

younger Malay nationalists to push for Malay dominance and Malay participation in all

fields through government intervention" (Tan, 2000b, p. 448). If one reads the

justification for the clash, arguably, one encounters polysemous interpretations,

particularly on the part of the non-Malays/Europeans (e.g. Hilley, 2001; Leong, 2003;

Watson, 1996). The imbalanced picture further reflects an indifferent attitude toward

Malays in the eyes of at least some writers. The emerging pattern from such rhetoric is

one which depicts Malays as rioters and as "privileged," and depicts Chinese as victims

and as "marginalized." Clearly, writers who champion a selective rhetoric do a disservice

to at least one group, if not both. The discourse, in this framework, is highly, and

ethnically, selective. There is no space for Malays in this type of discourse in part

because they lack the capacity to articulate. To date, this type of largely one-sided

discourse is becoming increasingly widespread. In the eyes of these writers, the Malay

realm seems almost non-existent.[94]

Apart from Freedman (2001), Tan (2000b) and Chin (2001) also questioned the

Malay privileges as enshrined in the constitution as well as Malay dominance, Malay

cultural displays, and Malay religious sanctions. To add to that, Malays—without a clear

distinction—are labeled as the "weaker stock" and "backward" as revealed by Tan

(2000b). Such labeling is justified by referring to the *Malay Dilemma* by Mahathir

(1970/1981). What is clearly missing from Tan's rhetoric is an emphasis on the fact that

the book was written three decades earlier. Overall, in my view, the book (despite its

unconvincing genetic discussion) was a "wake up" call to all Malays at the time; that is,

to raise Malays' consciousness as to their complacent attitude to events given that the

country had witnessed an ethnic clash which clearly belittled the Malays as hosts and the

majority population. Intersubjectivity, in this case, is clearly evident, albeit with a self-

serving tendency. As Mahathir (1970/1981) contended:

> The Malays are as much as everyone else for a free enterprise system. But it is
>
> becoming more and more apparent that the competition which should be between
>
> individuals and business groups has developed into a competition between racial
>
> groups in which one group has an absolute advantage over the other. This can
>
> hardly be termed fair competition. Even in America where the free enterprise
>
> system has had maximal acceptance, cartels and monopolies by any group or

---

[94] If one reads a book by Lydia Teh, for example, one finds that she talked about almost everything and anything but Malays in her weekly column in *the Star* (daily), even though her stories are about Malaysian life; also see p. 200-201; see Teh, L. (2004). *Life's like that! Scenes from Malaysian life*. Subang Jaya, Selangor: Pelanduk.

groups are prohibited. In Malaysia however the facts are seldom mentioned for fear of racial conflict. What is forgotten is that failure to face these facts can lead to the very conflict that everyone wants to avoid. (p. 52)

Subtly, Shamsul (1998b) described how, under the guise of scholarly writing, Malays and Chinese in Malaysia (and, more freely so, elsewhere) were able to present a highly contested scenario about majority-minority rights and dominant-subordinate power relations. He claimed that those who raise arguments that the Malays have a strong power base, as evidence for their claim, cite the fact that Malays hold a numeric majority, and nothing else. The lack of economic power of the Malays is viewed as something not worthy of discussion. Worse still, the Malays are blamed for their lack of economic power that we often read about, suggesting anyone can choose to enter the free market if he/she wishes. Factors such as access, networking, earlier entry during the British colonial days, and even opportunities are not addressed. While other things are ignored, those who evoke ethnic hatred or indulge in hate-speech seem to operate selectively through reference to self-serving aspects of the situation.

Shamsul (1998b) argued that the historical background should be considered when making any claim about Malays and their rights. In this regard, Pye's (1968) characterization of modern Chinese politics fits any form of rhetoric which is condescending. In Pye's (1968) words, "…hate and hostility are not only more openly acknowledged but they are extolled as positive virtues of the political activist" (p. 68). Following Pye (1968), some writers (e.g., Freedman, 2001) have (whether intentionally or not) shown enthusiasm in "singling out [the] enemy" (p. 68).

Clearly, we have a conflict of interest between Malays and Chinese in Malaysia;

the former (as a whole) is labeled as and accused of having more rights as it is the

majority based on the *bumiputera-non-bumiputera* dichotomy, while the latter demands

more political control. Economic control (for long term, maximum gain) is viewed by the

latter as the right to improve one's status—an argument which has long been a

conundrum between Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians. Meanwhile, Malays

(who do speak) demand more economic power since they claim that the Chinese elites

monopolize the economy (Daniels, 2005; A. Kadir Jasin, 2004). This is particularly true

in the private sectors which are Chinese-owned as revealed by Daniels (2005; see also

Elias, 2004; Tan, 2004).

Malays, in particular those who venture into the private sector, also contend that

the Chinese mostly prefer to engage in business deals or establish networks with

members of their own group (Cartier, 2003; Chin, 2003; Elias, 2004). Such scenarios

would most likely conflict with how majority-minority rights are played out in the

Malaysian reality. Because certain things (e.g., access to certain jobs in the private

sector/employment opportunities) are not made public, particularly for some ethnocentric

Chinese; Malays *will* always be the target as a majority. While it seems acceptable to

argue on the basis of majority-minority rights, I contend that the very notion of majority-

minority is context-specific and relational. More significant, such acrimonious exchanges

between the two groups pose intractable challenges to the efforts taken by the

government towards nation-building, as envisioned by Mahathir (1993). Tan (2004) was

right when he argued that rationality must be seen in relation to the people concerned. In

this regard, it should be for ordinary Malays and Chinese who strive to have a good

guanxi in Malaysia.

> Ye Lin-Sheng (see Tan et al., 2005) wrote persuasively to his Chinese audience:
>
> But if the Chinese are to rid themselves of the NEP's[95] 'ghost' and be committed
>
> and proud Malaysians, the Chinese and the Malays must engage each other more,
>
> not only in business partnerships, but equally important, in personal relationships.
>
> More *interethnic friendship* is needed to bond the two communities so that they
>
> understand and trust each other. Chinese parents must explain to their children
>
> and the rationale, legitimacy and necessity for affirmative action. The parents
>
> should speak of the NEP's efficiency rather than warn their children that 'you
>
> must work harder' since the Malays have a head start.[96] Such statements may
>
> seem innocuous – meant only to make the children work harder – but they have
>
> prejudiced two generations of non-Malays. (p. 330; emphasis added)

Notably, Ye's persuasive remarks reveal three underlying factors which call for further

examination of the Malay-Chinese mindset. Firstly, the significance of NEP is not

relayed accurately. Secondly, the Malays' predicament in the society *vis-á-vis* the

unequal economic footing in Malaysian history is rarely addressed in the scholarly realm.

Thirdly, the belief among the Chinese that Malays have a head start is deeply ingrained.

These factors might affect interethnic relationships and communication between Malays

---

[95] The New Economic Policy (NEP) was established in 1970 with the purpose of bridging economic inequality between the Malays and Chinese. With the government intervention, Malays managed to take their share in the economy. For more details, see Syed Husin (Ed.). (1984).

[96] This should be contested as it is misleading; it gives a wrong perception and creates prejudices. Malays did not have any head start following the arrival of the colonial rulers. Malays lagged behind in many aspects, including the economy, until the government intervened. Malays would have lost their lands without solid governmental protection (see Hirschman, 1975; NOC, 1969; Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969).

and Chinese. Thus, it is not surprising to find minimal interethnic interaction among Malays and Chinese outside of the workplace as this study demonstrates.[97]

Some Chinese Malaysian writers describe how Chinese are given the opportunity to participate with Malay counterparts, especially with the introduction of the NEP (Chin, 2003; Heng, 1998; Tan, 2004; Tan et al., 2005). They claim that NEP has produced not only many new rich Malays to compete within the existing trade but, also, rich Chinese. As a result of NEP, these Chinese become richer, not poorer, due to their connections with Malay politicians or elites. As Ye (quoted in Tan et al., 2005) confessed, "[t]he Chinese should realize that their wellbeing is inextricably tied to the economic and political dynamics of the Malay majority" (p. 330), and that "…experience shows Malaysia to have been in a 'virtuous circle' – the more the Malays have, the more the Chinese will have (and have it more safely, too)" (p. 331). Given that most businesses remain to be controlled by the Chinese, whatever the Malays consume will go back to the hands of the Chinese.

In what follows, I contend that the situation in Malaysia is crucial in understanding the idea of communication patterns and sensemaking among ethnic Malay and Chinese individuals in daily experiences. Essentially, their sensemaking will tend to promote or prevent ethnic integration and, consequently, nation building. How Malays and Chinese are portrayed—either as villains or heroes—in the (Chinese-centered or Western-based) academic discourse is vital in making sense of interethnic communication among lay persons, especially discourse about how average Malays and Chinese fare in multicultural Malaysia. What they think, and how they filter their

---

[97] See Chapter Four for the qualitative research work pertaining to interviews and observation.

perceptions of the other, deal largely with their mindsets (and other related factors) that would be passed down from generation to generation. In essence, how the communicators view their everyday interactions is important, especially when they have pre-conceived ideas about the other.

In describing Malaysia, some writers consider current day Malaysia to be "in a state of *stable* tension" (e.g., Shamsul, 2004, p. 130; emphasis added; see also Shamsul, 2005) due to feelings of distance and distrust experienced by most Malays and Chinese. Meanwhile, other writers describe the situation as ethnically polarized. Here, the question of who advocates for whom speaks volumes. In this regard, I contend that Mahathir's (1992) rhetoric, which calls for a state of collective "we-ness" among Malaysians, must be taken seriously. As he attested, "[e]thnic and religious passions are particularly easy to inflame. Once aroused, [ethnic and religious passions] are difficult to subdue" (p. 7). For sure, the 1969 riot was a true, yet ugly, reflection of ethnic passion which, in turn, acted as a catalyst to the feelings of economic, political, social, and even cultural deprivation among the two ethnic groups. When Malays were singled out for verbal insults by the Chinese, the former rose (from their calm yet tense nest). As two (people) are needed to tango, the riot was an outcome of an already hostile attitude and ethnic hatred especially among Chinese-centered individuals.

Apart from this scenario, it is equally important for me, as a Malay Malaysian, to present a balanced view of the condition in Malaysia in the postmodern era. As stated earlier, rarely do we encounter Malays' writings about the other (e.g., Chinese). Rather, the Malays are more prepared to criticize other Malays (politically and academically), but

not the other. As a result, we get to read about the Malays' fear, weakness, control, and other factors as perceived by others and their cheerleaders whose intentions are suspect. Yet, when that is done, such rhetoric is used to highlight the "marginalization" of all Chinese Malaysians, which obviously needs to be contested on a case by case basis. Likewise, I argue that (sub)consciously, Malays are marginalized, especially in the economy and private sector (e.g., colleges) since the majority have no knowledge of Mandarin,[98] which leaves them handicapped in understanding the Chinese mind through its writings, culture, and others.

It must be mentioned here that, in any nation-state, the majority will tend to have the ruling power. But, in Malaysia, the scenario is such that all ethnic groups are allowed to practice their culture, indeed more freely than even in many (western/Asian)[99] countries which are supposed to promote freedom of speech and human rights.[100] The Malaysian government consists of both Malays and non-Malays occupying a proportionate number of cabinet posts. The cultural recognition includes government assistance given to the construction of Chinese and Tamil schools, temples and churches, although to be sure; larger allocations are given to build mosques for the larger Malay (Muslim) population.

Unlike the Malay minority in Singapore, Chinese Malaysians have thousands of associations, many Chinese schools, Chinese institutions/colleges and one very newly

---

[98] Some Malays (who I know of) do actually send their children to Chinese schools. Chinese schools are commonplace in Malaysia.

[99] Arguably, this might be contested in Singapore and China with regard to the Muslim population.

[100] In multicultural Singapore, wearing a headscarf (veil or *tudung*) for Muslim women (Malays) is an obstacle to getting a job as most Chinese employers prefer that female employees not wear this symbol of the Muslim region (e.g., Lily Zubaidah, 1998; see also Law, 2003 on the headscarf issue).

established Chinese university, that is, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman or UTAR[101] (see

Heng, 1998; Tan, 2004), where the population is almost entirely Chinese. This is evident

when the researcher, for example, conducted a web search of the courses and societies

offered at UTAR for the purpose of this dissertation; there was, however, no reference to

either the Malay society or the Muslim Student Association, at least on the web page.

This situation suggests the presence of very few, if any, Malay/Muslim students at

UTAR. Given that UTAR was established by and is sponsored by Chinese politicians and

Chinese associations, and approved by the government through a generous grant (e.g.,

launched by Mahathir, the former Prime Minister of Malaysia), a majority Chinese

population at UTAR is to be expected.

Yet, one wondered about the dynamics of multiculturalism that Malaysia

promotes which is absent at UTAR, at least, through its numerous associations. Even

though the website lists foundation programs in Malaysian Studies, courses on the

national language, and classes in moral education/Islamic Studies, societies pertaining to

these courses are not in evidence. There is, however, one society known as "The Asian

Cultural Studies." Would that indicate the zero existence of the (Chinese) Muslim student

population at UTAR? What do we know about international students? The nine-member

International Advisory Council consists mainly of Chinese from outside of Malaysia,

except for two non-Malays.[102] Numerous scholarships, including government sponsored

scholarships, are available to the students enrolled at UTAR. Of course, as the university

---

[101] Despite its Malay name, UTAR is a university for the Chinese population who could not enter the public university (see Tan, 2004) initiated by Dr. Ling Liong Sik and approved and subsidized by the Malaysian government through Tun Mahathir. In 2002, only one Malay student enrolled (see the UTAR news clip).
[102] See UTAR news clips [Online]. Retrieved 20 October 2006 from http://www.utar.edu.my/v2/portal/newContent.asp?contentid=83&catid=12

is supposed to practice meritocracy, only the best applicants are supposed to be admitted. In 2002, only one Malay student was reported to enroll at UTAR.[103]

This picture has almost convinced me that UTAR is a "Chinese university" as opposed to a public Malaysian university which many writers claim is Malay-oriented. Apart from UTAR, there are numerous private colleges, especially in the capital city, that are Chinese in orientation. That being the case, would Malay or Indian students enroll? Or, if a private university were almost entirely Malay, would Chinese enroll? Consider a similar ethnic division in the US. If a university were almost entirely Black or White, would the White or Black enroll? How, then, would we account for ethnic perception as well as ethnic segregation in this situation?

A case in point: Chinese enrollment in tertiary education has been proportionately more than that of the Malays. Khoo (2006)[104] indicated that, in 1980, the total of Chinese enrollment in the universities was 47 percent compared to only 40 percent Malay enrollment. The enrollment pattern shows a preponderance of Chinese Malaysians in mainly professional fields such as medicine, engineering, accountancy, and law. Meanwhile, Malay enrollment is heavily concentrated in the humanities, especially religious studies, and social sciences. Because Malays tend to graduate in less marketable fields, this results in higher graduate unemployment and lower average income in the job market.

But as Tan (2004) admitted, "[n]ot many people realize that Malaysia is the only country where Chinese education has survived best outside of the Mainland China,

---

[103] See UTAR news clips [Online]. Retrieved 20 October, 2006 from http://www.utar.edu.my/v2/portal/newContent.asp?contentid=95&catid=12
[104] See Khoo (2006, p. 186).

Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao. The use of Mandarin is much more widespread and

deeply rooted than even in Singapore" (p. 118).[105] Yet, Freedman (2001) argued that the

provision of autonomous education to the Chinese Malaysians underscores the fact that

Chinese Malaysians are divided in their loyalties and outlook. Meanwhile Chin (2001)

queried that, "…90% of all government scholarships were awarded to *bumiputera*

students" (p. 80; emphasis original) without reference to the data on the *unequal*

economic footing between Malays and Chinese. How, then, do we evaluate such an

imbalanced situation? And how do we incorporate checks and balances in all the public

and private universities/colleges throughout Malaysia, given the *unequal* economic

standing of different ethnic groups? If ethnic integration begins with positive ethnic

sensemaking, then obviously, this scenario needs to be addressed.

Daniels' (2005) ethnographic work in Melaka, Malaysia, offers valuable insights

into the everyday-defined reality of Malay-Chinese individuals. His research reveals

several interwoven elements addressing ethnic relations which center on ethnic issues and

rights, and power dynamics between the various ethnic groups he interviewed. As he

argued:

> In contrast to Malays and Indians, [the Chinese] rarely hold open houses[106] in
>
> their homes, thereby rejecting Malay symbolic advantages and dominant forms of
>
> cultural citizenship as they choose to continue their distinctive customs of holding

---

[105] Perhaps, with the revelation of Singaporean 'unjust' system by Barr (2006; also Barr & Low, 2005), this is contested.

[106] Unlike in the US, the "open house" concept in Malaysia is concerned more with providing food and refreshments in the host-guest welcoming context especially during festive celebrations. The idea is to provide generous hospitality in terms of food, akin to Bedouin hospitality.

family gatherings over following the government promoted pattern of open house

hospitality to members of other cultural categories. (p. 266)

Alarmingly, Daniels' discovery synchronizes with Freedman's (2001) remarks

about why the Chinese should identify with the Malay state with regard to the unequal

distribution of benefits. Not holding an open house, for example, can be seen as a way of

not identifying with the Malay (the ethnic majority). Since the Chinese are unanimous in

the pursuit of their rights as argued by Tan (2004), the closed-door policy in Melaka as

demonstrated by Daniels' survey should not be a surprise to the reader. But, I argue that

if the survey is to be taken seriously, this scenario is, indeed, worrying. According to Tan

(2004), the Babas prefer to identify with and be identified with the Chinese, not the

Malays, even though the former speaks hybrid/localized Baba Malay.

Owing to such reactions from the Chinese in Melaka, Daniels (2005) claimed that

Malays often consider themselves to be accorded "marginalized first-class citizenship"

(p. 267) when competing for jobs in the Chinese dominated private sector, regardless of

their on-paper qualifications (see Elias, 2004). Also, when competing for jobs in the

private realm (typically Chinese owned businesses), qualified Malays often still fail to

enter the job market because one of the job requirements is to speak Mandarin, which

inevitably, favors the Chinese. Meanwhile, the Chinese in his survey regard themselves

as "second class" citizens (Daniels, 2005) in relation to the *bumiputera* concept which, in

their minds, only pertains to Malays. As one Chinese businesswoman shared, "[b]ut of

course our government did not say that we are second class. It did not specify it in that

manner, but we feel it in that manner" (p. 95). Her rhetoric implies a subtle frustration;

that is, it reflects *her* agony towards different concepts of citizenship for Malays versus non-Malays. Ideally, such frustrations (of both Malays and Chinese) must *not* be dismissed if a harmonious relationship—with a great deal of trust and respect—is what we crave. I further argue that this kind of rhetoric is more credible to pursue than is rhetoric which sparks hatred between/among Malaysia's ethnic groups.

Kadir Jasin (2004) wrote that the "negative" attitudes of Malays contribute to their either ignoring or failing to realize the fact that many of the government contracts (e.g., under the New Economic Policy) have successfully created non-Malay business individuals in varied sectors, while most Malays still remain less competitive. As Cartier (2003) demonstrated, the economic success of leading Chinese entrepreneurs in Malaysia has depended on interethnic linkages with Malay leaders (also Tan, 2004). In the same light, Hassan (2004) presented the agony of some Malays towards the Chinese in the capital city (Kuala Lumpur). For example, the latter mainly live in exclusive areas, own many shopping complexes and private institutions involving the possession (benefits) of government licenses through Malay partnership (Heng, 1998), including taxi companies whose drivers are mostly Malays. Such displays of wealth and power by the Chinese in the capital have, indeed, influenced many Malays to be worried about their status and feel inferior in their own country (Hassan, 2004; also Daniels, 2005). These fears stand in rather stark contrast to the notion of Malays as the "majority" and Chinese as the (marginalized) minority.

In finding common ground for effective interethnic communication, how do we explain such conflicting situations? If interethnic communication is a *joint* effort,

negative perceptions and group fears are potentially dangerous. But, I will restate here that understanding the past as well as the current situation is essential if we are to understand the sensemaking of Malays and Chinese in mundane situations. This brings us to the issue of religion. Because Malays (as Muslims) do not eat pork, and avoid entering places that serve pork, this has been a clear ethnic marker between them and the Chinese (Tan, 2000). This marker is even more evident in mainland China between Chinese Muslims and non-Muslim Chinese (see Gladney, 1991). Despite the religious restrictions imposed by the authority, Muslims in China continue to fight for their rights.[107]

Tan (2000) remarked that "[a]fter residing in Hong Kong since 1996, I find that eating pork there is taken for granted by the Chinese and is not really an ethnic marker" (p. 453). A religious comparison is useful when one attempts to find possible ways to merge the diverse groups for the purpose of better interaction. But, given the situation in Hong Kong, whose population is predominantly Chinese,[108] would it be a fair comparison? While a non-Muslim Chinese might naturally find comfort living in Hong Kong with regard to eating pork, a Malay Muslim might find it difficult when it comes to the selection of (halal/Muslim) food and eating places.

But, I argue that it is only a matter of how one adapts to the situation he or she is in without affecting personal beliefs. (Muslims all over the world have to adjust to "the problem of pork" and other religious-related issues when leaving their own "comfort"

---

[107] See *The Boston Globe*. [Online]. 'Muslim voices rising in China'. Retrieved November 26, 2006 from http://www.boston.com/news/world/asia/articles/2006/11/19/muslim_voices_rising_in_china/
[108] A majority of the Chinese population (i.e., 95 percent) in Hong Kong are non-Muslim while only 1 percent is Muslim (Chinese and non-Chinese Muslims). See Pluss (2006) on details on the Muslim population; Pluss, C. (2006). Becoming different while becoming the same: Re-territorializing Islam identities with multi-ethnic practices in Hong Kong, *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 29,* 656-675.

zones, but honestly, we have never heard of their plight.) While eating places in the US (a non-Muslim country) freely and widely sell pork (e.g., McDonald, KFC, Pizza Huts etc.) without considering whether Muslim Americans, as a minority (or other Muslim overseas—myself included), for instance, are affected,[109] why would Malays in Malaysia be scrutinized? Would the policy makers in the US consult the Muslim minority in the country about the "pork issue" or "Muslim" food? However, when it comes to the Chinese minority in Malaysia, their needs are catered to in numerous ways.

With regards to religious issues (such as pork), individuals who do not live in isolation should exercise a great deal of sensitivity. To illustrate religious conflict, in 1968 during the Cultural Revolution in China, the relationship between the authorities and Muslims was one of disrespect and humiliation. In one instance, pork was eaten in the mosque of the Hui community in Shadian and the pig bones were thrown into a well, which the Muslims used to wash before prayer (see Dillon, 1999). In Dillon's words, "their [the propaganda team] activities provoked a violent response from the Muslims of Shadian" (p. 165). Even in the US, the use of the Quran instead of a Bible when a Muslim congressman takes his oath of office has sparked a national debate, with a local television host raising the following question: "Is it un-American to be sworn in with a Quran instead of a Bible?"[110] Such a discussion demonstrates the problem of diversity, which involves, among other things, negotiation, accommodation, and tolerance in sensitive matters such as religion. In these examples, religious affiliation creates points of contestation instead of uniting religiously different individuals.

---

[109] Having lived in the US, I have never heard that being discussed by the US media!

[110] This issue was discussed on CNN *Paula Zahn Now* on November 30, 2006.

With that said, Chinese Malaysians are, in fact, free to raise and eat pork, drink alcoholic beverages and gamble, with the existence of numerous "Chinatowns". Big cities like Kuala Lumpur and Penang, for instance, are almost Chinatowns by themselves, if one looks at a glance. Even Melaka Town (not Melaka state) depicts this image. But, unlike the US which depicts itself more as a Christian country (with its public celebration of Christmas), Malaysia consists of a majority Malays who are Muslims. Therefore, what is required here is ethnic sensitivity and tolerance; the religious issue should not be used to harbor ill-feelings or exacerbate ethnic tensions. Should religion and/or dietary habits be highlighted to the point that such exaggeration can pose a threat to interethnic communication/relation?

Khoo (2004) offered a more humble perspective. He emphasized unity and harmony as essential for good living by referring to *Sun Tzu's (500BC)* words of wisdom. In pushing for racial harmony, Khoo spoke of making efforts to foster better ethnic relations, with these efforts including open houses, cultural exchanges, and fostering equal opportunities in all fields. This kind of good-natured spirit relates well with the Chinese way of communicating which we often read about (e.g., Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Kim, 2002). Similarly, my experience dealing with my Chinese friends (from China) while in the US has always been a pleasant encounter.[111] I am humbled by their way of conduct. My friendship with Chinese Malaysians during my school days remains meaningful. The notion of harmony seems crucial to Chinese communication practices as

---

[111] Sadly, I do not get to know many Chinese Malaysians during my stay in the US which makes me ponder the Malay-Chinese sensemaking/relation overseas.

revealed by Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) even though, admittedly, that would mainly be stressed among families and close ones (in-group members), not with ethnic outsiders.

A similar call for racial tolerance among the Malays has been made by Malay writers (e.g., Idris, 2001; Shamsul, 2001b) to sharpen awareness of the importance of such tolerance. In doing so, some writers would engage the audience in relevant topics such as Malay *adab* or etiquette, Malay historical background/identity (e.g., Abdul Aziz, 2001; Mazlan, 1998; Shamsul, 2001b). However, like Malays, the Chinese community is also heterogeneous. That is to say, what is considered normal practice to the Chinese in China might not be seen as such to Chinese Malaysians. Put simply, the behavior of Chinese Malaysians should not be likened to that of the Chinese in China. Indeed, there are many cultural differences among the various Chinese subgroups in Malaysia, namely the Cantonese, Hokkien, Hakka, Teochew, Baba, and Hainanese (e.g., Tan, 2004).

The nature of the Malays and Chinese, in the context of Malaysia, needs to be re-examined for a deeper understanding of Malay-Chinese interethnic sensemaking pertaining to everyday routines. What the characters are like and how they desire to be seen by others underscore ethnic sensemaking and/or perceptions. In the same spirit, a study conducted by a group of researchers at the *Universiti Sains Malaysia* (Penang) that examined human resource management in the Malaysian labor market (1994) revealed two interesting phenomena at the workplace. First, both Malay and Chinese respondents claimed that, unlike Malay managers, the Chinese managers practiced favorable treatment toward employees. Second, the favorable treatment was felt by the Malay respondents more than the Chinese respondents, especially in the private sector (primarily

businesses owned by Chinese). The 1994 study also quoted a professor of Indian origin

(Chandra Muzaffar) as saying that such a scenario occurred because, unlike their Chinese

managers, Malays (as Muslims) tend to adopt a more Islamic approach in their

management which requires them to make the non-Malays, in particular, feel welcome.

Thus, the situation in Malaysia calls for a different interpretation of what is

appropriate and democratic since Malays form the majority. If the medium is the message

(McLuhan, 1964), how do we confront perceptions? Does it make a difference whether

the term "Chinese Malaysians" is used in this dissertation as opposed to the term

"Malaysian Chinese"? Ong (1982) asserted that, with secondary orality (i.e., with literacy

being prominent), "we plan our happenings carefully to be sure that they are thoroughly

spontaneous" (p. 137). This means that, the more people are affected by things around

them, the more they want to make things seem "right." The risk here is that people who

are negatively affected tend to see the much greener grass on the other side without

giving due consideration to the plight of others living alongside them. As such, discontent

emerges, mixed emotions occur, and dissatisfaction becomes an endless cycle. What,

then, is to become of interethnic communication in everyday reality? In stating my case, I

restate the problem at issue in the following section with reference to several theorists

and events that have occured within the context of Malaysia.

<center>Restatement of the Problem</center>

From a communication perspective, Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson's (1967)

popular, yet contested, axiom (see Motley, 1990) highlights the impossibility of one *not*

communicating in interactional situations, suggesting that all behaviors in the presence of

others constitute communication (Watzlawick's interview in Wilder, 1978). Such a

perspective demonstrates not only the importance of human communication, but also, the

relevance of communication in situations where there are bound to be "others." As

Watzlawick and colleagues (1967) explained, "[i]t is the response of the partner that is

necessary for the 'classification' of a given message" (p. 117). That is, an individual's

(re)action is the result of the presence of the other.

Following a close relationship between communication and behavior, Furnivall's

(1948/1956) concept of a plural society needs further examination, if not rejection. Given

Malaysians "non-mingling" behavior in places other than the market, and in particular,

their "non-mingling" in institutions of higher learning, further inquiry should focus on

how these individuals are supposed to interact with the other. In other words, if

individuals only communicate in the market, how do we explain their interactional

behavior in other places? On what basis do we claim that people only "meet," hence

"interact" in the market? Following Watzlawick (1974; also Watzlawick et al., 1967),

communication is about how we see ourselves, how we see others, and how we see others

seeing us. The contention here is that there are more shared spaces now, than before

(Furnivall's time, 1940s). The niche for interaction is much wider given the fact that

one's sensemaking is contingent on others (Weick, 1995).

Therefore, regardless of whether individuals mingle in a common space, as long

as they feel the presence of the other, they *still* engage in a performing act within society

(Goffman, 1959; 1967; Mead, 1934; Watzlawick et al., 1967), but the question is to what

extent. As humans, we cannot possibly "ignore" others' presence even when that could

very well mean attempting not to stare at each other, in the lift or on the bus. I contend, once again, that the situation in Malaysia is changing, dependent on which ethnic dimension (or location) we examine. It is in this context that we ought to make sense of interethnic communication in everyday life.

We need to understand that interethnic communication, as a phenomenon, is contextually specific, bounded by culture, environment, technology and other parameters, such as ethnically bounded rationality, that govern the nature of society. Interethnic communication exists at various interconnected levels—the individual or personal, the mediated (dyadic, triadic, interpersonal etc.), the group, and the public. How we interact, particularly with people from diverse cultures, takes into account our (cultural) perceptions as speakers and hearers (e.g., see Kochman, 1981; Ting-Toomey, 1986). As such, I find sensemaking an interesting dimension to examine.

For this purpose, interethnic communication can be examined in two ways: one way is through a focus on the content of the communication, and the other way is through an emphasis on the communication strategies employed by interactants. Research focusing on the communication content seeks to examine perceptions which include the diagnostic perception of interethnic differences or difficulties in communication. This type of perception should attempt to reveal the points of contestation, the sources of grievances, the value orientations and, hence, the potential areas of convergence and divergence. The other approach to understanding interethnic communication emphasizes communication strategies and styles which are apparent in scapegoating, stereotyping, acts of denial of, say, a particular event or time in history. Through these strategies and

styles, one takes an historical approach to the interpretation of events that might influence interethnic communication. Ethnically chauvinistic power relations are allowed to persist in ways that might eventually encourage protests against ideological hegemony and the articulation of a more vocal rhetoric of justice or just society. Taken together, all these acts might be termed offensive rather than defensive communicative acts or, in some instances, as a combination of both offensive and defensive acts that are constantly being interplayed between the communicators.

Since the absence of any particular communicative act articulates as much as do the acts that are present, the defender and offender strategies might initiate further pulls toward negotiated interaction. Often times, we hear about the marginalized position or outcry about civil rights infringement, as in the case of Malaysia's national language policy. As someone who resides in the country, I am considered a member of the majority (but not necessarily dominant in terms of economic power) and often times encounter dialectical tensions in my relationships with others who might be from a politically subordinate group (as claimed) but who (sub)consciously, enjoy superior economic power through their advantages of prior entry and good *guanxi*. If success is measured by how much money one makes, how do we assess the wide economic gap between the Chinese and Malays which started way back in 1940s (see also Nagata, 1979)? As Silcock (1963a) attested, "…in 1957 as in 1947, Chinese incomes were about three-fifths and Malay incomes a little over one-fifth of the total, for Malaya as a whole" (p.3). How, then, do we explain fairness with regard to the wide economic gap between the Malays and Chinese as a whole?

While one part of me shares the sentiment of the other with the intent of enjoying a smooth conversation, the other part tells me to defend the rights of my group as enshrined in the Malaysian constitution; after all, it was written with the consent of all ethnic groups in the constitutional bargain of 1955. As such, automatic citizenship for all immigrants was awarded in return for the recognition of Malays as the original sons of the soil, with Malays thus acquiring special privileges in an uneven playing field, at the time, which admittedly still persists until today. How, then, do sensemaking episodes work with my research participants? How would my own sensemaking of interethnic communication be affected by, and affect, the very subject I am examining?

These tensions, despite the unity of oppositions at least in relationships between concerned parties (Baxter, 2004), are considered matters of perception. At this point, Gerald Phillipsen's notion of a defender who responds to others' racist remarks (in his ongoing study of social interaction and race in the United States; personal communication, January 19, 2006), raises at least one interesting issue from the perspective of interethnic communication. That is, how would the strategies employed by a defender (myself included) play out in actual social interactions? What transpires between the interactants? What do the diverse individuals talk about? From the point of view of a defender, what communicative acts are (not) offensive? How would an offender justify his or her claims? What has been the basis of such an offense? That is, what are the possible strategies of a negotiated interethnic communication?

From the two suggested studies, one can explore the larger domain of interpersonal communication in which the communication process becomes intertwined

with relationship development and the individual self (Mead, 1934). The dialectical

tensions occurring in one's mind can derive not only from the relationship itself but, also,

from the ethnic background of the person. The tensions occurring in one's mind would

influence the way the relationship is going and managed. In other words, the individual

sees the other not only as his or her (in)compatible partner but, also, his or her rival. In

this sense, ethnic perception should be factored in as a dimension that is worthy of

exploration.

Perceptions serve as a narrower domain (in comparison with sensemaking) that

can be examined. Uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) or

interpersonal adaptation theory (e.g., Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991) might be useful

as bases for predicting about how a relationship is perpetuated. Specifically, these

theories address ways in which individuals enact certain communicative acts or make

certain communicative choices. Why a person would be motivated to interact with

another, and whether an individual's desire to know the other increases over time, tells a

great deal about the relationship as well as individual (dis)contentment. Ting-Toomey's

face-negotiation theory (1985, 2005) invokes the concept of mindfulness, that is, the

manner in which a person relates depends very much on his or her awareness of cultural

differences, and the other self. In this sense, the way a Chinese speaks with a Malay (in

Malaysia) and vice-versa, reflects both directly and indirectly the speakers' social-

historical background, environment, education, and consciousness about self as well as

the other along with the idea of nation-building popularized by the government.

The smaller domain in which one can examine the two studies is the notion of perception in conflict situations. Deutsch (1973) argued that there are strong tendencies for most people to think about themselves favorably, but they will have opposite views of others, particularly in their perceptions of conflict. Deutsch (1973) identified the inability to have a positive attitude toward others in conflict situations as a well-demonstrated psychological truth. What this means to interethnic communication is that the attitudinal elements intertwine with such factors as perceptions and stereotypical images to influence the nature of intended and received messages.

Deutsch (1973) contended that "a *conflict* exists whenever *incompatible* activities occur" (p. 10; emphasis original; see also Deutsch, 2000); such incompatibility includes the different perceptions people have towards others. Inevitably, misperceptions and misjudgments of the *other* can make conflict situations more difficult to resolve, leading to an either-or battle—win or lose. From a communication perspective, individuals who attempt to avoid conflict engage in what Ting-Toomey (1985) identified as face negotiation moves, either to avoid confrontations or to avoid losing ground in the contest (or interaction). Face-negotiation theory (see Ting-Toomey, 1985, 2005) states that all individuals engage in some form of face maintenance or negotiation in all communication situations. The theory further assumes that the concept of face or "facework" (Goffman, 1955, 1967), as part of performing self in society (Mead, 1934), is considered more problematic when the individual is in an emotionally vulnerable situation. Given that people perceive things differently, certain events might be misconstrued (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

How can one tell (in particular, how can a researcher tell) if a person's intention has been misconstrued in a social interaction? Do we resort to a "sort of" frame to retell the message? How do we deal with such limitations? How do we recognize the differences in whatever we learn/receive or impart? These questions evoke the notion of authorship, that is who says what and to whom? Also, the discussion centers on the individual point of view versus the societal point of view as an area of contestation. In this regard, individually defined reality of everyday life would be dissimilar to authority-defined reality as both articulate different interests and tensions (Shamsul, 1998b).

Individuals, as players in social interactions, act as gatekeepers with respect to the flow of messages, the rules that are in force and the roles occupied by spectators. They also engage in aspects of emotion management and communication apprehension as these are not compartmentalized domains but are somewhat overlapping. As such, understanding social interaction demands an appreciation of anxiety, emotion, and apprehension. An emotion is something which fluctuates and, therefore, is as unpredictable as the interaction process itself. A communicator can only make sense of an interaction as and when it happens. Following Metts and Planalp (2002), "under what circumstances do people feel compelled by their feelings or able to control them?" (p. 362). Studies of real interactions, therefore, are much needed "…*where emotions are negotiated* in the moment, using all available channels, responding to situational constraints, and the like" (Metts & Planalp, 2000, p. 362; emphasis original).

Further Understanding of Interethnic Communication

I will restate here that defining key terms—or the focus—of interethnic communication is not easy (see Kim, 1986; Ross, 1978). This is the case when scholars attempt to make fine distinctions between interethnic communication and other related-terms such as intercultural communication, interracial communication, or international communication. Cultural differences (as implied in interethnic communication) can easily come under another rubric, say intercultural (Kim 1986; Ross, 1978). For a wide variety of studies to fit in, Ross (1978) defined interethnic communication as communication under conditions of *ethnic* difference. Shaped in this light, he proposed three approaches to the study of interethnic communication: approaches to groups, approaches to individuals, and approaches that focus on processual or interactional views of messages, with this third approach usually tending to overlap the first two approaches. The group approach addresses questions of "we" versus "they" and "us" versus "them" (i.e., identity). This means, group and individual differences become central. Diversity, rather than similarity, is accentuated.

Meanwhile, the individual approaches analyze the specific linguistic differences between members of ethnic groups and examine how these differences affect interaction. For example, Gumperz (2005) revealed that intonation and manner of speaking have been found to be possible sources of cultural misunderstanding. He pointed out that the Indian, and Pakistani female workers in a cafeteria in Britain felt that they were discriminated against by the native English speakers (i.e., their supervisors and clients), but the workers failed to understand the reasons for the discrimination. Through a series of interviews, the

workers were found to be sending different contextual cues to those native speakers which, in turn, contributed to a negative interpretation of the words/ sounds the former produced. The outcome of this linguistic analysis led Gumperz (2005) to suggest "a strategy for self-diagnosis of communication difficulties" (p. 34) among the workers.

Singh, Lele and Martohardjono's (2005) argued that Gumperz's analysis serves as typical evidence of a native's misperception (hence, prejudice) which has led to a one-sided understanding of human communication—a Eurocentric perspective. By asking the women workers to "self-diagnose," Singh et al. argued that Gumperz was implying that "the dominant [native English speakers] have nothing to learn, only something to teach" (p. 53). Of course, general misunderstandings occur when non-English speakers attempt to speak the language of the dominant group (i.e., English). Yet, Gumperz's (2005) emphasis on the remedy among the women workers means that he sidestepped the fact that the ability to learn should be the responsibility of *all* speakers, not only the responsibility of members of the subordinate group (Singh et al., 2005).

The above example illustrates how intonation or other language forms, as part of *ethnic* differences, can act as barriers to effective interethnic communication (see also Gumperz, 2001). A misunderstanding of others' ways of speaking can easily lead to the binary "we" versus "they" as the previous example illustrates. Clearly, the *actual* causes and reasons for misperceptions among members of different ethnic groups, in particular between Westerners and Asians, as well as among Asians, need further interrogation. For example, how can we avoid falling into the trap of ethnocentrism? Should one have a vested interest (i.e., an involved/relevant cultural positioning) to begin with? The

responsibility for effective interaction rests with all individuals irrespective of their background (e.g., Hall, 1959). Interethnic consciousness should be further evoked through analyses in which ethnocentric tendencies are commonly observed.

Kim (1994, 2005) posited a contextual model of interethnic communication using an open systems perspective. Kim's model involves a functionally interdependent set of components consisting of a communicator, situation, environment (i.e., multiple levels of context), and behavior (or action). She explained that these components "…co-constitute a communication event in which all components operate in a *reciprocal* relationship of 'stimulus and response' rather than a one-directional cause and effect" (2005, p. 328; emphasis added). Interethnic communication, therefore, occurs in its entirety; this means power relations, messages, intonation and so forth surrounding the individual are all intertwined in an interaction which explains how the mind works (Bateson, 1972).

In personal and distant relationships, communication clarifies or complicates matters. Bateson contended that "the message must come into an appropriate structure" (p. 401), and with that structure, there must be a sense of readiness to comprehend the message. In this sense, "…a picture is not fully specified unless its frame is also specified" (Givon, 1982, p. 2). It would not be sufficient to capture an entire story by simply looking at a single picture. Rather, one needs contextual cues for a fuller depiction of the event.

On a similar note, Hecht, Larkey and Johnson (1992) claimed that what constitutes effective African American communication differs from that of European Americans. They conceptualized interethnic communication, based on an African

American perspective, as having four components—ethnic identity, communication

issues, conversational improvement strategies, and communication satisfaction—which

underscore the importance of the ethnic culture (or identity) and heterogeneity (Hecht,

1993; also Orbe, 1995). This perspective challenges the "universal iconography" of

African American communication often adopted by communication scholars that

inaccurately reflects the lived experiences of "everyday" scenarios (Orbe, 1995). More

importantly, these four components suggest that communicators must know *how*

differences operate in interactions, and what those differences symbolize in each group so

that individuals can better situate themselves.

Ethnicity and Dilemma

Ethnicity, as Kim (1986, 1994) pointed out, needs elaboration. Ethnic group is

based on "…a commonness of subjective apprehensions, whether about origins, interests

or future (or a combination of these)" (Cashmore, 1994, p.106). By the same token,

Eriksen (2002) contended that ethnicity should be regarded as something *between*, not

inside, that is "…an aspect of a *relationship*, not a property of a group" (Eriksen, 2002;

emphasis added). In this sense, according to Eriksen (2002), ethnic identities are both

ascribed and achieved as individuals blend with society and their environment. In doing

so, each individual comes into contact with others. In a similar vein, Gladney (1991),

who studied the Chinese, particularly Muslims in the People's Republic of China, argued

that "…ethnicity is an intensely political phenomenon; an ongoing dialectical mixture of

self-perception, other designation, and state-definition" (p. 309). Meanwhile, Wu's

(1982a) study of the Chinese in Papua New Guinea describes ethnicity as an oscillating
identity.

A communication event, according to Kim (1997), is interethnic whenever the
communicator perceives himself or herself to be different from other interactants in terms
of ethnicity, ethnic group membership, and/or ingroup identification (Kim, 1997). So, the
nature of interethnic communication rests on a number of situational factors, namely,
history, cultural gaps, identity, common values, as well as other antecedent factors such
as linguistic, economic, political and religious differences. Interethnic communication, as
a phenomenon, is understandably fluid, and emergent. This means that interactions
depend not only on the speakers' and hearers' diverse backgrounds, but also on many
other variables, for example, their status/position in society (hence reflecting income,
wealth, and so forth), age, gender, and environment that could easily be manipulated to
generate communicative events. All these variables contribute to the content—or
conversational package—which, in turn, determines the success of the interaction.

Thus, the dilemma of interethnic communication is the inability to understand
others' interpretations (Gumperz, 1978, 2005). Meaning, individuals might not even
understand each other, let alone, to agree, which stands in stark contrast to what Peters'
(1999) would like to believe.[112] More often than not, minorities see themselves as
incapable of making themselves heard and/or understood by members of the dominant
group. Who says what and how remains problematic. But, how should we manage
interethnic communication in everyday life? What is telling about ethnic space and ethnic
narratives? I contend here that sensemaking provides us with some valuable insights.

---

[112] I discussed this earlier in Chapter One;

Residential location, as part of living, also determines the kind of space that is relevant to communication, either enabling or constraining. Ethnic space can consist of a physical or personal realm. Space is multidimensional; as is true of interethnic communication, space is fluid and open. We consider ethnic space to be a negotiated and, perhaps, contested realm, a hostile or hospitable realm of sub-ethnic groups. One should take the utmost care to ensure that space is not invaded. Otherwise, ethnic conflict could arise.

Ethnic security theory states that ethnic conflict occurs as a result of group members feeling threatened by the dominance of the other, both economically and culturally (Byman, 2002). Specifically, the concern here is with cultural survival, not physical survival. Schoenberger (2000) asserted that "…racial [or ethnic] identity is not a self-consciously constructed collection of characteristics, but a condition which is imposed by a set of external social and historical constraints" (p. 238). This brings to light a Marxian perspective that, even though people make history, the circumstances in which they do that are often not of their own making. Thus, the extent to which Malaysia is considered a plural society created by colonial power, in which ethnic groups—Malays and Chinese in particular—are segregated based on a "divide and rule" policy (see Shamsul, 1998a, 1998b), is still being questioned.

In retrospect, when ethnic groups live in their own social world, and only "meet" in the marketplace, as Furnivall (1948/1956) observed during the colonial time, one needs to examine what, who, how, and why questions for the purpose of nation-building. Is communication reduced due to segregation? Or is it due to lack of interest in knowing the

other? If so, how do individuals make sense of everyday activities through interaction? I present below two aspects of communicative strategies that individuals might employ as part of making sense of the interethnic communication.

Strategic Ambiguity

Strategic ambiguity can be both harmful and useful. Regardless of how one views the concept, strategic ambiguity indicates something about the manner of speaking or about getting messages across or things done, particularly in an organization. The phenomenon of strategic ambiguity includes the intentional act of leaving space for assumptions (Eisenberg, 1984). The concept, therefore, refers to the ability to simultaneously reveal and conceal. In other words, communication which is ambiguous seeks to forge unified diversity as well as solidify the outcomes, be it individual or organizational. Ambiguity can be achieved in several ways—through vague, unclear, imprecise or figurative language, and also through detailed or literal language.

Examples of the strategic use of ambiguity include the use of vague terms or imprecise language. Since "language is fundamentally contextual and constructed" (Eisenberg, 1984), the ambiguity might not be recognized. This is because the emphasis is more on interaction, and not on the actual message. In this sense, individuals can reduce uncertainty or minimize confrontation when using strategic ambiguity. The language used is so strategic that the ambiguity is hardly noticed unless the text is interrogated. I contend that individuals often employ strategic ambiguity in interpersonal communication. Therefore, the study examines interethnic interactions/conversations by drawing attention to sensemaking as part of the reason for offering "dimensions of

communicative context appropriate for the study of strategic ambiguity" (Eisenberg, 1984, p. 237). The other part is to understand how communicative strategies are interpreted by others.

<div align="center">Rhetorical Framework</div>

In order to understand the process of sensemaking which involves language, talk, and communication, rhetorical analysis is employed as this form of analysis is concerned with the intended potential activity of a text (spoken or written) as well as its unintended potential activity. Rhetorical analysis also allows the researcher to "…study whether and how texts actually do affect, influence, or change auditors" (Covino & Jolliffe, 1995, p. 6). In other words, how a message is delivered, who delivers that message and where the message is delivered informs the overall persona of the listener as well as that of the speaker. The rhetorical questions include: Who is the speaker? What is the purpose? Who is the audience/listener? What is the content? How is the message delivered? The analysis, thus, encourages a more meaningful demonstration of the data, or a nuanced understanding of individual sensemaking episodes through the exploration of the five canons of rhetoric: invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery. With these, I also discuss Aristotelian argumentative appeals (namely ethos, pathos, and logos) which intersect and interact within the text/messages. These appeals, in Aristotelian argument, are connected and interdependent.

Briefly, ethos refers to the self, that is, the writer or speaker and his or her credibility/character. In Aristotle's persuasive argument, "…a text must demonstrate that the rhetor is a person of good sense" (Covino & Jolliffe, 1995, p. 15), which means, the

speaker's character and wisdom are informed/articulated by the actual messages

delivered. Pathos, then, refers to the emotional appeals of the text that are meant to

activate the audience. That is, the text is created in such a way that it evokes an emotional

response from the audience. It is meant to stimulate feelings and to seek a change in the

attitudes and actions of the audience (Covino & Jolliffe, 1995). Meanwhile, logos assists

in mobilizing the power of reasoning (Covino & Jolliffe, 1995); in this sense, the actual

argument is presented through a rationale or supportive reasoning. In essence, the

rhetorical framework addresses the ways in which the research data are presented and

examined. More important, regardless of the rhetoric ethnic individuals use, their manner

of talk is the key to understand the Asian mind and their civilization as contended by

Oliver (1995).

<div align="center">Concluding Remarks</div>

The dissertation examines sensemaking in everyday Malay-Chinese

communication in Malaysia. Through exploring sensemaking episodes, the study further

analyzes how, what, why, when and where Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians

interact with each other in their everyday life. What strategies are negotiated? What

claims can be offered about strategic ambiguity among the ethnic individuals? Ordinary

Malays and Chinese are embedded in an environment where many issues are not only

complex but, also, highly contested as I have tried to present. The focus of the study is on

understanding interethnic interaction patterns of two ethnic groups: Malays and Chinese.

As mentioned elsewhere, my lens as an insider should lead me to acquire significant

information that other researchers might not get (De Andrade, 2000), even though this

might not necessarily be true of researchers who, by virtue of experience or training, see themselves as having the same advantage as the "insiders" (Merton, 1972).

The literature review has demonstrated the relevance of an ethnic perspective in the understanding of sensemaking in interpersonal communication. Such a perspective takes into account various elements including persona, ethnic/cultural frame, perception and intersubjectivity. These elements cannot be overlooked if we are to understand the process of interpersonal communication in its entirety especially in a multiethnic society where ethnic diversity presents a multiplicity of voices. These voices might vary considerably, but they are not to be taken for granted. Following Watson (2001), a researcher needs to know how to make sense of respondent experience.

Thus far, this chapter has shown that sensemaking, as a concept, has not been explored much in interpersonal interethnic communication. This, then, calls for further understanding of how sensemaking works among ethnic individuals. What have been explored within interethnic contexts are issues pertaining to ethnic relations, majority-minority rights and how such issues constantly affect the life of individuals, particularly those that concern identities. Malaysia, in particular, has seen numerous episodes of ethnic differences, either through acrimonious public debates, intellectual discourse (e.g., Nagata, 1979; Shamsul, 2004a, 2004b; Tan, 2004) or exchanges in everyday situations (e.g., see Daniels, 2005 on his qualitative work in Melaka).

My intent is to contribute to theorizing about sensemaking within interethnic contexts in everyday situations, which unfortunately, is very rarely addressed, if at all.

The focus of this dissertation is thus on sensemaking, and on how individuals negotiate ambiguities and uncertainties. I restate here the main research questions:

RQ1. Where and why do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians interact with each other in their everyday life?

RQ2. What strategies are used by Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians in negotiating differences within interethnic encounters, and why?

RQ3. How do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians make sense of interethnic interactions?

RQ4. When and how do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians manage/negotiate communication strategies within interethnic encounters?

RQ5. In what way do the positionalities and exchanges (negotiations, bargains, pleasantries etc.) of Malays and Chinese in the society affect the nation's progress towards national integration?

Essential in these questions are aspects of hidden transcripts (e.g., Scott, 1990), or the back stage performance (Goffman, 1959). In other words, what is *not* spoken—or talked about—within the front stage performance (Goffman, 1959) of interethnic contexts?

Because sensemaking deals with meaning-making and perspectives, interpretive qualitative methods using participant observational fieldwork is most appropriate as argued by Kilbourn (2006). Chapter Three details the methodological orientation of the dissertation which includes the essential research questions and the rationale for the choice of questions, method of analysis, the type of research technique used and its entities, research subjects, and the rationale for focusing *only* on Malays and Chinese, and

the selection process. Data collection procedures and data analysis method are discussed,

to be followed by research etiquette, limitations, and a short summary.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Qualitative research is "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world"

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 4).

Setting the Scene

This dissertation focuses on familiar yet complex questions that need to be

addressed concerning Malay-Chinese interethnic communication; that is, how, what,

why, when, and where do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians interact with each

other in their everyday lives? In essence, this study examines a highly contextualized

phenomenon of *situatedness* with regard to interethnic communication by drawing

attention to the idea of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Stated differently, I examine how

Malay and Chinese individuals (co)construct reality so as to facilitate participation in the

society in which they live—the so-called imagined community (Anderson, 1991)—

through a series of sensemaking moves/endeavors. Given that sensemaking never "starts"

or "stops" (Weick, 1995), for life itself is continuous, individuals constantly experience

the sensemaking process.

Overall, elements of survival, empathy, and consciousness-raising, or

conscientization following Freire (1970), are assumed to interplay among the ethnic

selves in the sensemaking process. I argue that the parameters of interpretation are

layered with individual awareness, prejudices, (past) experiences, and collective

consciousness as enabling and constraining constructs. Meanwhile the human lens is

colored by several factors, including individuality as agency and supposedly shared

values that can, in fact, mean different things especially to ethnically diverse people. Given the above, my intent is to examine how ethnic groups make sense of their everyday situations in order to assist our understanding of the larger phenomenon in our social world, that is, their conjoint participatory acts of human life. Ways of organizing things in life are socially constructed as people participate in the "lifeworld"— a term Habermas (1984) used to refer to a(n) (ideal) place where people possess/experience mutual understanding, thus achieving social integration. Because individuals have created needs, such needs give rise to the desire to accept and be accepted in the society which, in turn, affects behaviors and interactions. Ideally, life is created through mutual participation where people look for common understanding in making sense of the details regardless of whether the sensemaking actually makes sense.

As bizarre as it sounds, it makes more sense, then, for researchers to understand the current, but never replicated, complexities of interethnic communication. To be sure, I have not captured the entire life-episode since sensemaking, as mentioned elsewhere, starts with chaos. Only partial truths (Clifford, 2001) are obtained. These partial truths must be considered in-situ as illustrated by the sensemaking narratives of the respondents as well as my own sensemaking. Multiculturalism calls for the right to be heard, to include a plurality of voices without allowing the dominant group to overshadow the marginalized. Instead of looking at the partial pictures, ethnographers look at the whole situation, focusing on interconnectedness between individual parts. Gregory Bateson (1972), for instance, focused on patterns including social interactions and communication, and "the connectedness of life" (p. 11). The reciprocal nature and

complexities of human relationships demonstrated by Bateson's work have stimulated interest among countless scholars from the disciplines of psychology, communication, sociology, and anthropology, including the writer of this dissertation. My intent is to extend such theorizing to sensemaking in interpersonal interethnic communication.

In part, this study reflects my desire to understand how people with diverse ethnic backgrounds get by and relate to others through an examination of sensemaking episodes. As people connect, and get connected, the symbolic interaction should remain more solid, so to speak. Given that sensemaking among Malay-Chinese individuals are considered routine to them, how they negotiate actions and exchanges, affects me greatly on a personal level. That is, I learn to relate to others through my own sensemaking as I engage in defining and evaluating the research endeavor and when transferring such observational analysis of my fieldwork into writing. Experiencing it, as Patton (2002) argued, "accentuates the participant part of participant observation" (p. 268).

Interethnic communication as a subset of intercultural communication has always been my central focus within a field that is broadly interdisciplinary (see for instance, Hall, 1959, 1995; Kim, 1994; Samovar & Porter, 1988; Scollon & Scollon, 1994). Because of that, I tried to inquire as to how best to understand and communicate with people. My choice of this topic was prompted by the overall desire to contribute towards theorizing about sensemaking as well as towards making Malaysia a harmonious society. Sensemaking contributes greatly to an understanding of interethnic communication to further fine-tune the concept, especially when interethnic competencies or negotiated strategies are considered the tools of the trade. Crafted another way, how do individuals

respond to the varying interactional episodes in everyday life, a space where the

organizational flow is not as transparent, or structured, as the organizational construct? In

this chapter, I detail the following: the research questions and the rationale for the choice

of questions, method of analysis which includes the type of research technique used and

its entities, research subjects and the selection process, research/data collection

procedures, method of data analysis, research etiquette, and limitations. A summary of

the section is presented to provide a clear review of the methodological orientation.

<div align="center">Research Questions</div>

I restate the essential questions for a fuller understanding of the research inquiry.

Specifically, this research project asks:

RQ1.   Where and why do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians interact

with each other in their everyday life?

RQ2.   What strategies are used in negotiating differences, and why?

RQ3.   How do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians make sense of

interethnic interactions?

RQ4.   When and how do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians

manage/negotiate communication strategies within interethnic encounters?

RQ5.   In what way do the positionalities and exchanges (negotiations, bargains,

pleasantries etc.) of Malays and Chinese in the society affect the nation's

progress towards national integration?

Based on these research questions, the following factors were included as part of the

interview proper:

1. Individual experience: past and present.

   Reminiscence/recall – describe everyday experiences in Malaysia. Talk about worst/best experiences and explain why.

2. Outcome/Reflection:

   a.   How such experiences affected the individuals.

   b.   Describe the different levels of interaction.

3. Action: How respondents overcome the difficulties/challenges encountered in communicating with other ethnic individuals.

4. Construction of self and other:

   a.   How they view/describe selves.

   b.   How they describe/define the "other" in everyday experience.

5. Assumptions concerning ethnic integration:

   a.   What they think about efforts to promote ethnic integration in Malaysia.

   b.   Share the different levels of ethnic experience/promotion, if known.

6. Assumptions concerning interactional realm:

   a.   How the respondents view the interactional realm as a site for promoting interethnic understanding.

   b.   Whether they are conscious/aware of the interactional realm as a site for promoting interethnic communication.

7. Assumption about activity space: How the respondents describe the use of space and facilities by different ethnic individuals in the area.

8. Assumption concerning effective interethnic communication:

    a.   What is needed to communicate effectively with the other?

    b.   Ideas concerning different levels of human understanding and intentions.

9. Ethnicized knowledge:

    a.   How ethnic identity enables or constrains interaction.

    b.   Whether an individual's rank or position matters.

    c.   How politics (especially communal parties and leaders) influence attitude towards other ethnic individuals?

10. Open questions/Further Comments.

As it was essential that the questions posed made sense to the informants, I conducted two pilot interviews of the actual questions prior to engaging in the fieldwork. By piloting the questions, it became clear if a line of thinking held the potential to yield informative responses, hence indicating whether the questions can be further developed and honed (Kilbourn, 2006) so that more refined questions could emerge. However, the list of questions was treated as a flexible guide; the actual probes were adjusted according to the informants' reactions.

Method of Analysis

"[T]he significant issue is not whether one method is superior to another but,

rather, whether the method a researcher employs can yield convincing answers to

the questions that the investigation is intended to settle" (Thomas, 2003, p. 7).

Setting the Pace

Methodologically, I pursued this research through a series of in-situ observations

and in-depth interviews. Interactions were viewed in their natural setting. My initial

observation started as soon as I landed in Malaysia since sensemaking is ongoing. Given

that I have the advantage of viewing the subject matter from an insider's (emic)

perspective, the goal, then, was "to collect the richest possible data" (Loftland &

Loftland, 1995, p. 16) for the purpose of getting a thick description (Geertz, 1973). I

observed the individuals around me as we arrived at the airport, passed through the

immigration, and waited at the airport terminal—for almost one hour—for our ride to

Melaka (Malaysia).

Wengraf (2001) alerted researchers to the idea of subjectivity which refers to "the

permanent or transient characteristics of the subject who is acting as informant in the

interview" (p. 9). That is, how interviewees and interviewers speak about the subject

matter provides an indication of their subjectivity. In this sense, there is a complex

interplay between researchers and interviewees. The latter are not simply respondents.

Rather, they function both as informants and collaborative partners (Rubin & Rubin,

2005). The role I enacted interweaved with that of the respondents throughout most of the

interviews. Although I initially thought of only listening to them talk, I actually ended up

collaborating with them in many instances. In other words, the interview was more of an extended lively dialogue between us, not a monologue.

Interviews: Role and Significance

The purpose of the interview for this study is (arguably) "…*not* to be representative but to understand how individual people experience and make sense of their own lives" (Valentine, 2005, p. 111; emphasis original). To be sure, interviews enable me as a researcher to explore more fully the situation I am attempting to define and interpret. Given that the interview is "a conversation with a purpose" (Valentine, 2005, p. 111), researchers using this approach need to carefully construct the subject matter they are investigating. Qualitative interviewing is a technique that helps us understand people: why they do what they do in the chaos of living and their diverse perspectives. Not only does a qualitative interview generate information but it prompts people to talk about their lives, or about sensemaking (dissatisfaction, the haves and have-not, hopes etc.).

The qualitative technique has been widely used by many people; these include sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, clinicians, and administrators (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Britten (1995), for instance, discussed ways in which qualitative interviews are applied in medical research. She mentioned how practising clinicians routinely interview patients during clinical work and use different types of interviews, including structured and semi-structured or in-depth interviews, to get details. Often, they will begin with their initial question and let the rest of the interview be a free flow of information. Interviews normally consist of clarification and probing. As Britten

(1995) remarked, interviewers must check that they have understood the meanings given by the respondents and that they are not relying on their own assumptions so as to avoid misunderstandings.

Interviews are, therefore, considered a special form of conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) as I had experienced with my informants. As conversational partners, informants help to establish the link between the interview and conversation which, thus, suggests a more active role for interviewees. Qualitative interviews encourage the researcher to listen attentively to people as they share their sensemaking episodes. According to Simon (1982), who coined the term "bounded rationality," only a portion of us is rational while the remaining portion is emotional (or irrational). As "truth" is bounded by rationality, what we learn from the interview (or, in truth, any data collection method) is considered a partial truth (Clifford, 2001). So the questions posed (e.g., asking for knowledge, opinions, values, judgments) should always reflect our research aims as we wrestle with self-consciousness and limitations as researchers.

Holstein and Gubrium (2002) postulated that:

Treating interviewing as a social encounter in which knowledge is constructed suggests the possibility that the interview is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion, but is instead a site of, and occasion for, producing reportable knowledge itself. (p. 112)

In this way, I was in a better position to monitor my role as insider-cum-outsider. As Eisner (1998) pointed out, "[h]ow we interpret what we see, will bear our own signature" (p. 34). Given the nature of my research inquiry, I was able to learn as much as possible

about the individuals and their surroundings. Fontana and Frey (2000) suggested that

"…to learn about people, we must treat them as people, and they will work with us to

help us create accounts of their lives" (p. 668). I hardly introduced myself as a researcher

when I first met with the participants. Rather, I used my preferred name in order to

establish a good rapport, and to have a more open communication. My intent was to

establish a bond that might then be the basis for introducing my role as a researcher and

desire to engage them in an interview.

Specifically, interviews create a pathway for researchers to understand (cross-

cultural) phenomena and *personas* as they unfold. This means that, through our

collaborative partners, we get detailed explanations. We probe and draw inferences from

what we hear through the voices of the individuals. As posited by Gorden (1992),

interviewing skill involves "a high-order combination of observation, empathic

sensitivity, and intellectual judgment" (p. 7). In this regard, cross-cultural types of

interviews call for a deep understanding of others' cultural traditions of which, as a local,

I felt I had an added advantage. Interviewing is not simply about collecting data (Glesne,

1999). Rather, interviews should be a time for the researcher to consider several analytic

acts—relationships, salience, meanings, and explanations—which assist in producing

new questions as well as in preparing for data analysis (Glesne, 1999).

Given that the key principle of any qualitative research is thick description

following Geertz (1973), I acknowledge Patton's (2002) reminder concerning language

differences—that different words can be perceived differently. Since Malays generally do

not speak the language of the other (in this case, Mandarin for Chinese) and the official

language of Malaysia is Malay, the interview language was Malay or English. Because of my handicap (i.e., not knowing Mandarin), I was determined to only obtain English speakers among my participants. But during the process, I realized that I had left that option open.

Because I intended to get as much "sensemaking" as possible, I decided to go along with the individual and not the language. Meaning my choice of persons was prompted more by the person's willingness to interact. Mostly, the language of the respondents was a mixture of Malay and English, which is not unusual in Malaysia. I did not use a translator in order to avoid inconvenience on my part as a researcher (see Eriksen, 2004) as I concur with Glesne (1999; also Glesne & Peshkin, 1991) that "…interviewing is an occasion for a close researcher-other interaction" (p. 93). I, therefore, established connection and rapport through my own persona and research skill. I suspect, however, that I would have gained a much better rapport with my non-Malay informants had I known Mandarin as well.

In seeking rich data, my interviewing method consisted of both formal and informal techniques which included more of an informal conversation, as well as a structured interviews while, at the same time, making sure the "climate" for responses worked for all participants and was non-threatening (see Patton, 2002). Psychologists and market researchers, for instance, use focus groups for the purpose of seeking information about their clients' emotional state and their reactions towards certain products or ideas (Morgan, 1988). In this method, the role of intermediaries as facilitators is crucial, particularly when eliciting responses. Taken together, such interviews encourage us to

know not only the *how* but the *what* of the interview process (Holstein & Grubrium, 2002).

However, focus groups might not be suitable for an in-depth investigation of individual or cultural differences as highlighted by Patton (2002). For my sensemaking research, I preferred to interact with the individual on a one-to-one basis rather than in groups given that the purpose was to understand their daily experiences with the other. It bears repeating that the goal of the interview was not only to get insightful information from the interviewees, but to hear their voices, so to speak. Here, Rubin and Rubin (1995) provide a clear guide for structuring interviews. They advised researchers to have main questions which relate to the research purpose as well as probing and follow-up questions during the interviews.

Discourse

Discourse is generally the realm of discussion on a particular subject. Interestingly, Wengraf (2001) stated that discourse "is the mode of talk spontaneously chosen by the subject" (p. 7). In a sense, our research interests set the discourse, that is, the scope of what we want to examine. The discourse determines our possible topics (i.e., the objective referents). In the context of this paper, the discourse was interethnic communication among Malays and Chinese in Malaysia. As such, the research agenda was set at a manageable scope, in accordance with the research guidelines, that is, to focus on sensemaking which should lend (or open) itself to negotiated strategies and strategic ambiguity in communication.

Subjectivity

For Wengraf (2001), subjectivity refers to "…some of the permanent or transient characteristics of the subject who is acting as informant in the interview" (p. 9). That is, subjectivity refers to how the interviewee speaks about the subject matter because this provides an indication of his or her subjectivity. The purpose of the interview is to get a realistic description of a situation or cultural pattern through our full-fledged research partners or informants (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). I argue that a *nuanced* understanding of the subject we study is our goal. So we should keep our subjectivity intact but allow for a free flow of conversation to develop, slowly but surely, from our partners. That is, the flow of questions should be tailored to the individual's responses (Eyles, 1988), and that was what I exactly did.

In so doing, however, I came across certain things which I would have liked to know more about, even though such reflection occurred only during the data analysis. (I discuss this in more detail in the following chapter.) As interviews are a two-way learning process, the interview process was felt to be suitable for this study, which aimed to capture the conceptualization of interethnic communication as understood and practiced by people in their interactions. As such, I acquired certain skills, for instance, effective use of discourse markers (e.g., mhm, okay, yeah, really, right), prompts and encouraging remarks that helped accelerate the flow of information and enthusiasm. In my experience as a "local" researcher, I had to employ a variety of such skills in order to make the informants comfortable when responding to the questions that I posed. As a

Malay, I am constantly aware of my "standing" in the (Malaysian) society or specifically,

in the eyes of my collaborators.

Observation

The purpose of observational analysis is to take the reader into the setting

observed (Patton, 2002). The descriptions must be accurate, factual, and filled with,

relevant details. Put simply, we write what we see (e.g., unplanned activities) and hear

(e.g., words uttered). We describe the contexts we observe, the activities occurring at the

time of the observation, the people who participated in our setting, and "the meanings of

what was observed from the perspectives of those observed" (Patton, 2002, p. 262).

Patton (2002) described observations as naturalistic because they occur in the actual field

(e.g., community); the observers have direct, first-hand access and personal contact with

the people whom they study. He termed such observations as participant-observation,

fieldwork, direct observation, field research, and qualitative observation. Participant

observation (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984) is research which involves (social) interaction

between the researcher and informants, and in the process, data are collected

systematically and unobtrusively. Therefore, I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork in a

natural setting where my role as a participant observer required me to collaborate with the

informants (the human subjects) so that they could voice their concerns and inform me

about their communicative strategies.

Strictly speaking, observing is a one-way process in which observers "look at the

scene, literally or figuratively, through a one-way mirror" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p.

81). Noteworthy here is the extent to which observers allow the reader to enter into and

understand the situation described. The reader should be able to get an overall, accurate picture of the episode from the researcher's description. How we choose to observe depends very much on our research plan and questions. As Patton (2002) posited, observations are multidimensional. In a sense, it is not easy to differentiate between the observer and the participant observer (Guba & Lincoln, 1980). However, to avoid drawing any definitive conclusions, particularly based on only one observation, we should describe the event accurately to portray the actual setting (Glesne & Peshkin, 1991). As cautioned by Glesne and Peskin (Glesne, 1999):

> You are not in the research setting to preach or evaluate, nor to compete for prestige or status. Your focus is on your others, and you work to stay out of the limelight. To maintain this stance, be flexible and open to changing your point of view. (p. 42)

Research Participants

Participants and Selection

Data for the proposed study were collected from a pool of volunteers as well as selected individuals who are ethnic Malay and Chinese. These individuals were mainly those who reside in the country (Malaysian citizens), purposefully selected in order to capture a nuanced understanding of their sensemaking. Specifically, they come from the researcher's hometown. There were two reasons/justifications for this decision. First, the ethnic distribution of Malay-Chinese in the state is highly mixed and scattered; additionally, there is a distinct group composed of Chinese who still practice remnants of Sino-Malay (i.e., Baba) hybrid cultural elements. The second reason involves

convenience. Since the intention is to observe the everyday living environment, my community of origin is the most feasible. Also, the community in which I live is surrounded by a fair proportion of Malays and Chinese respectively.

I obtained my informants from a pool of contacts, namely, my family and friends. However, family members and personal friends were not my actual participants except for my sister who acted as "inside informant" since she works in a public college. Family members and friends were all part of my observation process, especially as and when they dealt with Chinese individuals. My mother has regular contact with her Chinese grocery suppliers (husband and wife partnership) and a Chinese house builder/contractor (a local *tauke* or boss who runs a family business), while my aunt is of ethnic Chinese origin as are many of my former students, former coworkers, friends, and colleagues. Because most members of my entire ancestral lineage reside in the area, through them, and former colleagues, friends, and neighbors, I was able to locate suitable participants for interviews. As such, the selection of interviewees was done based on my personal contacts and the availability of the participants.

Given that I had worked previously as a secondary school teacher, I did not encounter any problem in getting individuals to participate in the study. I used a combination of snowballing technique and the "personal approach" through my various informants in order to obtain a wider sample of participants. I approached almost anyone who exhibited a willingness to talk. This allowed me to get as many informants as possible for the purpose of getting diverse viewpoints. For the in-depth interviews, I selected only 10 individuals for the data analysis. With such a sample, I was able to focus

on five Malay participants and five Chinese participants for a fuller view of their

sensemaking.

Research Procedures

Interviews were conducted in a location where the informants were most

comfortable, for example, in their chosen spaces where privacy could be maintained. One

informant chose to come to my house even though I insisted on visiting him at his

workplace. The interviews were mainly face-to-face, with one interviewee participating

at a time. Given that in-depth structured interviews were time consuming, I only spoke

with one person per day (except on a couple of ocassions) which gave us ample time to

interact. Phone interviews were not used except only to confirm the interview dates and

to obtain further clarification with respect to statements made in the interviews.

The research participants were informed of the interview details and procedures,

and access to the interview transcripts. In ensuring that the interview questions were fully

covered, I conducted two pilot interviews; one, with an individual whose mother is of

ethnic Chinese origin but who has stayed in Malaysia although he is not Malaysian; the

other interview was with a Chinese Malaysian who is studying abroad, which resulted in

more solid questions (see the previous section and Appendix B). The latter's responses

were as significant as the responses obtained from the other respondents. The interviews

were all recorded using a digital-PC compatible voice recorder which I purchased solely

for the research. Data were downloaded onto the computer for transcription purposes. I

recorded my field notes as and when necessary as part of the observation process and to

capture body language of the interviewees. These notes were mainly written after the

interviews, to avoid distraction, and also to show respect. More often, the notes were recorded as I thought about, and recalled the incident; in other words, the note-taking was ongoing.

Data Analysis Method

For data analysis purposes, I transcribed the interviews using the digital transcription pedal which is available at the department. The data were categorized according to various factors and/or useful pointers based on the initial interview questions, for instance, on attitudes, ethnic affiliation, awareness, and self-projection. As I transcribed, I referred to the transcription conventions of conversation analysis adapted by Bailey (1997), developed by Atkinson and Heritage (1984) and produced by Jefferson (1979) as a guide, especially in determining the paralinguistic or non-linguistic features in my own analysis. That means the transcription included the elements of discourse markers, repetitions, whispers, laughter as well as silence, and/or pauses. I also recalled my memory of the interviews and the observations of the overall attitude and posture of the persons. In other words, "the messiness of everyday talk" (DeVault, 1999, p. 103), was not ignored.

I did not, however, use any particular coding system as such given that the nature of the research was sensemaking. What this means is that I consider the construction of each of the informant's narrative as sensemaking which includes its incoherent speeches, hanging sentences and/or grammatical errors. As indicated by Weick (1995), "[p]eople who study sensemaking pay a lot of attention to talk, discourse, and conversation because that is how a great deal of social contact is mediated" (p. 41). With that said, I underlined

pertinent or key phrases/words as I reread the transcripts, and compared that with their overall standing/emotion during the interviews based on my memories and field notes.

In essence, as the focal points are on ethnic individuals' perceptions of their sensemaking and their strategic communication, I looked for occurrences of justification for their actions and word choice since the latter informs much about one's action (from reasoning style) and persona. I examined the multiple sources of data I accumulated in my analysis. And more important, communication is a central component in sensemaking (Weick et al., 2005). Following Schegloff (1992), two kinds of context were considered: the proximate context (i.e., genre of interaction) and the distal context (e.g. ethnic composition). What was frequently said or done and justified, and by whom?

Sensemaking, as emphasized by Weick (1995, Weick et al., 2005), is about the interplay of action and interpretation. In this study, then, meaning-making is explored from the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 1998). As such, the question of how the presence of me as a researcher (ethnic insider or outsider) affected the respondents' narratives consistently comes to mind.

Research Etiquette

The participants were fully informed of the research procotol, meaning, they were made aware of the confidentiality of the information and who will have access to the data. As the topic discussed might be rather sensitive to be spoken out loud, some respondents preferred to choose their own venues for the interviews. I played back the tape and encouraged them to listen to their voice recordings after each interview for further clarity and satisfaction. But, they did not seem to bother about that which made

me more humbled by their sincerity; I felt they trusted me explicitly. I considered them my research partners (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) and invited them to review the input if they wanted to. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checks should be conducted for the accuracy of the (transcription) interpretation as well as the credibility of the data. In analyzing the data, I maintain the use of pseudonyms in the transcription and the final write-ups of the dissertation.

Given my position as a researcher and the nature of reflexivity, I am fully aware of the power relationships that exist between me and my collaborative partners (see Valentine, 2005). Reflexivity is a "self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious analytical security of the self as a researcher" (England, 1994, 82). I tried to be sensitive to the needs of the informants (see Valentine, 2005), while at the same time, remaining aware of my own needs and position as a researcher whose theoretical orientation was not fully known to the informants. For sure, my own experience was influenced and has been influenced by the sensemaking process and research inquiry.

It is important to note that sensemaking is "not about truth and getting it right" (Weick et al., 2005) but more "…about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism" (p. 415). This will remind us of Clifford's (2001) assertion that the data we get will only provide partial truths. More important, it is the participants' voices which will give rise to further theorizing about interethnic sensemaking in everyday communication. The reasoning behind the actions committed

and individuals' personas is examined. My role functions as an intermediary for such theorizing.

Delimitation and Limitations

The research inquiry was confined to only two ethnic groups, namely Malays and Chinese in Malaysia. Since I aimed for an in-depth interview which is time-consuming, and is continued for further clarification (I still keep in touch with some), I restricted the number of informants to ten as I got to know the individuals, with an equal proportion of representation on the part of each ethnic group (the Chinese informants are non-Babas). But, as for my other informants whose conversations were not tape-recorded, I had around twenty-five (and some were Chinese Babas); notes were taken in my private time and during my observations. The length of fieldwork was approximately two months which might not capture enough of the sensemaking process. However, since sensemaking is ongoing, the essence is to observe the in-situ interactions of the individuals in various places, and interview informants, during the entire fieldwork. In this sense, paying full attention to context is the key factor of the research inquiry. As Stage and Mattson (2003) explained, "the process of paying attention to context is a constant interplay, guided by contextual questions, between the researcher, participants and the stimulus of sources within and surrounding the context" (p. 102).

Given that reality is multilayered, only a small section of that reality can be examined (see Eriksen, 2004). This suggests that the quest for research is endless. Also, the study is exploratory in nature as there is, so far, no benefit of accumulating insight. There is no backdrop or hindsight to the study for the researcher to pile up data on the

sensemaking episodes of Malay-Chinese interpersonal interethnic communication, except to fall back on documents pertaining to ethnic relations. Compilation is made by reviewing various available literatures on sensemaking in organizations, interethnic communication, Malay-Chinese relations, non-Western communication and communication strategies. While the concept of sensemaking as used in this dissertation is a Western construct, it does not necessarily mean that, it is not applicable universally. What I mean to say is that, some of the sensemaking properties, for example, emotion, identity, and social, are derivatives of particular positionality, which can be occidental, oriental, hybrid, or global.

Other constraining factors include ethnic and language barriers; individuals tend to stay within their own community, and many Malays do not speak the language of the Chinese. The latter is assumed to understand and speak the Malay language since it is an official language. I used English at the beginning of the interview to avoid any unwarranted perceptions about the choice of language (and my Malayness). Most of my informants, however, did not speak English. Admittedly, English language is not widely used outside the English-oriented groups such as corporate leaders, and the academic and expatriate communities. Would the use of a particular language influence the outcome of the interview? There is obviously no simple answer to this question as it has aspects of colonial discourse, cultural construct, and identity issues.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented the methodological orientation by describing the purpose of the research, research questions, participants, method of analysis, and how and

why certain procedures were selected. I covered the scope of the discourse and

subjectivity. I also emphasized the significance of mixed methods; the in-depth and

informal interviews, and in-situ observations. Given that sensemaking is continuous and

retrospective in nature, qualitative research pertaining to interviews and observations in

natural settings enable the researcher to explore the dynamics of interpersonal interethnic

communication. As people participate in the imagined community in which certain things

are shared (and not shared), and meanings are personalized and constantly made sense of,

in-depth interviews encourage further insights into the dynamics of sensemaking.

   The interview questions were piloted prior to the fieldwork for further

clarification of the issues to be examined. Two pilot interviews were conducted, which

were fruitful in allowing the researcher to reflect on the nature of questions and fine tune

them further. Also, how the respondents reacted to the questions underscores the notion

of sensemaking. I learned a great deal about their perspectives (and mine). The interviews

were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed through careful planning and scrutiny. As

collaborative partners, I chose ten ethnic individuals (Malay and Chinese) through

personal contact and snowballing technique. My other informants were individuals I

befriended and met with during the observations. In presenting the data, research

etiquette is closely observed to ensure reliability of data and confidentiality of

respondents.

Chapter 4

Results and Discussion

Sensemaking is "not about truth and getting it right", but more "about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism" (Weick, et al., 2005, p. 415).

Early one sunny morning, as I peeped through the sliding glass door, I saw my mother with a Chinese couple in their late fifties. The couple was busy unloading some vegetables and other groceries out of a white van in front of the house. They were laughing away with my mother, the latter being so friendly with her usual morning chat and jokes. They must know each other, judging from the way they interacted. I overheard them say in Malay language, "Anak dah balik?"[113] (Your daughter is back?), to which my cheerful mother replied, "Dah, ada kat dalam. Rabu malam balik" (Yeah, she's inside. She came home on Wednesday night) as if she knew who they were referring to. The word "anak" in Malay literally means "child," which is gender-free. They must have talked about me prior to my return. As she spoke, the couple looked into the house. I felt embarrassed. They might have seen me standing behind the glass door with the curtains drawn. Out of respect, I went to greet them as "Uncle" and "Auntie"—the usual polite reference to eldest. We got acquainted in this first encounter. I learned that their daughter was a school teacher in a neighboring state. I have high respect for them for their "budi bahasa" (courteous language) as they do my mother. I recall the "uncle"

---

[113] Throughout this dissertation, I translated the informants's language into English whenever they spoke in *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language).

asking me in Malay, "Dapat 'scholarship'?"[114] (Got a scholarship?)—a simple question that struck me as so loaded with interpretations. I have read such a great deal about Malay-Chinese "dilemma" in the scholarly realm that I have now become conscious of the perceptions that people have. Even though the issues of "Malay privilege," scholarships, and equality are often challenged, I was not prepared for such a query to come from the vendor. Being Malay, too, makes it more difficult to respond without a tinge of uneasiness. Yet, this is part of my interethnic sensemaking research. In responding, I realized that I was more concerned about his reaction than I was about mine. I told him I did not get a scholarship during the first two years in the US since I accompanied my husband who was offered a two-year employment. I added that I only received it during my third year. In my head, I kept thinking about why he asked. Might it be purely conversational? Or, might it be because of who I am? As I watched my mother and the couple interact throughout my stay there, I consider their relationship unique. The process of relating that these ethnically diverse Asian individuals engaged in is not commonplace in the context of "customer-seller," at least, in the strict sense of the term. (Fieldnotes)

Introduction

The opening vignette points to several underlying elements, such as emotions, power relations, and sensitivity in the interethnic communication realm that interweave with ethnic consciousness among different ethnic individuals in this instance especially on my part as a Malay Malaysian researcher. Looking back, I wondered about my

---

[114] As it is commonly understood in Malaysia, the word scholarship in this context means "grant" or "fund", not scholarly work comprising research and teaching as it is also understood in the US.

reaction to the question posed by the Chinese vendor. Would I have reacted differently deep inside had I been a Chinese or a Westerner? As I narrate, I become more conscious of the enactment of roles that we engage in within society, especially roles where there are clearly identified ethnic affiliations. One cannot escape from being Malay, Chinese, Indian, or a member of some other ethnic group (or even multiple groups). The ethnic designation becomes so commonplace that its *labeling* sticks like a glue even though the mundane everyday routines might or might not necessarily be associated with one's identity. Unlike in the US where people tend to be perceived based on skin color, the situation in Malaysia is more about what is entailed with being Malay, Chinese, etc., be it in the private or public sector. That is, what "tags along" with a particular ethnic identity.

Crucial in this chapter, therefore, is the element of social being, or the relational self in social interaction. That is, a person's stature somewhat signifies a certain message vis-à-vis ethnic position in the country regardless of intentions. As such, the narration that follows specifically emphasizes the ethnic affiliation of the individuals for the purpose of understanding Malay-Chinese sensemaking in the Malaysian reality. At the same time, this narration informs the reader of the observational context—following Schegloff (1992)—in terms of the genre of interaction and the ethnic composition. I provide here the proximate and distal contexts; that is, the actual interaction, and the site where the discourse occurs (or the cultural setting) for a fuller view of the everyday scenario.

Relating and Sensemaking

The Locals, The Scene, The Everyday Experiences

The grocery vendor, who is Chinese, is my mother's "friend" (or rather, acquaintance) in terms of customer-supplier relation. He supplies directly (and voluntarily) to the house which works conveniently for my mother who does not have to visit the market daily. Indeed, the arrangement is mutually agreed upon. He happened to come one day, and since then, has been coming twice a week. My mother has never once failed to buy groceries from him, at least, throughout my stay there. I remember telling my mother that she could refuse politely if she already had the items. Such is the world of "business." But, to "offend" the good vendor who comes with his wife bringing fresh groceries to her doorstep twice a week is out of the question. "*Tak baik.*" (That's not good). She told me one day that it would not be right and would be impolite to do so. That was not the only vendor who came. There was another—a Malay—who sold chicken, fish, and other dry items. My mother bought from the vendor without fail. Her excuse would be that she had enough storage for the entire week. I knew she did not want to upset either seller.

To this day, I do not understand her way of dealing with the vendors or even people in general. I always believe (which is my consistent rhetoric with her) that she should not feel obliged to buy regardless of how nice the vendors are. Plus, the market is close by. But what needs to be mentioned here is the feeling of not wanting to offend that my mother commits to even though, at times, it means she ends up buying more of the same items. (Sometimes, I knew she already had particular items in her fridge.) Her

commitment and her desire not to offend the good vendors prevented her from saying, "I'm not buying today" or "you can come next week instead."

She would rather engage in "face-saving" strategy rather than "face-losing" that she claimed could happen to both parties. When the sellers appeared at the front gate, she would fetch her purse, and walk straight to greet them. Thus far, I have not detected any form of "favoritism" on her part; both vendors—Malay and Chinese—seemed to please her well. Significantly, such "fixity" of the role and interethnic encounter exemplifies the social enactment or, more specifically, the routinized activity of individuals like my mother, her immediate neighbor, and the sellers.

As I attempt to understand the "relationship," I believe that it could be more than simply a customer-provider-cum-business relation, but with one caveat: that is, *only* as long as my mother continues to engage in the activity. The reasons for my belief are several. First, the activity was always "personal" as it took place in front of the house, not at the market or the store. This indicates that the transaction is more personal and direct. There is also a sense of familiarity and belonging to the space. When my mother asked for specific items, the sellers indicated their willingness to serve (i.e., bring the desired items on the next visit). The faithful presence of the vendors (and my mother waiting) at the front gate every week would no doubt indicate a mutual sentiment which was obvious to the entire neighborhood. The fact remains that the vendors only came to my mother's front gate, and she never abandoned her role as a customer throughout my observation.

She never bargained (over the price). She did that once when they first met as I was told. Because they have known each other for almost a year, she now believes that

the price is reasonable. She convinced me of this in her efforts to debunk the stereotypical image of a Chinese, that is, one who not only cheats in business (Tan, 1982) but is also "ethnocentric, arrogant, and rude" (Wu, 1982b). Not only does she regard the couple as very good, but she also treats them as she would others. She does not treat them as "business people," or oust them as simply *the other*. Rather, she sees them as individuals with whom she can easily interact. That would explain the vendors' willingness to serve her. This "business" encounter usually took about thirty minutes to an hour and was interwoven with mundane daily conversation and laughter. Obviously, their's was not the usual brief, straightforward, and routine type of interaction which is typical of a business transaction.

Every time she engaged in a conversation, I would watch her from inside the house, through the glass door, only this time with the curtains slightly drawn. I would also observe her from my room upstairs, through the dark tainted windows. Or I would stand at the entrance gate in public view of the vendors or the next door neighbor. When I engaged in the latter, these people would bombard me with a lot of questions. Sometimes, I became totally immersed in the conversation which mostly centered on what I do, about my life in the US, and my children. I responded to the questions posed by the neighbor (Malay)[115] and the interested vendors (Malay and Chinese). I did not, however, inform them about my researcher role.

The interethnic communication in this context is public, privileging personalized and selective topics as directed by the interactants. The language of interaction was

---

[115] The immediate neighborhood consists of Malays, Chinese and Indians. But, throughout my observation, only the Indian neighbor came to participate at times in the interaction/activity.

Malay with a local dialect. The language was colloquial, informal, and spontaneous. The individuals who participated each have a clear role in the interaction. Hall and Whyte (1966) contended that, in intercultural communication, adjustment goes both ways. Indeed, in the fieldwork situation where I would make myself visible, I became the focus of discussion even though the talk was about everything under the sun excluding politics. I was a "joiner" in this small and personal social circle.

At times, my rapport with those individuals would extend beyond the mundane customer-seller level. Rather, it revolved around the neighbor-child-motherly-fatherly-seller type of relationship, which was understood in the given situation. My role would intertwine with that of a researcher and a local participant in the conversation. The latter role made me feel more of an outsider given the fact that the other participants were already familiar with each other. I was also the youngest member in the group. In the social interaction that occurred frequently, I consider myself a familiar stranger.

The social enactment of these individuals further witnessed the Malay vendor coming once a week, while the Chinese couple came twice a week to my mother's front gate. But, they never coincided. That first morning when I observed, the couple were serving my mother. Typically, my mother would say, "*Apa ada*?" (What is there?), as she surveyed the items displayed. At times, they would bring her fresh shrimps or squids, my mother's favorites. There was no sign of pork in the van which suggests that they accommodated the needs of their Malay/Muslim customers and were respectful of the religious differences. They managed to conceal their favorite food (hence, identity) in our presence.

In this social activity, the self presentation was one which concealed differences and revealed a "caring" spirit for the ethnic-other participant. The terms "Malay" and "Chinese" in this context seemed somewhat irrelevant. What this means is that the social interaction that took place was more about serving, purchasing, and the everyday routine among the participants. Nothing in the actual interaction indicated reference to ethnic labeling. Even though the social gathering was purposeful, these ethnically diverse individuals mingled without any apparent ethnic barriers.

As the scene unfolded, the vendor couple was busy asking and responding to somewhat routine questions. They looked patient—not hurried, portraying a calm, confident posture—and were responsive. Occasionally, the male seller would ask, "*Makcik tak nak ni*?" (Aunty, you don't want this?) The word "aunty" also refers to female relatives or older women, and when it is used, indicates a note of respect.[116] What strikes me as quite significant is the fact that the couple came a long way to serve only a few "faithful" individuals in this neighborhood.

The individuals would engage in typical, everyday conversation that I categorize as falling into two different topic groupings: (1) an environment-centered topic, for example, the prolonged hot/dry weather they experienced before my return, or sometimes the heavy prolonged rain; (2) a participant-centered topic, for instance, the tall, old, crooked coconut tree across the small stream adjacent to the house which they feared might fall and hit my mother's new roof, or they would be interested in her renovated

---

[116] The familiar honorific among Malays is to address Chinese male shopkeepers as "taukes" (or bosses) and Chinese females as "nyonyas". Among the Chinese, it is customary to address a Malay male as "encik", "pakcik", or "abang" and, a Malay female as "makcik" or "kakak" depending on the particular social ocassions. Rarely do the Chinese address a Malay female as "nenek" or "adik". A more detailed analysis awaits a study on its own.

house. Information was exchanged and comments made interlaced with laughter, smiles, head nods, and varied facial expressions. One could easily tell that they were very communicative. The interaction, in this sense, was one which promoted an interpersonal association and/or associative behavior of individuals (Kim, 2005). According to Kim (2005), the associative behavior includes elements of mutual understanding, adaptation, cooperation, and "the coming together" of the individuals in creating their "temporary" relationship (p. 330-331).

Even though I did not witness their cooperative relationship beyond the customer-supplier level (during my entire stay there as a researcher cum local), I realized that my mother preferred to maintain a good relationship with people through her "facework" strategies (Ting-Toomey, 2005) and polite communication (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The core element in this communication style is the concern for "face"[117] (or "*mian zi*" as known in the Chinese language; see Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). As far as her relationship with the other was concerned, she engaged in the act of "*jaga hati*" (i.e., taking "care of the heart" so as not to offend) which includes honoring another's image (i.e., "*jaga air-muka*") or "the moral" face, and respecting their dignity or the "face-other" (Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Recently, in a desire to gaze further into my mother's interethnic realm, I called home and asked about her "market" activity. I discovered that she had not been doing much of that lately. As a result, the sellers only come once a week or every fortnight. (When that happens, the other neighbors approach her for information about the sellers'

---

[117] I would argue that the notion of face is a universal concept which refers to a person's pride and dignity, however defined.

visits. She is then their informant.) Instead of buying in big portions like before, she is buying in smaller quantities. Such an indirect approach or, rather, "living" strategy as she put it, works better than if she had told the sellers she had nothing to purchase on that day. "It is better to be indirect in your approach," I was told. "You don't lose anything"— some long distance advice which I shall never forget.

From the perspective of sensemaking and relating, her rhetoric encourages tolerance and understanding. Meaning, she thinks of the others in good faith, with great sensitivity and respects them. (I cannot recall ever witnessing her engage in a confrontational episode with anyone.) Their temporary relationship resembled a social/community gathering where the purpose was to interact. In so doing, she made a subtle adjustment to the routine. In being cooperative, she engaged in adaptive and collaborative acts with those sellers who had to make their own adjustments pertaining to the needs of the Malays; essentially, they engaged in the "mutual face" concern (Ting-Tomey, 2005). While my mother still buys from them, the activity is not as often as it used to be. In a sense, her approach *is* right as I also learned that the Chinese couple (and the Malay seller) visited my mother for the *Hari Raya* (Eid) celebration. The Malay seller lives nearby, in the same neighborhood, so the visit was expected. As for the Chinese couple, that was their first visit. They brought along fruits as *buah tangan* (a gift for the host).

Indeed, our house has always been visited by people including non-Malays especially Chinese, during the Eid celebration. This happens because of my parents' hospitable nature; they invite people they like. (Like our previous house, the present one

is surrounded by Chinese and Indians, along with Malays.) As always, the Chinese guests do not fail to bring gifts, and thus, my mother (and belated father) would always associate the Chinese with gifts and generosity. Given that gift-giving is reciprocal in the Chinese culture, especially among business people (e.g., Chia, 1997),[118] the act of giving by the Chinese sellers might be perceived as a way of demonstrating appreciation for the invitation. Yet, except when I was younger, such a visit (or invitation) has not been the other way around.

Unlike my other siblings, I used to follow my father to visit his Chinese police friends (normally of the same rank or slightly higher) who were well-off and received *ang pow*[119] during the Chinese New Year. But I recall eating only snacks, not the main meal. I was not at all sure whether those "rank-and-file" people we visited were his friends or bosses, and I never bothered to ask. These visits took place in Pahang, a politically Malay state, and less cosmopolitan, where we lived when I was a child.

In contrast, this type of visit did not occur, or has, thus far, not occurred in Melaka in our day-to-day experience. The reasons for this might be many. Firstly, when my family moved to Melaka in 1986, I was abroad doing undergraduate studies. I could not commit to any form of visiting. But, I knew they did not either. Secondly, my father was already a retiree so he spent most of his time at home before his untimely passing. I, thus, argue that this type of social encounter requires detailed in-situ interethnic sensemaking research that can assist further understanding of self and other.

---

[118] See Chia (1997, pp. 163-164).
[119] Chinese gift; a small red packet with a small amount of money.

As a social phenomenon, sensemaking is not only fluid but is, also, "intricate". This is the case given that daily events are not rigidly organized; that is, we have no definitive flow chart with which to begin. The patterns of how people (i.e., self and other) adapt to life and given situations can only be examined as the situations unfold at a particular time-space, with particular individuals, and importantly, with a particular researcher. As Wolcott (2005) rightly pointed out, "the essence of fieldwork is revealed by *intent* rather than by location" (p. 58; emphasis added).

To illustrate further the ordinary sensemaking process: My mother receives guests from different ethnic groups as she likes to invite them over when she relates well with the persons. She does not, however, visit non-Malays, especially the Chinese, nor is she invited. Yet, she never talks about that; nor is she offended, or *"kecil hati,"* for not being invited. Likewise, my brother and his family who live in another town—about an hour drive—would always invite their Chinese next door neighbor for every Eid celebration, and, in turn, would receive generous "Chinese New Year goodies" on the Chinese festive occasion. However, there is no "open house" invitation on the part of his neighbor. The latter, too, only visited my brother, not the other Malay neighbors. The interethnic relationship is bonded between only them (especially the males). While my brother is not bothered by the absence of invitations as he describes them as "a nice couple", his wife (a homemaker) has a different view. She always wonders why. This was revealed when I asked them about their encounters with the ethnic-other. Her rhetoric would be, "*Kenapa dia orang tak pernah jemput? Agaknya orang kaya"* (Why didn't they invite us? Perhaps, they're rich people).

Interestingly, my sister-in-law rationalized the "issue" through her assumption as to the neighbor's wealth given that the Chinese couple is their immediate neighbor. (They live in a semi-detached house.) She likened their "wealth" (i.e., beautifully decorated entrance gate, and renovated front porch) to a "closed door" attitude. She felt strongly that her neighbor should have invited them given that they live next door, that is, only a few steps away. Do Malays, then, visit the other? More specifically, do the (ordinary) Chinese/Malays invite the (ordinary) Malays/Chinese into their homes in daily situations? Rabushka's (1973)[120] and Maeda's (1967)[121] studies on Chinese ethnocentrism in Kuala Lumpur and especially Penang, and their strong bond of nationalism of chauvinistic unity in *Alor Janggus* respectively, might give us some insights into Malay-Chinese relations.

As illustrated, and in what follows, I provide the narratives of Malay-Chinese sensemaking, drawn from participant-observation, and in-depth interviews of individuals in Melaka. I discuss the participants and their narratives, and offer insights into my observation of the individuals and the cultural setting which contribute more fully to the sensemaking process. Where relevant, I describe the historical situation and make reference to the relevant documents/materials pertaining to Malay-Chinese communication/relation. To evaluate the narratives, I employ the rhetorical framework that enables me to explore more fully the ethos (the voice/persona), pathos (the emotional appeal) and logos (the argument) of the individuals. I evaluate the speaker, the purpose, the audience/listener, the content, and the manner in which the message is delivered. In

---

[120] See Rabushka (1973, p. 60).
[121] See Maeda (1967, p. 89).

essence, I detail the narratives and *how* that interplayed with the informants and their actions.

<p style="text-align:center;">My Research, Emotions, and Sensemaking</p>

Studies of real interactions, therefore, are much needed "*where emotions are negotiated* in the moment, using all available channels, responding to situational constraints, and the like" (Metts & Planalp, 2000, p. 362; emphasis original).

As I explore my emotions and perspectives of Malay-Chinese communication in relation to the experience above, I realized I have subconsciously made them public. In line with Metts and Planalp (2000), my emotions surrounding research, thinking and reflecting on the Malay-Chinese communication are constantly being negotiated. Like sensemaking, my emotions fluctuated as I met with people, heard their voices, and witnessed things. Writing this dissertation has become a pathway, so to speak, for making sense of my emotions as well as my Malay-ness and distant Chinese-ness; the latter is often taken for granted (for reasons even unknown to myself). While the former is reinforced, the latter is almost forgotten—especially with my father's passing—as to date, I have not managed to collect much more information about my paternal Chinese great grandfather than I now have.

Even though our family did not really dwell on a Chinese descendant in our familial line, my father always did. Every time I accompanied him to shops to buy shoes or other items when I was small, he would proudly tell the Chinese shopkeepers about our Chinese heritage. He would even count in Mandarin when he paid for items. I recall feeling embarrassed each time he did that. I remember the look on some of the faces; I

thought *they* were not interested. If they were, there would be exchanges of information, a conversation, or something. But, there was nothing of that kind. And, I would share the experience with my mother. That was almost thirty years ago.

But this sensemaking journey is only a beginning. I know my great grandfather had siblings, but I lack details as to their whereabouts or identity. Yet, it is my contention that one's past can be enlivened with the research interest that offers insights into interethnic lens. How much do we know about the Malay and, in particular, the Chinese mindset? How much do we know about the ethnic-other? As I learn about how others view selves and the ethnic-other, I also learn about my own self and ethnic heritage. It involves the imperatives of living together, if you will, in which we witness the features of inclusion and exclusion that touch all aspects of our lives.

More specifically, I witnessed how Chinese Malaysians "view" Malays in particular, and vice-versa, as revealed by the informants, and the selective discourse, which I had not previously taken seriously. Yet, they seemed very certain and confident about what they said, and hoped for. I recall their mood, facial expression (dramatization), and the determination in their voice. Unlike the Chinese informants, however, I realized that the Malays had not been very vocal about the other. Rather, they harped more on their self-becoming, the socialization process with the ethnic-other, and about efforts to promote deeper integration with the self as the initiator (i.e., a person who commits to know the ethnic-other). Nevertheless, both parties were accommodating and careful in projecting their thoughts. They tended to engage in the rhetoric of "collective

consciousness" (as if it were orchestrated), whereby every individual was fully aware of, and sensitive to, the presence and position of the ethnic-other.

While the Malays articulated more in terms of how all Malaysians (regardless of ethnic heritage) should prosper alongside each other, a few of my Chinese informants carefully talked about their position in relation to Malays in the socio-political structure. But significantly, more reference was made to politicians and the authorities as blameworthy for certain ostensibly ill-conceived policies (as reflected by one Chinese informant), or responsible for more effective programs to promote ethnic integration (as reflected by Malays in particular, and Chinese in general). In other words, even though the informants shared their thoughts, each produced a personalized rhetoric through their lens; the ethnic *personas* slowly emerged from those individuals as they spoke about their daily experiences.

By reflecting on the Malay-Chinese plight, I become more aware of my own becoming and perspectives and others who surround me. My life has subconsciously become part of the data as Weick (1995) contended. Notably, my sentiment fluctuates as and when I engage in many of the issues the informants raised. Each issue carries its own weight and rationale. I realized that my sensemaking episodes intersect with those I examine. I think constantly about them, about *us*. I share and care about most of their sentiments, which makes me more deeply involved (and admittedly, confused in thinking and wishing for possible solutions). In the narratives and in spirit, we no doubt become the collaborators of our sensemaking. *But in reality, how do we fare?*

Yet, as much as I want to engage in a collective vision, I am still struggling with my "prescribed" ethnic consciousness and sentiment, a dilemma between what is fair, and what is not. In the end, who determines what is fair? How do I enact my role impartially as a researcher whose ethnic identity is also part of the sensemaking I am examining? Do I see myself as one of my Malay informants? Or, do I see myself as Malay-Chinese, therefore, somewhat closer to the Chinese? Or, do I accept myself as Malaysian (and thus, sideline my ethnicity/cultural identity) as I hear the murmuring of the Malaysian voice, both polarized and multivocal at the same time? As I write this dissertation, those questions continue to spin in my small head.

While I desire fairness, as a communication researcher, I must also question the very notion of fairness. I contend here that the term is relative, intersubjective, and contested. In other words, fairness is situated, and can be cornered into one's perspective in the making, particularly the writer's (or speaker's), or in my case, also the researcher's. Riessman (1993) cautioned that, "[a]ny finding—a depiction of a culture, psychological process, or social structure—exists in historical time, between subjects in relations of powers," and therefore, "we cannot speak, finally and with ultimate authority, for others" (p. 15). With that realization, it is my intention to offer the fullest scenario possible of the Malay-Chinese realm through the "collaborated" narrative—that is, between the informants and me about what is spoken and seen at a given time and space. Even though the final writing is of the researcher's, the content is, however, still shaped and determined by the informants and the field observation.

In theorizing about "fairness", what I see as "fair" might not be labeled as such by others based on our own theoretical framework. Essentially, I argue that fairness is a moral construct, which has many implications depending on the individual's orientation. For example, the communist notion of fairness differs from the notion of fairness among people who engage in business. In the latter, I contend that it is negotiated; that is, to some extent, it becomes "fair" (i.e., acceptable) to aim for a win-win situation as long as both parties gain, in one way or the other, regardless of the methods. In religion, fairness is different which can be a point of contestation depending on one's lens (e.g., Chinese Malaysians versus Malay Malaysians). Wearing a *burqa* (a garment that covers from head to toe) for many Arab Muslim women, for example, might be considered a breach of freedom by many non-Muslim Westerners, but not necessarily so to the former. Abstaining from eating pork by Malay Muslims might be perceived as problematic by the non-Muslim Chinese. In parenting, "fairness" can be contested between the parents and child (or the public) as illustrated in the heartbreaking case of "Ashley," a mentally and physically disabled nine year old American girl, whose parents stunted her growth[122] in the name of love for their "pillow angel." And in all these situations, *we* judge. W*e* suddenly become the judges of people's lives and predicament. Interestingly, many would view that as a public discourse, a freedom of speech. *Is that fair?*

Thus, the sensemaking of self and other determines, to a large degree, the private-public realm of communication. As Rawlins (1998) argued, the private and public realms are blurry because of the level of involvement and exposure the person engages in. In sensemaking, the self and other are not dependent of each other. Rather, they are

---

[122] *CNN Paula Zahn Now*, 8 January 2007 (8-9 pm).

interdependent of each other's action and interpretation. In my research undertaking, my personal thoughts intersect with the informants. While I readily make sense of their narratives, I also attempt to make sense of my own perceptions. I hear the diverse perspectives from the individuals' standpoints and in their own environment. As a local, I am familiar with what they said and hoped for even though I feel "strange" to some of the ideas. As a Malaysian, I, too, hear my own thoughts which bear some similarities and differences to those of the informants. No doubt the latter would also engage in a similar predicament, between what to say and what can be said, given that we live in the same space. Our presentations of self work in the area that we constantly and appropriately enact social roles that assist in the protection of each other's face.

Specifically, following Foucault (2000), whether *heterotopias* or *utopias*, real spaces or illusionary spaces, personal spaces or territorial spaces, ethnically integrated spaces or ethnically segregated spaces, I contend that those are still our spaces that we choose to live in and make use of. Malays and Chinese (who choose to live in Malaysia)[123] have been destined to live together in the same nation state ever since the British came to colonize the area. As a Malay, I view other ethnic individuals as a precious resource—a phrase which I constantly refer to in this dissertation. What this means is that it is advantageous to have *genuine* relationships or connections with cultured individuals irrespective of ethnic background. A relationship must be close

---

[123] In searching better prospects, many Chinese Malaysians emigrate and reside in the US, Canada, Australia, Hong Kong etc.); among these, some still retain their Malaysian citizenships while others refuse to be associated with Malaysia due to feelings of discontentment with NEP which they claimed pertains toward privileging only the Malays (see Tan, 2004; Tan, Ho, & Tan, 2005). In contrast to the accusation, see Shamsul (1998c).

enough that one can trust the other in good or bad times. But, one cannot possibly have

interethnic communication without the desire to develop and be committed to it.

The Malay word for such type of closeness is "*akrab,*" a somewhat distant cousin

of *guanxi* or clan. But if *guanxi* only works more meaningfully among relatives or in-

group members, especially among the Chinese whose involvement is more obligatory

(e.g., Lu, 1998), "*akrab*" extends its horizon to include meaningful relationship outside of

the group. The word is neutral as it means solid, tightly connected or extremely close,

which is based on many factors including trust, and respect. When that exists, the

relationship is perceived to be extremely good. "*Akrab,*" in this sense, requires no favor

or return favor to enhance friendship, unlike *guanxi*. The core elements are trust and

respect after years of knowing. For example, a Malay person can be really "*akrab*" with a

Chinese if each of the individuals commits to a "meaningful" relationship not necessarily

based on utilitarian gains. Once *"akrab,"* favors are not expected to be returned as in

guanxi. But, when some help or assistance is given, the giver has no ulterior motives. As

"akrab" is maintained, one is expected not to "use" a close friend for favors. You just

know your limits.

Such friendship should lead us to more weak ties, if not strong ones. Without

recognizing the significance of weak ties among individuals, as Granovetter (1973)

argued, we restrict the opportunity for greater enhancement of ethnic integration.

Similarly, in the spirit of Fisher (2003), we are reminded that "[t]o work *with* a group is

to partner with people, to see "their issues" as your own" (p. 21; emphasis original). I

held strongly on this reminder throughout my research undertaking. My intent is to reveal

the Malay and Chinese sensemaking narratives of everyday situations. The point to drive home is that Foucault's (2000) concept of space is a clear reminder—of speaking one's mind and what we can do with our social life. More important, society is a unity in difference. As such, different spaces within a society should exist for different people who, together, create a realm for interethnic discourse.

The Cultural Setting

I present here the context where the actual research begins for the reader's benefit. I describe where I live, and met with the informants, and other related-details to give a clear picture of the overall context. Access to the research process is a given in the sense that I am very familiar with the Malaysian environment and people. This access is convenient as well as negotiated. At the same time, I am fully aware of my role as a researcher in an environment where I am a local.

I hail from Melaka, and both of my parents also originated from the state. As such, my entire family (from both sides) and relatives reside there. Some of the children, however, eventually migrated to other states due to work and marriage. My father's side of the family occupies a large track of land on the small hill in a small town or *Pekan Kecil*,[124] which stretches all the way to the top. This entire area is occupied by his parent's extended family. My grandfather was a police officer, and it was no wonder that both my father (my grandfather's second son) and my eldest uncle (my grandfather's first son who lives in Kuala Lumpur) joined the police force, a typical scenario of father-to-

---

[124] This is a pseudonym due to confidentiality. To protect the identities of the informants, I would not reveal the actual name of the town. *Pekan Kecil* also means small town.

son occupation. (None of my siblings followed his footstep.) I discovered this when I

started digging into my family's history.

I still remember the mixed emotions every time we visited my strict yet loving

grandparents. As a child, I hated going up the hill, stretching over a steep slope spanning

some twenty terraced stairs. Foremost among the inhibitive factors were those stairs. But,

once on the hill, I enjoyed the scenery as it stretched as far back as the eyes can see. Now,

I can even see the roof tops of my mother's present neighborhood. My mother's father

was a *penghulu* (the local headman/leader). They lived modestly, as far as she could

remember, despite the fact that her father was a prominent person in the village (quite a

distance from *Pekan Kecil*). They had a piece of land to grow rubber. They would wake

up at five in the morning to engage in the laborious work. My father's side was relatively

better off than my mother's. So this section is partly an autobiographical reflection of my

personal attachment to the family history, and the state.

Melaka state has encountered several phases of change. Foremost, the name itself

was retained as "Melaka," and not "Malacca," as often used by Westerners, and which

often confuses the locals. The city is very cosmopolitan especially with its system of

digital clocks installed at the traffic lights; motorists can now anticipate the precise

second when the traffic light changes to green. New buildings have accommodated the

old ones, and new landscapes stand out, perhaps in stark contrast to some unkempt parts

of the environment. The scenery cannot escape the eyes as soon as one arrives at the *Ayer

Keroh* toll (with its big signage) and proceeds to drive through the city of Melaka

(Melaka Town). In a sense, Melaka is a grand spectacle, or more specifically, borrowing

from Guy Debord,[125] a society of the spectacle. Debord (2001) argued that "[t]he spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (p. 139). Whatever it means to people, Melaka is now a popular tourist destination, especially to Chinese Singaporeans who might have relatives or "personal attachment" to the state.[126]

I recall my amazement in witnessing the rapid change which had occurred in barely a year, when I first returned to Melaka in the summer of 2004. It reminds me of postmodernity, a fluid subject that leaves most graduate students groping with endless interpretations. In the summer of 2006, I was more prepared for the changes that occurred. Because my mother moved to *Pekan Kecil*, I have, once again, become a stranger in my own house (my new home). We used to live in a much larger district that is more cosmopolitan in outlook. I felt like a new driver all of a sudden, searching for "familiar" signs on both occasions. At one point, I was truly a familiar stranger.

As a city where history, as claimed by Worden (2005) tends to be packaged and promoted as heritage, I realize that changes are inevitable. The city evidently exhibits features of the twenty-first century. In the host-guest realm, Melaka, which was once colonized by the Dutch and Portuguese, can be regarded as a contested space of traditional heritage and modern living, with a population of about 713,000. Malays

---

[125] See Durham & Kellner (2001) for Guy Debord's works on the *Society of the Spectacle.* Written in 1967, and translated into English in 1977.

[126] See Hans-Dieter Evans (1988, p. 327) on the connection between Melaka Chinese and Singaporeans. Ref: Evans, H. D. (1988). The evolution of urban society in Malaysia. In K. S. Sandhu & P. Wheatley (Eds.), *Melaka: The transformation of a Malay capital c. 1400-1980* (pp. 324-350). Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

constitute about 61 percent of the total population in the state, and Chinese 27 percent, while the rest are Indians and other minority groups.[127]

While one can lose his or her way in the city of Melaka, I managed to get around *Pekan Kecil* where I was to do my research without much difficulty. I have never lived in this part of Melaka given that I was abroad when my family moved here. So, in some ways, I consider myself (again) a familiar stranger. But it is possible to drive around *Pekan Kecil* without encountering too many problems. The town consists of rather sleepy, tidy, and scattered commercialized and residential quarters with mostly Chinese shop houses, as well as Malay restaurants, clinics, banks, and gas stations. The bus station is located in the centre of the town while the police station is a bit further to the fringe of the town. My mother's house is within walking distance from the town; therefore, going to town was not at all a problem, especially when I wanted the exercise.

Pekan Kecil, with a population of about 25,000,[128] reflects more of a Malay area with its traditional Malay-style (*kampung*) houses with people from all walks of life on the streets, than does Melaka City (population is almost 150,000).[129] The latter is more multiethnic and cosmopolitan, though not necessarily integrated. Politically, *Pekan Kecil* is a predominantly Malay area even though the shops are mainly Chinese-owned. Malay shops which mostly sell Malay-style clothing tend to be small and located in one corner. Occasionally, Malay premises appear in between the Chinese shops, but that is not a common sight. At one glance, the shops especially the restaurants with each group patronizing its respective ethnic premises, appear to be highly segregated. Even the

---

[127] Basic Data Melaka, Department of Statistics. (2005).
[128] Population Census 2000, Yearbook of Statistics Malaysia. (2001).
[129] Ibid.

shoppers tend to be segregated. As a policy, most of the shops use Malay names

alongside either English or Chinese language. The fresh food market, however, is

dominated by Malay vendors. Pork is not sold there, at least in terms of the front-stage

performance, even though the shops that surround the market are all Chinese-owned.

During schooldays, the bus station is usually packed with Malay schoolchildren

and teenagers but not Chinese or Indians. I often wondered about their conspicuous

absence. When I drove along the precinct of the only Chinese primary school in the town,

I could see Chinese students on the streets and the road would be congested with cars,

especially on schooldays. The Indians were so few here. A Malay secondary school (i.e.,

high school) is not far away from this one judging from not only the name of the school

but, also, the students and the school uniform they wear. Most Malay students wear

headscarves (*tudung*) and *baju kurung* (traditional Malay dress with white blouse and

turquoise long skirt). Meanwhile, the Chinese and Indian students wear knee length

uniforms even though the former (e.g., Chinese Babas) occasionally wear *baju kurung*

(and eat Malay food).[130] It is obvious, therefore, to any outsider that this is a

predominantly Malay community.

In terms of residential location, the newly built terraced houses are located in one

section while the *kampung* houses are rather scattered. Normally, the house varies

according to the size of land one has; the larger bungalows are almost like detached

houses in the US suburbs where there is ample privacy. Unlike the latter, in *Pekan Kecil*

the fences typically separate houses from each other. Some are wooden houses with

---

[130] Many of the Malay high school students I met find this surprising on their first encounter with the Chinese-Baba students. They always had the idea that a Chinese would not eat Malay food, or wear Malay-style dress.

bricks on one part while the rest are either wooden or of brick construction. Modernity has touched not only the urban people but, also, the smaller town folks.

Admittedly, this is a fast developing town. I remember visiting the place when I was small. At the time, we lived elsewhere because of my father's job. Every time he got a promotion, we would move to a new location. In the end, when he retired, my family settled in Melaka (my parents' hometown). Back then, the town was less urbanized. There were, for instance, no terrace or town houses. The land on which the houses sit (including my mother's) was once a *padi* field which belonged to the village folks. I used to be awed with the green scenery (since we have always lived in a town area). Now, such a site is long gone. Rather, it has been replaced with rows of brick, double-storey terrace houses. When these were built, the people received compensation from the authorities. Nonetheless, one can still see old coconut trees scattered in the various sections of *Pekan Kecil* including those adjacent to my mother's house. Returning to this location means much more than simply embracing modernity. This is "home" where my sensemaking journey took its roots.

<div align="center">Making Sense of Malay-Chinese Informants</div>

The Malay and Chinese individuals I met come from two categories. One, category might be labeled as rather well-off middle class families. In other words, they are educated, professionals, and have some years of working experience. All the Malays work in government departments while the Chinese informants work in both the government (one individual) and private sectors (four individuals). Among the

informants, I have a lawyer, a housing agent, a kindergarten teacher/owner, a lecturer, a

contractor, and five college (pre-university) teachers.[131]

In the other category, I have individuals—about twenty-five of them—from all

walks of life: house builders/constructors, sellers/shop owners, hairdresser, students,

drivers, home makers, and teachers/lecturers, who helped in one way or another. The

number would be more if I consider those whom I approached in passing throughout my

observations. They were indirectly involved in my study as I engaged in the observation

process (e.g., at the market, shopping malls, post office, bus station, hair salon,

restaurants). Some of them had no idea at all about my research as I only observed the

encounter. In order to protect the identities of the informants' (and others) assisting me in

this research, I use pseudonyms. Since I have five Malays and five Chinese (one is a

Chinese Muslim), their pseudonyms reflect their ethnic or religious affiliation. Out of

these individuals, only four are females (i.e., two Chinese, and two Malays).

The Informants, Interviews, and Observation

The interview was conducted in the informants chosen venue including one

person who preferred to meet in my house. Ken—of Chinese descent—is a lawyer in his

forties. When I received his call for an interview appointment through a friend (i.e.,

Lilian), he insisted on visiting me at home. He remarked that he was used to meeting his

clients at their homes. So, the interview was conducted in my "space," if you will. That

idea made me think about providing the participants with a climate that is non-

---

[131] As stated in this dissertation, the respondents were chosen on voluntarily basis. Questions might be raised concerning the representativeness of the selection. However, in light of the snowball interview technique used in this study, I believe that the data obtained would not be very different from those gathered through a more rigorous sampling technique.

threatening as Patton (2002) suggested. I realized that turning the interview into a host-guest scenario would make the interview pleasant and comfortable. Given that I once taught hospitality language at a local university, I felt I knew how to make him feel welcomed.

During the interview process, which was conducted in English, I learned a great deal about Ken. He grew up in a Malay *kampung*, went to a Malay school, is soft-spoken, and has been exposed to Malays his entire life. He was extremely polite, and rather *atypical* of a lawyer, very humble, not intimidating, and unassuming. When he met with my mother, he greeted her in fluent *Bahasa Melayu*. He spoke with ease, something which comes naturally, I thought, not a front. That speaks volumes about him visiting me at home.

Yet, his workplace is mainly a social circle of Chinese with only one Malay individual who works in the administration. He speaks Malay to the latter and Mandarin to his Chinese staff. He hardly meets with other Malays there even though he has Malays and Chinese as clients. But, his Malay clients mostly come from the district where *Pekan Kecil* is situated. He visits them at their homes. Only his Chinese clients visit him at the office. His immediate neighbors, too, are all Chinese. Once at home, he rarely mixes with people. In his words:

> I don't really have er I can say, not very healthy social life. I mean, I don't
> socialize that much. In the morning, I go to work and then come back. I will stay
> at home most of the time so I only deal with my customers. I don't deal with other
> people. I don't even have much time for friends, socializing, and actually, I hate

socializing so even like er wedding dinner er I'll try my best not to attend. I'll ask my mother to attend.[132]

I felt our "collaboration" in the interview went well. Given that he was introduced to me by my hairdresser, Lilian, who owns a hair salon in the town and is a good friend of his, I have been able to keep in touch with Ken. We have exchanged e-mail addresses for future contact.

At Lilian's persuasive request, I did not interview her. Her polite excuse was, "*Melayu saya tak bagus*" (My Malay language is not good); "*Nanti you rugi*" (you'll only waste your time). Rather, she preferred to supply me with information or informants—a counter offer which I could not possibly refuse. As a hairdresser, I thought she was very tactful in handling my request given that she does not live in *Pekan Kecil*. Instead of rejecting me totally, she offered assistance. Even though I might be "alien" to the small town, I consider myself more local than Lilian. Therefore, I assumed that, by offering me an alternative help—a negotiated strategy—she would continue to be a trusted hairdresser. But that truly worked for me.

In my research, she remained as an "inside" informant (alongside my sister) who kept on reminding me to "ask if I have any questions". Her usual, soft-spoken Chinese-style Malay utterance would be, "*You cakap sama saya, kalau saya boleh bantu, saya bantu*" (let me know if you need help). In my entire two months in Melaka, I visited her salon several times with a dual purpose: to have my hair cut or washed, or to accompany my children or nieces—whom I had "forced" to choose this salon—for a hairdo, and at

---

[132] For the purpose of this dissertation, the narration is presented in a correct grammar. In other words, I made some corrections to the utterances. But, other expressions like er, uh, mhm, pauses, and repetitions are written as they originally appear.

the same time, to observe—while waiting—unobtrusively, the customers who sought her

skill. At each visit, she would either converse with me or give me something to read.

At one occasion, a Malay girl came with a male friend (presumably her

boyfriend), and complained about the service. She claimed that the hair color treatment

was not effectively done and accused Lilian of cheating. The girl was angry as she said,

"*Dahlah mahal*" (it was expensive) given that the color did not show. Lilian responded

calmly, saying that she did not cheat, and in fact, she used the same treatment for others.

She explained that the hair color (customer's choice) would depend on the individual hair

type. Apparently, the girl was not satisfied with the beautician's explanation as the

customer continued scolding her and then left.

Notably, the negotiation strategy in this case, was missing. The girl came rather

angrily to complain. But, the outburst and accusation must have been "hurtful" to Lilian

as she reasoned calmly. She was more defensive than apologetic. The latter was labeled a

"cheater" in that brief encounter, while the former left with anger. The above encounter

illustrates an interethnic communication between two Asian individuals from a

collectivist culture in which no face-negotiation moves were used. Significantly, one is

Chinese and the other is Malay. Both individuals were more concerned with saving own

face than with the ethnic-other's face. Neither used an indirect approach in the

communication. Neither face was saved. And there was no sign of face-saving concern

being harbored. Evidently, both committed to "self-face concern" which pertains towards

dominating (the Malay girl) and emotionally-expressive styles (see Ting-Toomey, 2005).

Both have violated the rule of good, effective communication that we would expect in

any encounter. However, as I wrote in my fieldnotes: *This is the business realm. One is afraid of losing money-cum-credibility while the other is concerned about "failed look," money wasted, and the dignity of being short-changed for a "poor" quality of work.*

Throughout my observation, most of Lilian's customers were Malays especially adolescents (males and females). One Malay girl came with her mother to ask for the hair shampoo Lilian promoted. To my surprise, they spoke Mandarin. With the mother's frequent interruptions and comments in Malay, I managed to roughly follow their conversation. For the first time in my own hometown, I felt inadequate due to my lack of knowledge of the language. When they left, I was told that the girl attended Chinese school at a young age. Her mother, however, does not speak Mandarin.

The rest of the interviews were conducted at the convenience of the participants. Kay—another informant—is a young Chinese sales agent in her mid-twenties who has a temporary office in *Pekan Kecil*. Everyone knows her there as she is soft-spoken and graceful. Unlike the two Chinese neighbors in the area, she mingles and interacts with the community where she works. For the interview, I walked to her office and had a conversation with her, and asked if she would like to be interviewed. I did not encounter any problem given that we had already met once. She agreed and we talked about my research interests. Our primary contact occurred three years previously when I enquired about the house which my mother intended to purchase after my father's passing. We liked her approach, and decided to buy the house through her. Now that my mother lives in *Pekan Kecil*, we see her often. She speaks Mandarin and *Bahasa Melayu* (reasonably well), but not English. So the interview was actually conducted in Malay at her request.

Throughout my research there, she visited my mother frequently (i.e., impromptu visits), especially when she claimed she was bored (as she works alone in the office) and when we had *kenduri* (feast). She lives in a predominantly Chinese neighborhood. Her father is a businessman and has both Malay and Chinese customers. Given that she works in a predominantly Malay area, she is quite used to Malay customers. The latter often visit her father at home. Significantly, her father advised her to be nice to people, including Malays. As Kay remarked, "*Melayu, Cina, sama lah*" (Malays and Chinese are the same), *"Buat baik sama Melayu juga"* (Be nice with Malays as well). Her favorite expressions about Malay-Chinese were, "*Tak ada masalah*" (It's not a problem) and*"Baik juga"* (Just as good).

Alisa Li Abdullah, a kindergarten teacher/owner, is a Chinese Muslim who converted to Islam after she was divorced from her non-Muslim Chinese husband. She claimed that her husband used to beat her, especially when he was drunk. (This story emerged as she described her lived experiences.) The beatings and alcohol were the reasons she left him. In her words, "*Tak tahan*" (Could not stand it). She managed to pull herself together and eventually decided to learn about Islam when her immediate neighbor (a pious Muslim) bought her a book on Islam. As Muslims abstain from alcohol, which was the main cause of her marital breakdown, she claimed that Islam suits her. Together with her daughter, they converted to Islam and changed their identity cards.

Since she could have both her Muslim (Malay) name and her Chinese surname written on the card, she proudly showed it to me. Abdullah (meaning, "servant of God") is the name given to all Muslim converts in Malaysia that they have to attach to their new

names, which can also be combined with their original names.[133] She recently opened a kindergarten for children ages three to six years and owns a tuition center that caters to elementary school children. As part of my research strategy, I sent both my children to the centers, respectively. Her teachers are mainly Malays with a couple of Indians.

When we first met (my mother introduced her to me), I recall her telling me proudly, "*I dah masuk Melayu*" (I have already become Malay), which in Malays' understanding means she had converted to Islam. The phrase, "*masuk Melayu,*" has been a common meaning among some Chinese and Malays, and has even been widely discussed in scholarly writing (e.g., Chew, 2006; Nagata, 1979; Osman, 2002; Tan, 2004; Wang Ma, 2005). The term has often been used as if it is accurate. It must be mentioned here, that literally, *masuk Melayu* means to become Malay; as such, the concept has often been misconstrued by many non-Muslims given that it has the implication of the person becoming Malay, therefore, forgetting his or her family ethnic identity. As Chew (2006) claimed, "*[b]ukan Melayu sangat pantang menukar agama terutama Islam kerana ini bererti mereka 'masuk Melayu'. Sedangkan ini wajib diikuti apabila mereka berkahwin dengan Melayu*" (p. 74). (The non-Malays are strongly against changing their religion especially to Islam as that means they would become Malay; this would be followed strictly when they marry a Malay.) The positive implication is, if one becomes a Muslim, the assimilation into the Malay culture should have been viewed and understood as part of being in the Malay community, not as a total rejection of one's identity. As Osman Chuah Abdullah (2002)—a Chinese Muslim—asserted, unlike the Indian or Chinese

---

[133] See Rosie Wang Ma (2005) for details on the Chinese Muslims.

religions, for example, it is possible for a Chinese and Indian to embrace Islam and become Malay.[134]

I corrected her politely by saying that the appropriate usage would be "becoming Muslim," not "Malay," an erroneous view held by many Chinese. Such a misconception or negative view (I told her) is widespread in the intellectual realm. I explained that the phrase should have been "*masuk Islam*" (converted to Islam) given that it is the religion to which one converts, not the ethnic identity. She laughed and nodded. I told her that if one is a Muslim in Saudi Arabia, one would wear a *burqa*. In Malaysia, that is not a typical dress code among Malay Muslims. Innocently, she said, "*Salah eh*?" (Wrong, isn't it?). But at the same time, she insisted that she is already "like a Malay" in many ways. She appeared to me as someone who likes what she is becoming, or so I thought. When I asked her in what way, she explained that she no longer eats pork, *"sembahyang lima kali"* (prays five times—a day), interacts more with Malays, and wears *baju kurung*, and a headscarf at appropriate functions and locations. In everyday life, however, she does not wear a headscarf. Her justification for being "Malay" pertains towards committing to Islamic practices that are almost synonymous with Malays and their way of life.

When relaying her story, she switched from Malay to English as she apologized for her poor command of the language. I detected a strong Chinese accent in her spoken Malay, which is common among some Chinese who attempt to speak the Malay language. In her case, most Malays would liken her speech to that of a "market-type-language" (or *bahasa pasar*). She, however, speaks *Hokkien* with her daughter (Suri).

---

[134] See Osman (2002, p. 75).

Interestingly, her daughter moved to a Malay school when she became a Muslim as she was treated better there than in the Chinese school.

As her story unfolded (she willingly shared this), I learned that neither she nor Suri were welcome by her Chinese family as she claimed that her family thought they were "traitors" to their culture. In the family's words, "*Dah jadi Melayu, jangan masuk ini rumah lagi*" (Because you have become Malay, don't enter this house again). Here, Alisa was referring to her becoming Muslim (not Malay), which was the source of conflict in her family. However, she kept on using the words "Malay" and "Muslim" interchangeably to demonstrate her Muslim identity. Notably, her use of Malay to mean Muslim clearly reflected the misconception among Chinese Malaysians about what really constitutes a Malay versus a Muslim. More importantly, Alisa faces the dilemma of being perceived by her kinsmen as "becoming Malay", hence "defecting" from her group in everyday reality of Malaysia. Although she is, legally defined, not a Malay, she is, nevertheless, entitled to all the benefits of a Muslim convert including tithe (*fitrah* and *zakat*) and other forms of Islamic charity.

Currently, she told me her friends are mainly Malays as many of her Chinese friends have rejected her. Many claimed that she was stupid and "a bad woman." Her former husband even tried to take her daughter away, she said. Her kindergarten, which was once monopolized by Chinese children, now consists of entirely Malays. The Chinese parents' had accused her of turning their children into Muslims given that the students also learn *"Iqra"* (i.e., the Arabic alphabet; reading and writings). This explains why her students at the kindergarten and the center are all Malays. Her narrative, in this

sense, extended a misconception among Chinese about becoming Muslim if one learns Arabic, or even associates with anything related to "Islamic" teaching.

As she shared this information, her facial expressions moved along with the "dramatic episodes" of her lived experiences. The elements of bitterness, sadness, relief, anger, and happiness interweaved and interacted given that her serious voice fluctuated from low-pitch to high-pitch. Most of the time, her voice would be loud as she dramatized events. Se was quite "expressive" and switched frequently from using "I" to "*saya*" (or "I"). I was hypnotized by the powerful articulation of her "story" as I quietly listened to her talk. I did not interrupt. I had not expected such "personal" stories to emerge. I found it difficult to react. I was concerned about making unwanted statements. But, she must have noticed the silence as something that needed reinforcement as she said:

> *Macam tak percaya eh*? *My life is teruk*, *you know. Dulu saya susah; suami saya tak bagi duit. Saya sakit teruk. Ada orang Melayu tolong ubat saya, baik sama saya. Tapi masa tu I tak peluk Islam lagi. Bila ada satu Uztaz eh bagi I buku ugama, I baca, baru I convert. Lepas I peluk Islam, baru I rasa lega you tau.* (Hard to believe, isn't it? I had a hard life, you know. I used to be very poor; my husband did not give me any money. I was ill. There was this Malay person who helped me to seek treatment; he was nice to me. But at the time, I still did not convert to Islam. When a pious person gave me a religious book, then I converted. When I became Muslim, I felt so relieved.)

Significantly, her connection with Malays (Muslims)—as it turned out—began when she received treatment for her illness. (She was not psychologically fit, not eating well, and could not work, she said.) She embraced Islam when she was given a religious book to read from a pious Muslim she befriended after the treatment. Her circle of Malay/Muslim friends has extended from such a connection. I find her story not only emotional, but also, embedded with a strong sense of "connection" and "identification." That is, she identifies her self with Malay Malaysians in general, and with me, as a Malay Muslim, in particular through a very "heartbreaking" narrative. With that narrative, she also connects herself with the other-larger Malay (e.g., in Indonesia, Thailand) and other-Muslim audiences (e.g., in the Middle-East).

My other informant, Robert,[135] is a very polite young man in his twenties. He lives in the town center and is the son of a Chinese businessman. He is very well liked by my family. With his other siblings, he helps his father run the family business. Such assistance is crucial to the Chinese businessmen as attested by Chia (1997). As explained by his father, "*Ada ramai anak untung, boleh tolong saya buat kerja*" (It's lucky to have many children; I can ask them to help out) when my mother queried about his children. He added, "*Kalau ada ramai anak tapi tak boleh tolong, apa untung?*" (What's the point of having many children if they cannot help?) "*Kalau anak kita tak boleh buat kerja, Cina kata tak ada 'ong' o*" (If your children cannot do work, the Chinese say there's no "luck").

---

[135] The language spoken is Malay; the interview was informally done at various times (not one long stretch of interview), and as such, was not digitally recorded. I took notes immediately after having spoken with him. There were also many other brief encounters when we talked about the house and I took the opportunity to ask him more questions.

Robert's team consists of modest and skillful people as my mother always said. They also did their work fast, which was one of the reasons why my mother still requested their skills. In fact, they rate high in terms of their good *rapport* with the Malay community there. (My mother's word of mouth might have contributed in some ways.) Work wise, they are quite skillful as my mother always compliments them. She was even asked by a neighbor to get Robert to fix her doors. I was informed that Robert and his father work well with their Malay partner. The Malay partner is a good friend of his family.

What struck me as odd was the fact that the Malay partner had never addressed him in my presence. Their front stage performance did not match the kind of "friendship" they had as I gathered from Robert's narrative. It turned out that, when my mother requested Robert and his father to renovate the house, they sent over the Malay who in turn, recruited his two sons and a Malay male neighbor to help out. Every time Robert or the father came to check the status of the work done, my mother and I would serve these workers food and drink (something which my mother always insists we offer to guests throughout our life). But, they never interacted in the way that I would expect from a friend. As I recall:

> *The Malay "Pakcik" did not make any reference to the Chinese partners. Really*
>
> *odd! Why did they act as strangers? The former quietly requested my sister-in-law*
>
> *to set separate tables when the refreshments were served. The "tauke" (boss) ate*
>
> *in the front yard, and this "pakcik" ate in the back yard, but only after the former*
>
> *had eaten. He told my sister-in-law quietly, "biar dia orang makan dulu, kita*

makan karang" (Let them eat first. We eat later). *They continued working. Later,*

when the Chinese tauke had left, I heard them say to my mother that the Chinese

made a lot of money but could not even supply good cement. They should have

been more generous. They are also not reasonable, his friend claimed, and then

added, "kedekut, tapi duit banyak tu" (stingy, but has a lot of money). *(Field*

notes)

As I heard them talk about the Chinese "*tauke,*" I understood that the *Pakcik* was

referring to the actual cost of cement the *tauke* incurred and the overall amount that my

mother had paid him. The *Pakcik* felt that the "discount" given was not much when

compared to the money the *tauke* made and the items he supplied. Only later did I realize

that the *Pakcik's* sentiment about the *tauke* would indicate a stark contrast to what Robert

informed me later as he said, "*Kita kenal dia*" (we know him), referring to the Malay

pakcik as a family friend. As he remarked, "*Kita selalu tolong…kita bagi dia kerja*" (we

always help…we give him work). *"Dia pun tolong kita; kalau ada kerja Melayu suruh*

buat, dia bagi sama kita lah." (He also helps us; if there's work that Malays need done,

he'll let us know).

Little did I realize that the *Pakcik's* rhetoric was a revelation of his deep sentiment

about things that might have transpired throughout his relationship with the *tauke*.

Perhaps, he, too, might have thought that the *tauke* was not generous with him as a friend.

Sharing *his* predicament with my mother about the business nature of the *tauke* might be

a form of emotional release given that my mother would be in the position to understand.

How would one, then, interpret both Robert's and the *Pakcik's* ethnic discourse as they

unfold (separately)? What can we say about their front stage performances? In

sensemaking analysis, neither the individuals' "standpoints" can be dismissed lightly.

The partnership he talked about was more of a lending hand. In other words, the

father (as Robert's boss) felt that by offering some jobs to the Malay partner, the latter

could have an extra income for the family given that they have long known each other.

And in turn, the Malay partner does the same thing. I was so moved by that story as I

realized that the Chinese family and the Malay *Pakcik* are pleasant, at least, from what

little we know about them. To me, they are humble and friendly. To each other, the front

stage act was always one that reflects a worker-boss relationship—rather diplomatic. As

for the Chinese father and son, they can speak Malay, especially Robert, who speaks

Malay much better than his father does. My mother once said to Robert, "*Pandai cakap

Melayu*" (you speak Malay well), to which he responded humbly, "*Bolehla*" (I guess so).

Admittedly, I could not check whether their friendliness had to do with the high

profit margin they made from the renovation of the house, as hinted at earlier by the

Malay laborers. As with many other "business" transactions, my mother did not compare

the cost charged. She simply trusted them with the deal which was presumed to be fair

given that Robert and family had done several other projects for her before (e.g.,

installing the gates, the awning etc.). Robert seemed to me to be a (good) listener and

modest person. His pleasant and unassuming character encouraged us to do business with

him.

Alan—of Chinese descent—works in a public institution, which is predominantly

Malay. He is in his early thirties and is likeable. Like Ken, Alan also felt that he has been

surrounded by Malays throughout his career even though he grew up in an entirely

Chinese neighborhood. Being the only Chinese in his department, he interacts well with

the others in the Malay language. He claimed that he has had no difficulties in interacting

with his Malay colleagues. In his words, "*Memang tak ada masalahlah*" (I don't have a

problem). Even during his university days he had to do coursework with a Malay student,

to which he added, "*Terpaksa bergaul*" (We had to mix). Nonetheless, his interactions

with and exposure to the ethnic-other were very minimal; that is, he went to a Chinese

school, has had Chinese as close friends throughout his life, played sports with Chinese

students during his time as an undergraduate student, and did not communicate with any

Malay outside of the workplace. The only Malay community he interacts with is his

students and Malay colleagues, given that the latter outnumbered the other ethnic groups

in the institution.

One thing which struck me as significant was his behavior throughout the

interview process. He would speak very softly at times that I had to bend near in order to

hear what he said. He would say politely, *"Boleh dengar?"* (You can hear?) When that

occurred once, I informed him that I could not hear him well, as such, he needed to speak

up. But, as that occurred too often, I often made excuses of interrupting him so as to

check the recording. I was worried that his voice might not be captured. I noticed later

that the intonation of the voice would depend on the questions asked, especially with

respect to questions pertaining to Malay-Chinese relations. Given that the interview was

conducted at his workplace, the topic might have been rather difficult for him to discuss.

(I did not, however, query him about that. I assumed that my ethnic identity and the

surrounding might have also contributed to the situation.) As I listened to him talk, I scribbled "*voice – too soft.*" I realized how the environment, the emotions, and especially the topic might greatly influence a person's behavior which is affected by sensemaking. In this regard, behavior (or action) is part and parcel of sensemaking.

Sarah and Reza—a Malay couple in their late thirties—teach at the same place. When I approached them for the interview, both were very willing to share their experiences especially the husband. He was keen to talk about his life experiences as he said that he had a lot to share. But at the same time, he was modest as he informed me that he was not sure whether that was what I wanted to hear. I was informed by Sarah that her husband is always the talkative and approachable one. I could see his friendly and warm personality throughout the interview.

Reza was enlightening and indeed helpful. He seemed to have a persona that no researcher would regret to approach and befriend. He required no probing at all. Throughout our *intra*ethnic communication, he was concerned that he was not providing me with relevant information. There seemed to be some amount of trust and confidence which I believe might be due to our common ethnic identity. The ethnic bond reinforced our social cultural affinity, hence, made it easier for him to express his sentiments and viewpoints. As an in-group member, the collective memory and the shared experience generated a strong sentiment of commonality.

Sarah decided to join when I interviewed her husband. So, this was the only interview where I actually had two persons at one time. More often, it was Reza who spoke, but given that Sarah was available, I also interviewed her. (Initially, she refused to

be interviewed.) It was more of a dialogue with Sarah interrupting and laughing, and me asking extended questions pertaining to the recollection of his experience. They both graduated from different universities, one in the capital city and the other abroad. Their interction with the non-Malays mostly occurs at the workplace.

Interestingly, Reza was the only Malay student in a predominantly Chinese school in his early years of schooling. Yet, his reminiscence of that experience demonstrated a good relationship with the Chinese. His best friends at the time were Chinese. He claimed that part of the reason was due to his talkative and friendly nature unlike his other siblings. He recalled there being only two other Malays in his class of forty students, but he was confident of himself. His intention was to be sociable especially with the ethnic other. So he interacted with them in English as he felt that the language would be a suitable choice. He cheerfully said:

> You would not use Malay with the Chinese, right? We don't use English with the Malays. But because I teach English, I have to use it. We try to speak English because we don't want the students to come to our department and see that we don't use the language. What will they say? hhh ((laughs))

Meanwhile, Sarah had minimal contact with the Chinese students even though she went to a university in the capital city that has a considerable number of Chinese students. The justification for her minimal contact was that she was less talkative than her husband. Moreover, there were many other Malays to befriend. Her husband believed strongly that one needs to approach the ethnic-other in order to widen the circle of friends. Their exposure to the Chinese, for example, varied given that Reza was used to

having contacts with the former at the high school in Penang, whereas, Sarah only seriously befriended the other at the university. However, like the other Chinese informants, both Reza and Sarah do not mix that much with the ethnic-other outside of their working environment since the community they live in is mostly Malay. They mentioned lifestyle as a factor which contributes to the zero socialization. As they confessed with a tinge of guilt, they simply did not have the time to commit to the outside activities given their long working hours.

Ramli is a Malay senior teacher in his late fifties. He was articulate in his views of Malay-Chinese relation and how to achieve better social relationships. I had no problem getting details from him, and indeed, we had another subsequent and lengthy interview a few days later. On both occasions, he volunteered. He was serious in discussing urban Malay-Chinese relations and in the country as a whole. His mood shifted dependent on the type of question raised. I realized that the changes in his reactions had much to do with his seniority and experience in life. His narrative suggested that he has gone through many memorable experiences with regard to ethnic-other consciousness.

For example, he informed me that he had to leave Malaysia to enroll in a university abroad since he could not gain entrance into the only university in Malaysia at the time. Malays could not enter it easily since it was dominated by non-Malays (see Khoo, 2005). (I noticed the bitterness of his voice at this revelation). He shared his memory about the 1969 riot given that he was in Kuala Lumpur on the fateful day. He believed that the riot should act as a constant reminder of ethnic distrust and hatred in Malaysian history, alerting people to the consequences of such distrust and hatred. As he

put it, "*Generasi muda kita dah lupa*" (Our younger generation has forgotten); "They want so many things" and "*Dia tak tahu padahnya*" (They did not think of the impact). He felt that many people, especially the younger generation (Malays and Chinese alike), have forgotten about the riot, which results in them demanding things that might lead to negative consequences. He said this subtly without blaming any particular group. He confessed to feeling a bit apprehensive going to and being in Kuala Lumpur on May 13 and, as such, would always try to avoid such a situation. Throughout the interview, he talked about the ethnically diverse friends (who are very few) at the workplace. But like the others, the interaction always stops short when he is at home.

Zahra is a Malay teacher of fifteen years. She is in her forties and speaks mostly Malay with colleagues including the non-Malays. The interview with her was conducted in Malay. She confessed to not being sociable outside of the workplace. She has both Malay and Chinese friends, but the former outnumber the latter. She used to have Chinese friends at high school but when she entered a public university, her friends were mostly Malay.

She recalled the only conflict she had with a Chinese colleague when she was promoted to Head of Department by the director. As the job was also eyed by the colleague, she was caught in the conflict. As a result, they did not interact with each other but somehow survived the conflict by faking their performances when it comes to departmental meetings. In other words, she displayed a front stage performance that enabled her to act normally and interact with the person as her subordinate as and when necessary. In so doing, she used adaptive and evasive strategies. As a result, the conflict

was contained to a few individuals in order to ensure the smooth running of the department.

Salim, who is also in his fifties, lives mainly in a Malay environment. He teaches at the university outside the local town, and like Reza, he received his education in the Western country. His best friends used to be a Chinese and an Indian, and he also had many non-Malay friends. He went to a Malay elementary school and, later, started to make contacts with Chinese individuals when he was in high school. His reminiscences of schooldays were unforgettable since he made friends throughout the school. Though he lives in a predominantly Malay community, he strikes me as someone who appreciates being with people, regardless of their ethnicity. This is evident from the way he talked about his Malay, Chinese and Indian friends in high school. Notably, he studied overseas where a dominant Malay community would be rare to find. As such, his perspective of the other (i.e., beyond the Malay realm) was quite comparable to Reza's. Their relationships with Chinese, as ephemeral colleagues, changes constantly as they relocate to new stations in life—school, workplace, and others.

<div align="center">Making sense of Malay-Chinese communication</div>

A variety of viewpoints emerged from the data, drawn from the two-month period field observation, and interviews. The data reflect not only the speaker or the articulator, but also, his or her ethnicity, environment, and experience with the ethnic-other. With regard to the latter, that would depend on the amount of exposure, time spent, and the rapport between them. In this section, I discuss fully the multiplicity of voices of the

Malay-Chinese informants—their sensemaking—in the form of narratives. I also explore

in this chapter the content in terms of what is salient and what is hidden.

I consider the content as privileged and meaningful in the time-space context that

it occurs. The discussion was a situated event which includes the articulator, the

environment, and the presence of a researcher. As Riessman (1993) noted, "[i]ndividuals'

narratives are not only [sic] situated in particular interactions but also in social, cultural,

and institutional discourses, which must be brought to bear to interpret them" (p. 61). As

such, I bring to bear relevant details surrounding the individuals in my narratives. Even

though the participants were willing to share their thoughts on the questions raised, there

were times when those thoughts tended to interact with their roles in the society, and my

role as a local researcher.

I identified several characteristics within two broad themes; the *uniformity* of

ideas (i.e., the commonalities) and the *disparity* of ideas (i.e., the differences). These

themes include positive and indirect attitudes, positionality, adaptive ambiguous strategy,

presentation of self (the front stage act), articulation of viewpoints, and social enactment.

Embedded in these are conceptions of self, the other, and the sensemaking (i.e., the

content). As sensemaking is dynamic, I contend that self and other are always in the

process of creation as they embellish their own identity and embrace (or denounce) the

other. How the self and the other frame the sensemaking process are reflected in the

themes of their respective concerns.

The Interview Response Pattern: Points of Uniformity

Informants' Attitude and Positionality: "I don't have problem with the other"

The informants' attitude is somewhat unifying in the sense that they were warm in welcoming me. Generally, they were accommodating. They responded to all the questions even though some provided very brief and indirect responses to questions that sought one's ethnic opinions, while others tried to elaborate on all of the points made. All the ten informants presented themselves as "contented" and "comfortable" with the questions. That is, they displayed positive and cooperative attitudes. None asked me about the relevance of the questions except to seek further clarification. Out of the ten interview questions, the ones pertaining to describing the other and government's efforts to assist the latter were the least favored. This was indicated by the way they responded and behaved; in other words, the responses were brief and somewhat vague (or subtle) especially among the Chinese informants. The informants' rhetoric indicates an overwhelming acceptance towards individuals labeled the ethnic-other.

Given that how much is said (and lack thereof) speaks volumes, the narrative accounts of the informants occupy much of the space in this chapter. Most ended up with their own "unique" sets of narratives (e.g., as in the case of Reza, Alan, Alisa, and Ramli) which typically, interwove with how they were influenced by others (or events) in the society. At the same time, insightful stories often emerged as a result of my intense probing into their involvement in interethnic communication. Some got carried away in the sense that they provided rather "personal" information about the self, or they recalled their "those were the days" experience.

My sensemaking research constantly reminded me that I must engage in a collaborative framework in order to get a thick description from the informants. This means that, at times, I had to bring the issues that they indirectly talked about to the forefront. As Scollon and Scollon (1981) noted, "…the subjective reality of each participant in a conversation is checked out against the reality of each other participant as an ongoing negotiation through which we create a social world" (p. 14). Following this, what I obtained from the informants depended on how they situated themselves in the past, and at the time of the interview. Hence, my representation of their stories is very much influenced by how they narrated lives.

For example, in asking about their everyday interethnic experiences, the informants ended up telling me about their background, predicament, and work environment. Through their shared stories, more details emerged which not only pertained towards the actual questions, but more often, extended from their own narration. Initially, I did not think about my research as a "life story" of individuals. Rather, I saw my research as understanding how these individuals make sense of their interethnic encounter/communication. However, as one story unfolded, to be followed by another, I realized I had to "follow" every move (i.e., the life experience) in order to get to the bottom of it. Meaning, I believe that without pursuing their stories, my research questions would not be answered. To do that, I had to ask more questions, probe and inquire. In the process, one informant (Alisa) was rather emotional as she spoke about her personal life and relationship with the other, and, the other informant (Reza) was very passionate about it. Having gone through these "sensemaking" episodes, I concur with

Riessman (1993) as she attested, "…narratives often emerge when you least expect them" (p. 56). Embedded in all these narratives are elements of personas, identification, connection, adaptation, mindfulness, emotions, (dis)contentment, friendship, communicative styles, hopes, and multivocalities.

My informants all lived in Melaka for varied reasons. Some have lived there longer and have returned after finishing college education elsewhere. Ken, for example, positioned himself as someone who is very familiar with Malays. He explained that he grew up in a small *kampung* in the same district, went to school in *Pekan Kecil*, and did his law course through an off-campus program when he failed to enroll in a university. He commutes to work everyday and meets his clients at their homes or offices. Unlike Ken, Sarah and Reza consider Melaka their workplace where much of their interethnic communication takes place. They are not originally from the state. But, having worked in Melaka for about six years, they consider it their hometown.

In describing their background, the informants positioned themselves as side-by-side with the ethnic-other (Malay/Chinese) in the society. In this sense, "togetherness" is more orchestrated through a rhetoric of identification and perhaps, in *thinking/verbalizing*, if not in spirit. As such, growing up in a Malay *kampung*, or being in a dominant Malay or Chinese population is claimed to reflect and reinforce some form of familiarity with the ethnic-other. Such a situation is identified as a realm for social/interethnic interaction in which these informants claimed to encounter no communication difficulties.

Similarly, by having friends, or working across the ethnic divide, the informants assumed familiarity with the other. In this regard, the informants laid claim to the idea that, at various stages of their lives, they encountered the other regardless of intentions. None positioned himself or herself differently. Rhetorically speaking, they displayed a sense of "*us-ness*" that suggests the idea of sharing a collective conciousness among different ethnic individuals. These individuals tended to collaborate in the act of rhetoric, if not in the real situation.

When I began interviews, I did not immediately talk about the questions. I revealed my background to some extent and became acquainted with the participants. Subconsciously, I chose to talk about my Chinese heritage when interacting with a couple of my Chinese informants, but not with any of the Malays. I must have desired connection and identification with the former in gaining their trust. I see the need to prolong the relationship as they are also my local acquaintances. My intent is to maintain a good, meaningful relation with all of them.

The questions prepared were merely a guide, but in the end, the interview rested with the individuals. Even though I mentioned about my interest in understanding Malay-Chinese interaction, I did not receive any surprising reactions. Nor did I perceive any "hostile" attitudes from the informants. They were only too eager to assist me and inform me about the things I would like to know. I was not sure whether that was a good (or bad) thing, but it seemed to me that they had all understood my purposeful visit. I showed the questions and explained thoroughly my research agenda.

From the interviews, two somewhat revealing patterns emerged. One, both the Malay and Chinese informants were all too willing to provide input and were very positive in their attitudes. The other, the vocal ones tended to be those who work in the private sector (e.g., Ken, and Alisa), and those who were conversant in English (e.g., Ken, Reza, Ramli, and Salim). But to be sure, every informant I spoke with talked about having no problems at all with the ethnic other in daily situations. They were unanimous when it came to knowing the other and having the other as individuals with whom they interacted, especially at the workplace. While there is a sense of uniformity between the Chinese and Malay informants in terms of how best to project their front stage performances in daily experiences, there also exists a marked disparity in relation to sensemaking and ethnic-other.

Informants' Claims and Positive Strategy: "I relate well with the other"

As mentioned, the informants relayed positive attitude about the ethnic-other. They spoke about being able to adapt to the other throughout their lives especially in the community where they live and in their workplace. Responses like "*Okay saja*" (It's okay), "*Tak da masalah*" (No problem), "*Biasa saja*' (It's fine), "*Melayu baiklah*" (Malays are alright), "I don't have problem interacting with them", "I can have the other as close friends", were commonplace. Every participant claimed to know and have friends of other races, with those individuals including workmates, course/business partners, clients, and neighbors. None of the individuals felt inadequate or lacking in terms of how they negotiate interethnic encounters.

However, detailed analysis shows rather limited interaction, at least, in the present situation. My perusal of the data indicates to me that the interaction the informants talked about is confined only to the workplace (or stores/malls, banks) even though the realm where they encountered the other is wider (e.g., the schools, the university, the cafeterias, the streets). Much of the interaction that occurs takes place only between colleagues, customers/clients, and students. A contact with the ethnic other outside of this realm is very minimal and, often times, is absent altogether.

As attested by Ken, "one of my staff is Malay and many of my customers are also Malay", and he tries to build a good relationship with his Malay customers partly as a marketing strategy for business. For him, this is his interethnic communication given that he never socializes outside of his workplace. He maintains a positive attitude towards the other as he shared his standpoint, "I think er one is attitude *lah*. I think frankly you don't see them as another race or anything, just another friend or another customer, and there's no barrier anymore, and one more thing is that, I think I speak Malay quite well." Interestingly, Ken equated his adaptive strategy to his positive attitude and good command of Malay. He perceived himself as someone who adapts well to the interethnic situation through the way he treats and speaks with others. In turn, he has received a warm reception from most of the interethnic contacts forged so far.

Similarly, Kay also claimed to interact and "mingle" with Malay customers since her office is in a predominantly Malay area. As she remarked, "*Customer saya ramai Melayu dekat sini"* (My customers are mainly Malays here). In my presence, she used Malay without much difficulty and her fair comparison between Malays and Chinese did

not reveal much except the fact that she would be willing to compromise her judgements. Meanwhile, Alisa claimed to have known many Malays when she converted to Islam. She informed me about her experience living in Kelantan (a predominantly Malay state) to reinforce her positive images of the Malay realm to which she has been exposed. At present, her interaction with the other is confined to the realm where she works. She also meets with other Chinese Muslims regularly. The other respondents also had very minimal contact with the other (Malay or Chinese) once they were outside of the working environment. Thus, the living environment speaks volumes about the individuals' realm of interethnic communication.

Informants' Adaptive Strategy: "I see the other as a friend/customer, not the other"

The participants were, thus, rather tactful in their responses (towards me and the ethnic-other) and the way they viewed the other. For example, when asked about their Malay or Chinese friends, all of them claimed that they have or used to have the other as friends as attested earlier by Ken. By insisting on the venue (visiting a Malay at her house), Ken indirectly illustrated that he could adapt to the situation. Given that he also travels to meet with his clients, he might have considered me a "client". That would explain his "relaxed" and confident behavior in my home. Yet, he was humble as I recall my mother commented about that to him. In business parlance, his good rapport with my mother was good for his business which relies on "word-of-mouth" marketing.

Meanwhile, Alan informed me that he has no difficulties interacting with Malays as long as he knows how to adapt himself to the situation. This reminds me of his soft

voice during the interview, which almost sounded as if he was whispering. As I recall my observation and field notes:[136]

> *He did not look comfortable. His voice was extremely soft, almost inaudible. Why didn't he speak up? His 'office' might influence his response. Looking around, I saw Malay faces. Sitting next to his desk was a Malay woman, and slightly further away, was a Malay guy. One Indian guy was looking at us or him. Alan seemed conscious; in his chair, he lowered his head slightly and talked to the digital recorder. He was almost whispering. I could barely hear him. Was he whispering? Or, was that how he would talk normally? The people in the staff room were busy doing their work except, of course, occasionally they looked at us; I could sense it. The staff room had no fixed wall except for temporary half-length cubicles or divider; there was simply no privacy in this small space. Everyone could see or hear the other. (Fieldnotes)*

In comparison, his situation is quite unique given that he is the only Chinese in the department. As I was told, the public institution has very few Chinese instructors. He would speak Malay with Malay friends and Mandarin or Hakka with his Chinese friends. With the latter, he would never use Malay or English. He confessed that his English is not good. I also learned that Alan is very well-liked in the department. His soft-spoken behavior might have contributed to that.

Similarly, when sharing his experience about the ethnic riot in Kuala Lumpur in 1969, Ramli lowered his volume and spoke in a rather cautious manner. He relayed his

---

[136] My field notes contain mainly descriptions, key words, abbreviations and/or full sentences, depending on where and when I recorded the observation.

"trauma" being caught in the "intense" mood on the streets; how the Malays were

shouted at and were asked to "*balik kampung*" (return to your village)—an experience

which he would never want to encounter ever again in his life. In retelling the event, he

asked whether the information he revealed would be protected. His concern was

understandable given that neither the riot nor the causes were widely discussed among

the public in Malaysia as mentioned earlier in the dissertation, for fear of provoking

ethnic hatred (see also Mahathir, 1970/1981). Even my belated father never discussed this

in our own home. But, in the scholarly realm, the ethnic riot was freely discussed and

even misrepresented by some writers (e.g., Chernov, 2003; Chua, 2003; Freedman, 2001,

2003).

Ramli's reaction in this context was a stark contrast to his other responses

pertaining to the interview questions. He was more relaxed and free-wheeling when he

talked about things other than the ethnic riot. With the latter, I felt he was more cautious

in his word choice and speech as he detailed what he witnessed. Given that there were a

few non-Malay colleagues in the institution, his "cautious" behavior was a sign of being

in a dilemma, of showing respect while still providing information.

Throughout the interview, he used English and was quite confident with the

language as he teaches English. According to Ramli, he primarily uses Malay in his

interactions with others except when the other only speaks English. As he put it, "I don't

have much difficulties; I feel comfortable." And he added cheerfully:

What I find is that, uh, if the other person knows that er I'm er good in English

then they always use English to communicate with me ((laughs)), they feel

comfortable to communicate in English and it's also a way to actively use the language or so.

The other informant, Reza, who stood out to me as a rather confident and well-composed person, described his involvement with interethnic communication as follows:

I mostly interact with Malays since many of the teaching instructors here are Malays. We only have two Chinese out of twenty five Malay staff. When I was in Penang during my schooling time, my friends were mostly Chinese. There were only three Malays in my class. So we used English, I mean with my Chinese friends. It's a good opportunity because we can practise our English. But of course, with Malay friends, I will use Malay.

Significantly, Reza viewed his world as being comprised of both Malays and Chinese, depending on the location. In other words, where there would be Chinese, he would use English to interact; similarly, where there were Malays, he would use *Bahasa Melayu*. Given that he teaches English, he asserted that he has to use the language to interact with both Malays and Chinese in his department. That, he said, his use of English made him a role model for the students who visited the department.

Alisa, a Chinese Muslim, jokingly referred to herself as "*Melayu-Cina"* (Malay-Chinese) given that she is already a Muslim. She viewed herself as "multiethnic," and more so, her daughter, who befriends both Malays and Chinese at school and at home. However, she claimed that they are still Chinese even though they are Muslim. Due to that, she encourages her daughter to befriend Chinese and have Chinese adopted "uncles" and "aunties." At home, she discourages her daughter from using Malay. Rather, they use

Hokkien to speak with each other. The statement stood out to me as inconsistent with her earlier claim that she has "become Malay." However, one might argue that home is where individuals resort to Goffman's back-stage performance (1959) or James Scott's (1990) hidden transcripts. The reader might ask, "What does the notion of "becoming Malay" mean exactly to the non-Malays?"

In a sense, becoming Malay in Alisa's context is also negotiated between being not-so-Malay and not-so-Chinese, that is, the *in-between*. This reminds me of Chawla's (2003) predicament of the "life in-between," and the "dislocations" that intertwine with her ethnic identity. Similarly, Alisa might also be viewed as being "dislocated" in the sense that she moves from one "identity" to another as she moves from one realm to the other. That is, as Chinese, she speaks *Hokkien* at home. Outside of home, she uses Mandarin with others who can speak the language. Meanwhile with Malays, she uses either English or Malay depending on their command of the languages. Even with her daughter, she uses English and Malay, almost code-switching the two languages, but only outside of her home. Even though she is not fluent in English, and speaks in her "Chinese-style" Malay, she impressed me as not only multilingual but, also, a confident and strong-willed person. No doubt her hardship and "troubled" life have turned her into someone with a strong personality; she now appreciates her new becoming—a claim she made consistently in the interview.

When it comes to food, her religious affiliation came out strong as she said seriously, "I told my daughter if she goes out with her Chinese adopted uncles or aunties, or to Chinese parties, she should not eat Chinese food; only eat Muslim food".

Interestingly, when we parted, she once again claimed that, "*Saya tahu semua dunia*

Cina, Melayu" (I know the Chinese and Malay world); "*Saya pernah duduk Kelantan*

setahun, bergaul dengan orang Melayu sana" (I used to live in Kelantan, and befriended

the Malays there). As she said that, she explained how she would dress for the occasion,

which means, she would wear proper Malay attire given that she is a Muslim. She would

follow the rules established by the Islamic party who ruled Kelantan when she lived there

for a year. Importantly, she recalled passionately and vividly her year in Kelantan. I

confess that I enjoyed listening to her talk as she could do that endlessly.

Overall, the participants claimed to have a "good" ethnic interaction by using a

particular strategy which included amongst other things, by simply being themselves—as

reflected in their narratives (i.e., the projected or "exposed" selves), being nice, speaking

the language which was appropriate to the ethnic-other, having a good attitude, and by

knowing how to "fit" into the interactional realm. Notably, the rhetoric used is full of

diplomacy and respect for the ethnic-other. Even though the informants talked in terms of

"I", they displayed a "we" sentiment and created a rhetoric of "togetherness." As Kay

said cheerfully, "*mhm hati lah ((laughs)), bukan budi bahasa saja, hati kita mesti baik;*

kalau kita baik dengan dia, dia mesti baik dengan kita" (mhm it's our heart ((laughs)),

not just courteous language, we must have a kind heart; if we are nice to others, they will

be nice to us). Kay's sensitivity almost made me feel emotional as I realized that there is

still hope for a Malay and Chinese like her to engage in meaningful interethnic

communication. Her narrative, too, reflects the rhetoric of an interest (good naturedness)

in the ethnic-other that all Malaysians should commit to.

The Presentation of Self: "I mind what I say to the other"; "I don't quarrel"

In essence, all of the ten individuals I interviewed "collaborated" in the enactment of self presentation pertaining to facework and front stage acts. At least throughout the course of the interview, none of the participants showed any sign of "disinterest" nor did they exhibit any peculiar behavior that might signal disengagement from our conversation (except, perhaps, Alan). That also means that none of the Chinese participants, except for Ken (a lawyer) talked about the "Malay privilege" or other "Malay-Chinese" issues discussed in the literature. However, their front stage acts differed based on who they are and where they were interviewed.

Alan, for example, spoke in a rather low voice in a staffroom full of Malays, whereas, Kay spoke in her usual everyday-at-work voice to which I was accustomed to. The latter spoke in the comfort of her office in a predominantly Malay neighborhood. Given that she works alone in the temporary office, unlike Alan, she did not really need to consider others' performances or faces. In many instances, however, she hesitated, and then came out with positive and encouraging words through her a "face-negotiation" move. She would frequently say that Malays and Chinese are generally nice towards each other. Her rhetoric did not draw any difference between the two ethnic groups except to point out that she only has Chinese as friends and Malays as customers.

Even Alisa spoke in her usual "loud" high-pitched voice when she shared her "troubled" life and daily experiences at her office. Her face-saving strategies included balancing the comments she made about Malays and Chinese, negotiating what she said, and insisting how she is becoming more "Malay" through her religious practice. The

other Malay participants seemed in a cheerful attitude as they shared their thoughts about Malay-Chinese communication. Salim, for instance, recalled his experience with Chinese friends at school who he considered as both rich and poor. In reminiscing, he said that "we could talk about anything, but not about Malay-Chinese relations; we never thought about that. I was only exposed to the Chinese when I was in high school." Clearly, in an interpersonal context and communication, self and the other constantly operate in ways that enhance their existence and presence.

I did not manage to observe Ken at his firm since he visited me at home. Nor did he invite me to his workplace. Given that he also visits his Malay clients in their homes, this was consistent with his practice. As a person, he is well-liked by my mother, and they could interacted fairly well. This was evident on three occasions: when he was greeted at the door, when he was offered a drink, and when he made a move to leave. He would switch politely and with ease from using English to Malay when addressing my mother. Unlike other Chinese participants, he put forth his ethnic views in more detail but only after I "partnered" with him—following Fisher (2003). Given that he is a lawyer with many years of experience, he was articulate and confident in presenting the case as he viewed it.

<div align="center">The Interview Response Pattern: Points of Disparity</div>

Articulation of Viewpoints: The Polarized Voice

Even though the individuals exhibited uniformity in terms of their overall behavior and attitude towards the interview, they also displayed a sense of disparity. I detected that the disparity occurred not only among similar ethnic participants, but also,

between the Malay-Chinese participants. To be sure, not only did they enact polarized standpoints with regard to certain issues such as Malay-Chinese relationships, and governmental efforts, but they also differed in terms of the responses given. Their intrapersonal concerns might be attributed not only to ethnicity, but also how much exposure they really have to the ethnic-other (e.g., personal experience). While, with two exceptions, the Chinese informants would generally give brief and positive feedback, the Malay informants always elaborated on their ethnic friendship and the government's efforts. More evidently, the informants attempted to provide a view which they might think I desired at the beginning of the interview. But, when they were probed further, they began to open up through the acts of concealing and revealing. The disparity concerns ethnic views, ethnic strategies, government policies, and their own responses (e.g., some would be as brief as one word utterances or a phrase, others would be fairly lengthy).

To illustrate, Ken felt that the relationship between Malays and Chinese is good, and has always been good, at the ordinary level. He repeated this point several times in the interview, which I took away as something very positive and convincing; that is, he reinforced the idea that interethnic problems do not exist among the ordinary public. For example, he has had no problem dealing with the ordinary ethnic-other in his life. One can never avoid the other, he maintained. In support of this, he cited his own experience dealing with his Malay customers and Malay employees at the government offices and buildings. As he said:

…they are quite friendly to those lay people who don't understand anything and need their help and I think there's a difference between nowadays and er some years ago and uh even at the time it used to be very different, but now, er even they're all very friendly. They're providing very nice service even to those who can't really speak er *Bahasa Malaysia* [Malay language]; they try to explain and sometimes when I was there er I was asked to help translate and explain to them. They asked if it's okay so, I see no problem at all for us er interacting with the other…I am comfortable with that er with them and er I can't say I have any problem with any of the government office *la.*

When I probed further, he remarked, "I think the laymen are interacting very well among themselves. I think there's no problem. But I think the problem comes from politicians…I think the problem comes from politicians." He repeated the latter phrase twice, which suggests that that he had much to say about the role of politicians in the escalation of ethnic cleavage in the country. I sensed that I needed to interrogate the idea that interethnic problems we have come from the "politicians, and some from the government policies", not the ordinary individuals. As he asserted, "I mean, at one time, they [i.e., the politicians] tried to promote this interaction between races, but on the other hand, some of the politicians tried to divide us into ethnic groups." In Ken's view, the blame is directed to the policy-makers-cum-politicians-cum-government officials, not the ordinary people. He associated himself with the realm of the ordinary—people like me and him. The everyday-defined reality and the authority-defined reality are clearly distinguished in Ken's perspective.

On the contrary, Ramli had high regards for the government in its efforts to unite the different ethnic groups. According to him, "the government is doing more than enough…but what is not enough is the response from the others." For Ramli, the "others" refers to the individuals at the grassroot levels including Malays and Chinese. He expressed the belief that these people need to do more than simply wait for the authority to promote interethnic integration as he remarked:

> We should organize more social activities in the area; even among the same race we don't organize social activities. We don't even know our next door neighbor *kan* ((laughs)) so we must organize more social activities."

As further illustration, consider the following excerpt:

Researcher: When you said that the situation is much better, whose contribution is it, you think?

Ramli: I think the authority has played a big role trying to promote ethnic integration because they have er made it compulsory for certain percentage of non-*bumiputeras* and *bumiputeras*, *kan*

Researcher: so you agree with that?

Ramli: er I agree with that er yes.

Researcher: So, what about the use of space and facilities? What about here? What about the facilities? Are they well shared?

Ramli: I think the space is much shared; everyone has got his or her own share *lah…*I think the government is now trying to devise the uh

rukun tetangga (neighborhood vigilante patrol) so we can meet

with some other races *lah* we can mingle *lah.*

In the same vein, Reza believed that the problem lies with the general public, not the government, as the former are rarely involved with the activities promoted at the local community. He argued that people's lifestyles contribute to the ethnic divisions in society. In his situation, the family did not participate in outdoor activities organized by local groups. Significantly, his rhetorical strategy pertains towards self realization/consciousness. He did not put the blame solely on a particular person or party. Rather, he was conscious of individuals like himself who had not done much to socialize with the ethnic-other.

My own experience dealing with government employees would not be as smooth sailing as Ken's. It would vary; there are good and not-so-good encounters. However, it must be stressed here that the situations we encounter are all case-based, hence, context-specific. How we are treated and by whom and why—our performative acts—are all coordinated by taking into consideration an interplay of various factors as Pearce (2005) would argue. Culture, he said, is one of those factors. For instance, ordinarily, I had no problem dealing with the people at the counter at the post office, bank, or in government offices. However, there are always exceptions.

I remember visiting the local leader's office and the government building in charge of "national integration" hoping to obtain some statistical information pertaining to the local population and copies of any printed materials that might be relevant to this study. As a researcher whose interest is to understand interethnic communication and

sensemaking, these places are important sources of information. To my dismay, the male

representatives (who were busy conversing) acted as if I was referring to something alien.

The way they looked at me made me feel as if I did not know what I was talking about.

As I was conscious about my sentiment, I immediately restated the purpose of my

visit. I was told that the actual local leader was away on a field visit, and that I would

have to come back for the "statistics." I wondered about the nature of their job and asked

myself: What are they doing there, sitting and talking but of no help at all to a local? As I

slowly gained my confidence, I asked the question that I had in my head but rephrased in

a more civil but firm tone: "If this is supposed to be a local office pertaining to the locals,

why wouldn't you have such details? May I know the function of this office then? I live

here."[137] I must have looked very defensive and overpowering at the same time as the

men (*only* three in that big building) started to pull themselves together.

To my amazement, one of them tried to reason out and talk about the role of the

office (in the act of defense), while the other quickly gave me a handout which had

statistics on it. *Not much, I thought, but that will do. (Fieldnotes)* The third man simply

stared at me. I suppose he must have been shocked (or disgusted) by my speech. My

small build did not indicate in any way my resolve to demand for a *fair*, if not better,

service. Little did he know that my exposure to the world and my role as a local

researcher has empowered me to deal with such "minor" irritations. Given that the

document I was handed was the only copy they had, he made me a copy. What this

means to me as a local researcher is the fact that such an office is not prepared to serve

---

[137] I spoke in Malay using "I" instead of the Malay word "Saya". This is translated for the purpose of this dissertation.

the locals on the basis of public need for information. There is no act of *spontaneity* in catering to such needs nor is there professional *knowledge* of the core business/subject under their charge.

Another office posed a similar problem. I requested materials pertaining to state-level ethnic integration programs that have been, or are going to be, implemented. Again, to my surprise, the director had nothing to share with me—not even the names of the programs or the activities conducted. Upon probing, he confessed to being new to the post; in his words, "*baru ambil alih*" (recently appointed) as he engaged in an avoidance strategy. In other words, he had no clue as to what I was referencing. But, how would he not know? Isn't his job to facilitate programs that could enhance ethnic integration? Shouldn't *he* be in the know?

> *I masked my emotion (or rather, my disappointment) by asking him if his staff knew. "No," he said. "Everything we do here would correspond with the headquarters," he explained. "Which means?" I asked. And he said, "If you want any documents or statistics pertaining to the programs and population, you have to go to the headquarters in Kuala Lumpur." "But, don't you have local programs for the locals or the state?" I interrogated further. "That will be similar to the ones organized in Kuala Lumpur." He responded dismissively. (Fieldnotes)*

My worst encounter with the male director ended when I decided to make copies of the data at hand. (I made him lend me the only copy that he claimed he had.) Then, I went on my own way getting materials from a young woman at the front desk. As she was also

new (her first day, she said), she allowed me to make copies of the materials. A case in

point: Given that these representatives could not provide a local researcher with the

information needed, it makes me wonder about the role of these departments: Do they

really know their tasks? Or, is it because my request was not a routinized action, thus,

making compliance more difficult for the newly appointed clerks/director? To link these

encounters with Ken's experience, I am inclined to suspect that either Ken has never had

any bad encounters with the government representatives/bodies, or he conceals the

information in order to have a good rapport with the community (particularly Malays) in

which we live. That is, *he* has learned to adapt and accommodate. More specifically, he

might choose to be constructive in his discourse, that is, he chose to ignore the

"indequacies," and instead, concentrate on the good relations.

Ambiguous Strategy: "I think it's okay"

With respect to their responses, the ten ethnic individuals differed in the manner

in which they attempted to respond. Each provided his or her own "communicative style"

in providing opinions on the questions raised. Out of the ten, only five informants gave

rather lengthy feedback, each reflecting his or her personal view concerning the realm of

Malay-Chinese relationships. These were Ken, Alisa, Reza, Salim and Ramli. Reza and

Ramli had Western exposure, given that they went abroad to study. A careful study of the

transcript indicates that more probing was needed to gain a more detailed response and

clearer input from most informants. That might have resulted in the overlapping

utterances (see the interview transcript below) as a result of sharing my own thoughts by

referring to such issues as the "ethnic quota" and "Malay" privilege when the subjects

were referred to in passing. For instance, I worked with Ken in eliciting detailed

viewpoints. To illustrate, I present two excerpts from my interviews with Ken and Alan.

Interview - Excerpt 1:[138]

Ken: When we deal with like, customer or friends, we don't divide them into

whether they are Chinese or Malays, they are just like any other persons.

But sometimes, when it comes to some policies, then, they [the

authorities] divide us into races.

R: What are the government policies that you think need further improvement

or, you know, improviza[tion

Ken: [okay uh

R: that are not working, or are not effective at all?

Ken: Okay, for example, uh, in school days uhh we interact with er Malay

friends and so on until uh Form Five (grade 11), and then, we get our

results, and we need to apply for U and then, we see what we feel are

unfair, and then, some of the Chinese who get very good result they don't

get into U and they don't get any any this uh ((pause))

R: university?

Ken: yeah uh [scholarship

R: [yes

Ken: and those who performed poorer than them er

R: [get?

---

[138] In this excerpt, Ken responded to my question about his description of the other. The symbol [indicates overlapping utterances. "R" refers to the researcher.

Ken: [yeah yeah, can get everything so that that's in my own experience, that's

           the er first first experience itself of uh the government dividing us

           ((pause))

R: and you felt it

Ken: yeah we felt it very quickly

I: because it concerns you and your future, right?

Ken: ((continues with the issue)) by the government, even though when they

           explain they want to help the poor, but we also come from a poor family

           and we tried so hard for it and we still are denied of it not because we are

           not good ((pause))

R: mhm

Ken: ((continues)) but because ((pause))

R: because of the quota?

Ken: yeah yes ((pause))

R: So you couldn't get entrance to the university?

Ken: yeah so ((pause))

In the excerpt, not only did Ken share his viewpoints concerning how he saw the

ethnic-other, but he also revealed his bitter experiences affecting his (or, rather, his

group's) future alongside the future of Malays. Such sentiments, I believe, should not be

dismissed lightly. He asserted that he treated friends and customers as simply "friends"

and "customers" and not as Malay or Chinese. But, the awareness of an ethnic

idenfication—"of who you are"—was made clear to him when he completed his high

school and applied for entrance into a university. Ken stated all this subtly not emphasizing the word "Chinese" or "Malay," that is, not stating the "obvious." He referred to them as "they" (Chinese) and "those [Malays] who performed poorer than them [Chinese]."

Yet, I understood perfectly what he meant in the discourse: His actual narratives should read:

The Malays who performed poorer than the Chinese get everything.

The Chinese tried so hard.

The Chinese also come from poor families.

The Chinese are denied [access to the university] even though they perform well.

I wondered about his "bitter" experience, his intrapersonal concerns, his perceptions, and his views of "others." Deep inside, I felt so unhappy for him, and wished that the scenario would have been different. I wondered about how we (*us*) can make this common space a better place in which to live. At the same time, as a Malay, I also felt like "dialoguing" with him about such actions; why we—as educated people—think that the 1955 Constitution was set up, followed by the NEP (after the 1969 riot) and others. Too often, the rhetoric I hear (not necessarily from the participants) is "binary" in nature. Either it is about the Malays' predicament (in its own ethnic realm), or the Chinese (as oriented by the educated Chinese, most often in the international realm). The informant did not make refence to the agreement that the Malay and Chinese founding fathers made when they accorded automatic citizenship to the Chinese while giving the Malays special privileges to enable them to participate in a largely Chinese dominated market economy.

What this means is that the historical context was not included by Ken as part of his sensemaking narrative about the unfair treatment felt by the Chinese when competing for government benefits. As a Malay researcher, I realized that this convenient oversight portrayed the Chinese Malaysians as the *victims* (with the use of collective "we") while at the same time, promoting a profile of Malays who are *genetically not fit*—which I took away from Ken's narrative—to compete in the open market regardless of the uneven playing field. The phrase, "w*e* tried so hard", as used by Ken penetrated my soul. That phrase almost felt like a knife, stabbing me in the heart. I, thus, wondered about the previous discussion concerning zero invitations from ordinary Chinese Malaysians (see also Daniels, 2005). *Could the "we work harder phenomenon" be the reason for not inviting Malays into their homes?*

> As I pondered, Ye Lin-Sheng's (2005) words (again) came to mind:
>
> The [Chinese] parents should speak of the NEP's efficiency rather than warn their children that '*you must work harder*' since the Malays have a head start.[139] Such statements may seem innocuous – meant only to make *the children* work harder – but *they* have prejudiced two generations of non-Malays. (p. 330; emphasis added)

Clearly, the Chinese Malaysians, according to Ye (see Tan et al., 2005), have unanimously ingrained in their minds that *every* one of them has to *work harder* than Malays as the result of the Malays having "a head start," and because of that, become

---

[139] This should be contested as it is misleading; it gives a wrong perception and creates prejudices. Malays did not have a head start since the arrival of the colonial rulers. Malays lagged behind in many aspects, including the economy, until the government intervened. Otherwise, the Malays would have lost their lands without any protection (see Hirschman, 1975; NOC, 1969; Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1969).

prejudiced towards Malays as an ethnic group. The main actor in this rhetoric is *the parents* who instill such deep-skin prejudiced sentiment in their children.

But, as a researcher, I must learn to listen, and not assert my viewpoint. Admittedly, it was such an uphill task, a big dilemma so to speak, having to listen to a "moving" story from Ken, in my own home while at the same time, having to restrain myself from asking him about the Chinese perceptions/mindsets from his perspective. Also, I felt like sharing with him the importance of "honest" dialogue between Malays and Chinese for the future generation. A thousand questions spin, yet again, in my head: What does Ken honestly think about me as a Malay? What does a Chinese think about Malays in their day-to-day experiences, or vice versa? How much do we know about their mindsets? If there are 100 poor Malays and 40 poor Chinese (because there are more Malays than Chinese), and the places at the university are limited, how would the distribution be accomplished? What *if* the 40 poor Chinese did better than the poor Malays due to various historical and economic factors and the authorities enrolled all the forty Chinese persons in a university? Would the Chinese be contented leaving all the "poorly performing" Malays behind? Would these Malays be content to remain "poor" if they could not gain access to education which was the result of unequal economic footing as illustrated decades ago in the intake of all Chinese students at the University of Malaya in the early years before NEP (see Khoo, 2005)? Where do we go from here?

As a Malay, I understood the specifics to which he was referring. It is a known statement to both of us in the rhetoric of discontentment as reflected in Ken's utterances that the Malays (i.e., "those") who perform poorer than the Chinese (i.e., "them") manage

to enter the university even though the latter obtain good results. His further dismay was the fact that these "poorly performed" Malays were given scholarships, that is, "get everything," while he, or "*we*, the Chinese tried so hard," and "come from the poor family," "were denied" access to the university. He asserted that the Chinese were denied because of the "policies"—the ethnic quota as one of the examples he mentioned—and not because they were "not good." His rhetoric did not only address the problem he encountered, but also, the problem that the Chinese as a population faced. His reference of "we" suggests so. Evidently, there is a sense of "collective consciousness—we" among the Chinese as an ethnic group. Here, Ken acted as a spokesperson for the Chinese whose sentiments he shared (see Thock, 2005). From the Chinese point of view, the implications of the ethnic quota include that the space for them at the university is smaller than Malays, which suggests that university admission is competitive (and biased). Moreover, since the quota for Malays is bigger, it is believed by the Chinese that Malays who enroll in the public university are not as good as them. It is, thus, crucial to examine if such a generalization is a belief that Chinese Malaysians hold.

Put simply, his bitterness and the "unfair" situation became clear to him as something which divides him from the Malays, as an ethnic group, not the individuals. Such bitterness—as Ken subtly described it—was made worse given that the Malays who who went to the university were not the "good" ones. He was rejected despite being the second best in his school. At the same time, Ken asserted that the fault lies with the government policies. And he made this clear to me as he stressed the factor several times in the discourse. More specifically, Ken's rhetoric offered insights into the realization of

many Chinese like him about how the presence of Malays as an ethnic group put the

Chinese in an "unfair" situation in terms of utilitarian gains upon the completion of high

school. As such, the self-awareness of being "Malay" and "Chinese" became apparent at

this level in his experience. Hence, we are also confronted with a rhetoric of

competitiveness (i.e., competing for the same resource) and rhetoric of justice (between

what is considered "fair" by the Chinese and Malays).

While Ken emphasized the government's role in the ethnic divide at the group

level and not at the grass roots level, Alan seemed reluctant to provide detailed comments

on Malay-Chinese communication/relationships. Rather, he engaged in a "superficial"

level of interaction as opposed to "deep" level of interaction. One might ask, what does

"no response," "mhm," or a "pause" mean?

Interview Excerpt 2:

In this excerpt, I asked Alan about his experience teaching at a predominantly

Malay college. In so doing, I prompted him to talk about his experience:

R: So, how has that experience affected you?

Alan: meaning?

R: uh meaning in your everyday interaction trying to use the language, and

        getting used to the [environment

Alan: [okay, okay

R: So, rasa macammana? (How do you feel?)

Alan: mhm ((pause))

R: So how does that make you feel? Do you think it makes you feel more

Alan: comfortable

R: more comfortable?

Alan: comfortable, confident

R: confident?

Alan: yeah, confident, yeah after two, three years, *jadi sekarang tak ada*

   masalah (so now there's no problem at all)

R: *hubungan etnik tu macammana*? (What about ethnic relation?)

Alan: mhm ((pause))

R: *Masa you sekolah dengan masa you mengajar, kaum tu hanya kaum Cina*

   sahaja ke atau campur? (During your schooling time, and at your

   workplace, you have Chinese only or mixed?)

Alan: *oh masa saya sekolah ye*? (oh, during my school time?)

R: *yeah, masa sekolah* (yeah, during your school time)

Alan: *masa saya sekolah dekat X* (I went to *X* school)[140]

R: oh here in Melaka?

Alan: ah yes here

R: oh right right that means you don't go far yeah? Your area in a way, yeah?

Alan: yes yes my hometown

R: you're very lucky

Alan: ah yes my hometown so not much problem lah

R: tapi high school kan majority Melayu? (but the high school consists of

   majority Malays?)

---

[140] Due to confidentiality, I did not reveal the real name of his school or the university.

Alan: almost ninety-five percent

R: Malays?

Alan: Malays

R: mhm

Alan: *tapi tak ada sebarang masalah lah tak adalah dari segi bahasa tak adalah*

(I don't have any problem, no language problem at all)

R: Where did you do your degree?

Alan: At *X-University*

Alan: tapi masa tu pun majority Melayu (But at the time, Malays were also the

majority)

R: majority Malays yeah?

Alan: *tak ada masalah, cuma kita kena er* (no problem, except we have to er)

R: *pandai [menyesuaikan diri?* (know how to adapt?)

Alan: uh huh *[pandai menyesuaikan diri, menghormati, and… uh kena*

bertimbang rasa lah, kita datang sini pun dengan majority tak ada any

problem, memang close dengan mereka jadi er masalah dari segi bahasa

tak adalah cuma English (know how to adapt yourself, respect others

and…uh, have to tolerate others. When I came here, I don't have any

problem with the majority [Malays], I'm close with them er I have no

problems with the language except English).

From the language perspective, Alan indicated that he had no problem with the

Malays at the university where he completed his undergraduate studies. This might be

expected since he mostly spent time with Chinese friends. In his words, "*tak ada masalah lah kalau mengingatkan ye, apa, mungkin saya lebih banyak masa bercampur dengan Chinese lah masa dekat universiti, contohnya, main game ke, habis kelas ke*" (I had no problem at all when I think about my experience at the university as I spent more time with the Chinese, for example, in sports and after class).

We can further infer that Ken accepts the ordinary Malays (or laymen as he described them) as separate from the politics, or more specifically, as separate from those Malays who are politicians (as revealed in the transcript excerpt). That is, he identifies his "villain" through his subtle yet strategic rhetoric of "the government policies," "the government," and "the government dividing us". In the latter, the term "us" identifies him with me as one of the "laymen" who he believed are interacting well with each other. Meanwhile, Alan did not talk much about the government nor did he talk about his "problem." As such, we can infer from his rhetoric that he did not encounter any problem in his experience with the Malays. It is noteworthy that he did not really have much experience with Malays as compared to Ken. The crucial question is, "How would he know whether he might or might not have problems dealing with the ethnic-other if his social circle did not include the other?" More specifically, was he being evasive?

In this context, I recall the words of Richard, my other Chinese informant I met as I pursued with my research. He remarked that, "just because you don't have a friend from another ethnic group does not mean that you're racist." With that said, Richard informed me that he did not really mix with Malays at school even though the high school was predominantly Malay. In this regard, unlike Reza who went to a predominantly Chinese

high school, Richard had ample opportunity to interact and develop friendship with Malays. However, his experience suggests that the school (or early education he received) did not contribute to his inter-ethnic socialization. He had very few Malay friends as demonstrated when he said, "you can count with only one hand." But, there was a Malay friend who he would visit during the Eid celebration. Despite his Malay-dominated environment, Richard did not fully mingle and interact. *Was it a personal choice? Why was he being evasive when I probed further about not having Malay friends in the school? Why did he keep on saying his situation is different? Did I detect a sense of resentment in his behavior? (Fieldnotes)*

Yet, he asserted that the ordinary Malays and Chinese have no problems relating with each other. Plus, he argued that his situation is different since he lives in a less urbanized environment, compared to Kuala Lumpur, where the situation might be different. He felt that, in Kuala Lumpur, people mix with each other more, and freely too. This is a stark contrast to what most scholars argued. That is, Chinese and Malays tend to relate better in a rural environment (e.g., village) or small towns than in the urban environment (see Raybeck, 1980; Tan, 1982; Winzeler, 1985). Therefore, unlike the others, he could not reminisce enough about his relations with the Malays. However, he articulated more in terms of what the government failed to do and how interethnic integration would not be successful if an ethnic quota is maintained. His rhetoric was very selective given that he responded to only a few, rather than all of, the questions. Unlike other conversational partners, Richard mentioned religion and the dietary habits of Malays and Chinese which he felt pose problems for ethnic integration.

Both Alan and Richard had very limited contact, hence limited interaction, with the Malays. Given that Alan only has a real connection with Malays at the workplace, Alan's claim that he has no problems with Malays might be contested. I argue that the workplace situation is different from the situation in school, for example, where one can avoid the ethnic-other as demonstrated by Richard. At the workplace, if an individual does that, it might be perceived as "racist," "anti-social," or, a "non-joiner." The workplace also consists of many educated individuals whose horizon and even sensemaking are affected by many situational factors that might enhance the relationship more than they hinder. Would one be considered racist if he or she had no ethnic-other as a friend? I wondered. I argue, however, that there is no *relating* if there is no *interest* to do so. And there is no *other*, if there is no *interest*. Embedded in all this, admittedly, is our mindset—our cultural frame of reference (Kimmel, 2001).

Meanwhile, Reza talked more about using English when Malay-Chinese communication was pursued. He relayed the idea of speaking English as having a connection with the Chinese (as non-Malays) who, unlike his Malay kinsmen, would not hesitate to speak with him in English. Salim elaborated his views on the Chinese but was more inclined to focus on the good relationships he has had. Similarly, Ramli referred to his few Chinese colleagues in the department whom he has befriended. He described their relationship as being at the professional level, not beyond that.

Robert, Kay, and Alan did not elaborate when describing Malay-Chinese relationship, or when they were asked about the other. They would refer to members of the other ethnic group as "good," "fine," "not bad," "they're okay," etc. They asserted

that they did not have any problems with the other in daily life. As Robert put it, "*Kita buat baik dengan semua orang, Melayu, Cina…*" (We make friends with everyone, Malays, Chinese…). "*Kita kenal dia, kita kenal semua Melayu kerja dengan kita*" (We know him—the Malay worker—we know all the Malays who work with us). However, Alisa tended to be more vocal in her opinion about both Malays and Chinese as she spoke elaborately in her Malay-Chinese dialect:

> *Chinese don't care one. They just care what they want, you know. They don't care about you. They only think about their children's education. They pull out their children from my kindergarten. They think I want to turn their children into Muslim. Mana ada.* (Where got?) *They want good education but fikiran dia orang sempit.* (…they are narrow-minded). *Dia ingat Islam tu tak bagus.* (They think Islam is not good). *Melayu tu malas, tapi suruh saya buat. Nak suruh saya ajar anak dia tapi bapak dia tak tengok pun kerja anak dia eh. Harap sekolah saya ajar, tapi dia tak tengok kerja anak dia. Malas betul. I marah dia you tau. I kata you ingat I ni apa? I geram betul sama dia.* (Malays are lazy, but they want me to do it. They want me to teach their children but the father did not check his child's work. He wanted my school to teach, but he did not check his child's work. Really lazy. I scolded him, you know. I said, who do you think I am? I'm so mad at him.)

Admittedly, her openness startled me deep inside, an emotion which I hoped she did not sense. Her strong, "outspoken" words stirred my emotions and clouded my mind as she spoke. I realized I was not prepared to hear those comments in person despite the

fact that I had already encountered similar remarks in the academic discourse (see Alatas, 1977; Maeda, 1967; Rabushka, 1973; Tan, 1982). I believed that the remark she made was more of a generalization or even stereotyping, not reflective of the actual ethnic group. However, as a researcher, I tried to put on a straight face and acted naturally, offering prompts such as "really?" and "Oh, I see." At best, I forced a laugh. After all, that *was* her narrative sensemaking about self and other as she recalled her experience. Despite my attempt to conceal my emotion, Alisa continued with her comment about "those Malays" who "did not care about their children's education."

When I repeated her thoughts (reluctantly) about "lazy Malays" or "lazy Malay parents," she rephrased that into, "*bukan semua Melayu malas la. Ada yang rajin jugak I tau. Kalau dia duit sikit, susah nak tengok pelajaran anak dia. Chinese dia nak education, dia tak kisah punya. Nak hantar sekolah yang bagus.*" (Not all Malays are lazy. Some are very hard working. If they have very little money, they cannot afford to attend to their children's school work. The Chinese want education. They don't care. They want to send their children to the best school.)

Alisa stood out to me as a very emotional person who enacts the roles of a divorced woman, a single mother, a "businesswoman" and a Muslim convert. Despite her "strong" views, I realized that she meant what she said given that she had always spoken in a "direct" manner throughout the entire two months I was in the neighborhood. Kay's office was nearby and while we were having the interview, Kay dropped by and listened in. Alisa immediately addressed her in the Chinese language, which made me feel inadequate. I was informed later that Alisa asked Kay if she wanted something to eat.

Alisa's approach was flexible—something which I thought would relate well with her "business" attitude. Her directness and openness were clearly evident during the interview.

Social Enactment: Role Differentiation

As mentioned, the informants acted based on how they viewed and situated themselves in the larger society. Foremost, they situated themselves in the work environment alongside the other. The primary role that the informants assumed would be one that identifies with the workplace, that is, as a colleague, lawyer, educator, owner, sales agent, business person, or other. Alongside those roles, there were familial roles which evolve within ethnic identity, that is, as a mother, father, daughter, son, wife, and husband. In this sense, role differentiation is negotiated and dynamic. The embodiment of roles somewhat determines their "entities" and the "perceptions" of those roles. What this means is that, as they interacted with me, the roles moved from being Malay or Chinese, to being individuals, citizens, cultured persons, spouse, workmates, and informants in a non-linear pattern.

To illustrate the embodiment of the different roles: As individuals, they are driven by competing factors which are historically, culturally, and politically situated. As members of a profession, they engage in various forms of social enactments which include collaborating, accommodating, and competing with the other for such things as departmental heads, well-paid positions, rewards, or even friendship. As cultured persons, depending on how they view themselves in relation to the other (e.g., sidelined or privileged), different notions pertaining to justice and the conception of their ideal

nation of intent would interplay between their action and interpretation that might affect

their performances. As informants, they would be readily prepared to share their

standpoints based on how they view themselves and others in society, given my presence.

In reality, the dynamics and the multiplicity of roles emerge and intersect as they relate

with the other. In this sense, I contend that sensemaking is also about *anticipation*. That

is, we anticipate before we do things, enact a role, or claim our positions based on what

we already know/experienced, or assumed we know, or heard. Specifically, we view the

on-goings (or interruptions/failures) in life and proceed (or anticipate) from there.

Ethnic Rhetoric

This section examines the diverse ethnic standpoints of the Malay, the Chinese

Muslim and the Chinese non-Muslim individuals. As I listened to them talk, I learned

about the ways they negotiated things and events in life. This was revealed by the choice

of words used, the intercultural strategies applied (e.g., privileging, accommodating,

collaborating, avoiding, compromising, and competing), and the manner in which they

delivered the stories. In other words, how they shared their life predicament with the

presence of ethnic-other and the researcher offered the potential for valuable insights into

their mindsets and sensemaking. As I analyzed the transcripts, I recalled the informants'

overall posture and attitude, which I believe might have affected and been affected by my

presence. At times, I was unsatisfied with the somewhat vague comments as I felt that

they could have expanded on the views even more despite my attempt to prompt.

But at the same time, Malay-Chinese communication is not an easy subject to

interrogate. As mentioned much earlier, many things come into play when we talk about

Malays and Chinese. I was fully aware of my ethnic identity in positioning the Malay-Chinese standpoints and in articulating the narratives. I assume and ponder on many things. I assume that my position as a researcher, and especially as a Malay, might be construed as an "obstacle" to the Chinese informants to pursue deeper and easier revelation of ethnic sentiments. I assume that my identity might be considered a "bridge" for the Malays to connect with their in-group member about what they experienced and felt. I believe that such binary stance of "us" and "them" might not assist me in getting far into my research pursuit.

Rather, such narrow/dichotomous thinking persuades the researcher and the informants to move in only one direction. I thus ponder the in-betweens—the "neither here" nor "there" type of individual. What this means is that there might be individuals who are inclined to go along with the ethnic-other in some ways. I wondered about my great grandfather: *Where would I situate him in this dialogue?* There might also be individuals who think about moderate ways of managing issues. In all these positions, our ethnic strategies and sensemaking affect and are affected by each other. No one, especially a local Malay, has thus far inquired about the sensemaking episodes, relating processes, and interethnic communication with the ethnic-other in everyday experiences.

Yet, I wondered about the limits of asking: How much can I ask? How far can I pursue? What is going on in the interviewee's mind when we talk about shared common space? To obtain more in-depth responses, I prompted and probed the participants for clarification. In so doing, I often ended up suggesting or offering the words as illustrated

earlier. But, that only meant that I would get more lengthy and detailed responses from the Chinese and Malay informants.

The narration was, often times, arranged and crafted in such a way that the interview did not follow the order in which the questions were listed. Rather, the narration emerged as a result of the participants' ways of telling the stories. Each narration is different; it is subjective and personal, hence, situated. Each perspective is raised differently. And *that's where I begin*. Each informant had *his* or *her* own *unique* style in presenting the story. Each had his or her memory to recall and reflect upon. Each of them engaged in reflexivity, that is, the act of self-consciousness, to the extent that he/shehad to open up and talk about his/her "sentiments." Based on that, each interviewee replayed his/her story in the present, with me as an audience.

Put simply, the informants are the primary directors, producers and actors of their events while I am the secondary producer and a storyteller (Wolcott, 1994). As argued by Jacelon and O'Dell (2005), "[t]he researcher tells the story of the findings using all of the results of analysis. The presentation of findings is usually punctuated with examples of data that support the results" (p. 219). Somewhere along the process, I, too, would play the role of a director, guiding them to the questions, always at their disposal. The sensemaking process, in this regard, is one which requires a *participatory* effort from me as a researcher and the informants' in order to "produce" the narratives (i.e., content). As collaborators of action, the researcher and the informants engage in a range of communicative acts that dwell upon their *active input*, particularly that of the latter, and their intersubjectivity.

Malay Views

There are commonalities among the Malay informants with regard to the issues raised. They described positively their interactions with the ethnic other, the government's efforts in uniting the different ethnic groups, and what could be done to promote integration. Their primary exposure to the ethnic other reflects, to some degree, their background and the education they have received. For Reza, he was exposed to interactions with the other as early as Form 1 (or US equivalent of Grade 7). Sarah, his wife, was exposed to communications with the other only when she entered the university. Salim's first contact with the other occurred when he entered high school.

Meanwhile, Ramli described his interaction with the other mainly at the workplace. For example, he claimed that he had no problem relating with the other as he would first size up the person with whom he interacts. As such, he has never had any difficulties. As he remarked:

> I feel comfortable…for me it doesn't affect much er whenever I communicate in English, I'm sure that the other person is er er fluent in English otherwise hhh ((laughs)) then I can communicate freely. But, if the other person is not fluent in English, then, I find it difficult *la* to communicate because you have to be selective in your words *kan* so that er you can remain friends hhh ((laughs)).

Similarly, Reza shared the following sentiment as he elaborated his experience at high school where a majority of the students in his class were Chinese:

> Being Malay, in a majority Chinese population, did not affect me at all. I think, it goes back to attitude. It was not a problem at all. We had a good relation. It

depends on the individual also. Even my father also encourages us to mix with others. So during the schooling time, this was not a problem to me; maybe because we were still young so we were not conscious about the Malay-Chinese issues. Now, it might be different *la* hhh ((laughs)). In my case, I had no problem communicating with the other because of the early exposure. For me, communication wise, socialization, mhm, there's not much difference. People might think that oh just because we are from different races, we cannot communicate. Not with me. I can. Me. I like to interact with people. But now, I lost contact with the others [the Chinese friends] when I left... But personally, the relationship we had at that time was interesting, no biases.

As he shared his viewpoints, he wondered about the ethnic situation that the Malaysians are facing now:

But now, it seems that we cannot get along. But why, I ask? Why not? I think it was better during my time. Now, why? Sometimes, I question about that. What went wrong?

Sarah, too, claimed that she had a good experience with the other:

My relation with the Chinese at the university was okay. There was no problem even though there were more Chinese in the department where I was in. We used Malay and English to communicate. But, that was the first time I had to really communicate with the non-Malays since majority of the students in my department were Chinese. I communicated in English and Malay, both languages,

and they did the same. It was okay. *Main cakap je lah*. (I just talk). My exposure made me interact with the other. I communicated…for the purpose of studying.

Like the others, Zahra has very minimal interaction with the other in work or social situations. Her circle of Chinese friends includes those who were in the same class with her at high school. As she was enrolled in a top science class, she had the opportunity to mix with them. But, the language used among them was Malay, given that their command of English was not very good, or so she said. Nevertheless, her friendship with her Chinese friends at the time was a good one, something which she recalled with enthusiasm. She was considered by the "*Additional Maths*" teacher as proficient in the subject and an exemplar to the class. At the university level, she had Chinese friends— who were fewer in number than the Malays—but the "rapport" was not as good as the one she experienced at high school. Her statement was, "*tak ingat dah; kalau ada pun tak close*" (I cannot remember at all; even if I had, it was not close.)

But, unlike the other two males, Zahra and Sarah were not very articulate about their relations with the other or even about events surrounding themselves. That is, they did not readily talk about things or people as much as the other two males. As such, I find it difficult to get as much information as I would like from these women who are not only educated but are also content with their life. But, as it was my job to probe, and as a woman too, I pursued with intense probing. I realized that the need for information—or probing—underscores sensemaking in the interethnic communication research.

Meanwhile, Reza confessed that the individuals—himself included—have not done enough in order to integrate:

Professionally, we can integrate. Professionally, it's not a problem, but only

professionally. At least, that's my opinion. Majority of my friends are Chinese. I

don't have a problem with that. My 'Mrs' has a different exposure. But here [the

workplace], are mainly Malays so, there's not much interaction. At home also, we

don't interact with the other, not even with the other Malays ((laughs)). So, that's

our excuse. No time to interact.

As such, Reza argued that people, or "we," should not be encouraged to go their ("our")

separate ways as he reminisced about his past and shared his views about the present

situation. He somewhat blamed the freedom of the "ethnic programs" on television which

divided people further apart, not ethnicity:

During my time, the language was Malay. We spoke Malay and English as well.

But Malay was there. Basically, it goes back to the individual, attitude, and

lifestyle. We must have the activities. But I think it's *our lifestyle* now. The

lifestyle; I mean among *our* own ethnic group as well. We don't have time to

socialize. Okay, I take the example of *our* new housing community. They tried to

do something but it only lasted for two weeks because only two families attended.

Huh? We love it but we cannot carry it out because if only two families came,

who is going to pay for the instructors? hhh ((laughs)) I think *it's the lifestyle*.

People don't have time. I think it's not a good excuse, but it's the excuse that

people use now. People don't commit themselves to the activities; simply because

people don't have much time. We do share some activity space like open house.

But we don't really get involved. Go back to lifestyle. Even college activity also,

250

people don't get involve. It depends on your schedule. *Ethnic wise, not much*; we

don't actually go out. But, *it's not so much about ethnic*. That's what I think.[141]

In parting, he reminded me of a few more things as he said:

My major concern now is food lah. When you start cooking, and you smell it,

then, it's not good *lah*. You feel bad because you're not used to it. So we must

have the activities to get people together. *Other things are okay with me*. Give us

the space to do what we are supposed to do. But when people do that there are

people who forgot that there are other races. I can make friends with the other,

and have best friends from a different ethnic group. I invited them every year to

the house. And my mother will cook special chicken since *we* don't eat pork,

right? We cannot accuse the government for not doing anything. Education should

be the first step to develop or to design whatever we want to design. Right now, I

think everybody is allowed to do what they want to do based on their their ethnic

interests.

Evidently, Reza pointed out several pertinent points in the interview. First, he

drew attention to the language use, that is Malay, which he feels is not being pursued. He

provided the example of the Malaysian television programs which nowadays devote too

much time to *ethnicized* discourse. He asserted that the authorities have given too much

freedom to the different ethnic groups to have their own programs, and as a result, he

believes that people are still divided. Second, he dwelled on the lifestyle that each ethnic

group adopted, which somewhat hinders ethnic integration. Third, he highlighted dietary

[141] Emphasis is added in Reza's elaborate rhetoric to reinforce his points on his self-consciousness about "our"—as he put it—inactive participation in promoting interethnic integration.

habit as he talked about "the smell of the food" (i.e., pork) that many Malays are not used to, while other things do not bother him. As such, he believes that individuals need to engage in activities that can bridge the differences among the ethnic individuals. The latter, he remarked, must do more to commit to *the other*, and not simply blame the government for not doing enough. Through education, individuals are exposed to ethnically diverse individuals. Notably, he used the concept "we" to indicate the ethnic group/religious consciousness that he and I share about not eating pork. Here, we are bound by not only ethnicity but by religion.

Like many Malays who have invited Chinese to their homes, he also engaged in a similar activity. However, we did not hear about the "open-door" attitude from the Chinese informants. Scholars such as Tan (1982) have made reference to Malays who would not enter a Chinese house because of the pork factor.[142] As he noted:

> Some Malays are very strict about food to the extent that they will not accept a drink from a Chinese. They worry that the cup or glass offered might have been indirectly contaminated with pork as it has been used by non-Muslims. Such a strict observance of Islamic codes certainly prevents the development of any intimate relationships between Malays and Chinese as well as between Malays and members of other non-Muslim groups. (p. 53-54)

What is our take on this type of rhetoric? If the argument concerns "problematic" and "strict" Muslim practices, how do we rectify the problem from the Chinese perspective? Do Muslims, then, abandon their religious beliefs for the sake of having close interpersonal relationships with non-Muslims? Taken further, will a vegetarian eat

---

[142] See Tan, 1982, p. 53-55 for more details.

meat (or specifically pork) in a meat-eating Chinese home for the sake of friendship? On a more positive note, the Chinese who would like to invite their Malay friends/business partners can always do so by catering or buying Malay food, and preparing paper/plastic cups and plates. But the bottom line is, do ordinary Chinese have the desire to invite Malays to their homes?

Above all, Tan's (1982) statement might be more of speculation if there is no invitation extended by the Chinese to Malays as illustrated in this dissertation. It is misleading to assume that Malays will not come without clear evidence that the Chinese have extended an invitation. It is also premature to say that Malays will not come if the Chinese hosts make "careful" preparation that respects the needs of the Malays as mentioned. After all, Malays never fail to visit Chinese shops and hotels, given that many such establishments survive largely as a result of Malay support. It is disrespectful to indicate that Malays who are willing to visit the Chinese at home will resort to "temporarily abandoning" their religious beliefs. Even if they do, that further indicates how the Malays "attempted" to or "tried very hard" to bridge the "religious" gap.

As expressed by Ramli in the transcript excerpt:

Ramli: …the ethnic group is not doing enough to try to integrate ((laughs)); we, Malays actually, are very receptive people, we accept all races, all religions, but sometimes, we're being too soft and too…er what do you call it…

Researcher: complacent?

Ramli: er no not to say complacent; we think that er other people are as

good as us whereas sometimes, hhh ((laughs)) we accept, but er,

maybe sometimes the other group they're trying to take advantage

of our *syokness* ("comfyness") *kan* ((laughs)).

That's what I feel because otherwise our country wouldn't have

been good er harmony *kan*, it's because the majority, the dominant

race in the country is Malays.

Ramli felt that the situation now is much better than in the past due to the

government's efforts, but much still needs to be done, especially on the part of the

individuals. He claimed that individuals still remain within their ethnic enclave and do

not interact as he asserted:

It's not happening…we only assume it's happening *sebab kita tak nampak, kan?*

(because we don't see it, right?) We still have Malays with Malays, Chinese with

Chinese.

To be sure, the tendency for ethnic polarization is certainly the preserve of the Malaysian

public. Studies by Rabushka (1973) and, recently, on contemporary American campus as

revealed in the *New York Times* (Online) suggest that this might very well be a common

feature in multicultural contexts, not only among Chinese but all groups (Egan, 2007). In

his study of racial behavior in Malaysia, for instance, Rabushka (1973) found that "a vast

majority of Chinese [in Penang and Kuala Lumpur] seem to prefer to keep to themselves

in their daily social avtivities, while Malays, on the other hand, are much more outgoing"

(p. 58). Similarly, the University of California, Berkeley, has a substantial percentage of

Asian undergraduates (about 41 percent), with Chinese as the largest group, followed by

Koreans, East Indian/Pakistani, Filipino and Japanese, while Blacks, Latinos, and even

Whites are under-represented. According to Egan (2007), many commentators view the

the campus as becoming "overwhelmingly Asian" and these ethnically diverse students

do not mix.

Chinese Muslim View

      According to Alisa (Chinese Muslim) who maintained a positive attitude towards

Malay-Chinese relation in everyday experiences, also believed that the ethnic groups can

integrate:

> *Chinese and Malay boleh bersatu. Memang boleh. Tak ada masalah. Tengoklah*
>
> *sehari hari. Melayu Cina semua boleh bergaul. Politik jangan peduli. Mana ada*
>
> *gaduh gaduh. Tak usah pedulilah mereka yang suka gaduh.* (Malays and Chinese
>
> can unite. It's possible. No problem at all. Look at everyday situation. Malays and
>
> Chinese can mix. Don't worry about politics. There's no conflict. Don't worry
>
> about those who want to fight).

Like Ken, she believes that having a good attitude helps people to interact well. As she

added:

> Back to attitude again. *Saya tak suka sombong-sombong dengan orang*. (I don't
>
> like to be arrogant with people). Because I am a convert, I know many Malays.
>
> *Semua tauke Melayu saya kenal. Tempat orang Melayu saya pakai baju kurung.*
>
> *Skirt pendek-pendek semua saya tak pakai.* (I know all the Malay *tauke/*bosses. In
>
> Malay areas, I wear Malay traditional dress. I don't wear short skirts).

In Alisa's account, she reinforces the idea of ordinary living as separate from politics. Her position on such matter was clear given that she talked about her public appearance (or self presentation) as a Muslim in the Malay/Muslim realm and as a Chinese convert/individual in a multiethnic society. Such image/persona reflects and reinforces her identity as a Chinese Muslim alongside Malays as Muslims and even non-Muslim Chinese. Notably, her sensemaking is influenced by the way she views herself (e.g., she does not like to be confrontational) and is viewed in the interactional realm.

Chinese Views

Alan felt that Malays and Chinese are quite different especially with regard to religion. As such, he pointed out that people should know when or how to talk to others. People should think first before they interact, he claimed. In his experience, he has never encountered any problem interacting with the Malays. He maintained that individuals need to "*jaga tutur kata*" (i.e., "mind what they say"). His view of the other is positive as he thinks about them (i.e., his Malay colleagues) as "very good" people.

Ken maintained that his Chinese and Malay customers are different in character as he shared his experiences dealing with them:

Ken: Most of my Chinese customers are more demanding while Malay customers, they are more ((laughs))

R: complacent?

Ken: yeah ((laughs)) yeah hhh

R: in terms of your Chinese customers, they make sure you attend to that?

Ken: yes uh no usually because they uh they want it fast yeah in this…they want you to do it fast for them

R: mhm quite interesting but you don't have any difficulties dealing with the two groups?

Ken: uh no not with Chinese not with Malay. Actually, it's easier to deal with Malay customers than Chinese customers. I think because mostly they're not demanding and as long as you do it, do your work, get it completed, then, they are satisfied.

R: ohh

Ken: but the Chinese they want it fast. Usually I think it has to do with their way of life. I think the Malays their way of living is more relaxing, a bit slower while the Chinese in the business community do everything fast fast hhh ((laughs))

        Of course if I have a choice I prefer most of my customers to be Malays. It will be much easier because …my work is very stressful.

        Even though most of my friends are Chinese, but in terms of work I think I prefer dealing with Malay customers to Chinese customers ((laughs)).

R: Because Malays are slow-paced yeah?

Ken: yeah not demanding

R: you use the word "demanding", that's quite an interesting comparison.

Ken: Because uh mostly it's the time – fast or they let you do it and at some stage once it's done, they're happy. But the Chinese…they want you to do it fast, and in fact, very fast and sometimes, very unreasonable…

R: Quite interesting

Ken: ((laughs)) in fact quite unreasonable

R: What's your strategy?

Ken: I don't quarrel I don't quarrel hhh ((laughs))

This excerpt indicates several useful pointers concerning Malays and Chinese characters. That is, Malays are thought to be slow-paced, therefore, less demanding whereas Chinese are considered fast-paced, therefore, very demanding and, thus, unreasonable. The impact is that the former will be satisfied once the work is done, but the latter will hunt you down until the work is accomplished. Despite the different ethnic characteristics (see also Alatas, 1977; Mahathir, 1970/1981; Savage, 1984), Ken expressed the belief that language can really unite given that many Chinese know the Malay language even though they do not speak Malay among themselves. But he asserted that, "when interacting with the other,…it's quite normal to speak *Bahasa Melayu*." Personally, he asserted that speaking Malay does not affect his Chinese identity. On ethnic integration, he argued that it will work "as long as the government doesn't try to divide us" through some of the policies. However, he also confessed that individuals will still stay within their ethnic realms:

…in daily life, the Malays still mix with the Malays, and the Chinese with the Chinese, other than, well, from time to time they'll visit each other like when

doing business, when they have to, there's no problem dealing with each other, but er, when socializing, I think they still remain with their own social groups except with their immediate neighbor, they do mix.

Ken also contended that the efforts engaged in the government would not mean much if there were policies to divide the ethnic groups. He provided two scenarios to illustrate his points:

One, when the Chinese go up they realize that they cannot fit into that quota because the quota is too small. Second, I think it is because the privilege that *bumiputera* has compared to the *non-bumiputera* so, the percentage is different already. I think…the Chinese…have always voiced their rights.

Evidently, Ken—who was the second best student at his school—shared his own bitter experience with the government policies that he claimed have divided the ethnic groups. In the following excerpt, he attested:

Ken: I studied law at home…as an off-campus student.

R: oh because you couldn't get that

Ken: no I couldn't get

R: but did you apply?

Ken: Yes, I apply

R: but you couldn't get because of [that

Ken: [yeah yes so I apply for this London U

R: What was the quota like at the time?

Ken: we didn't really find out

R: oh

Ken: but if you were the second best in your school and still couldn't get and I

        know those who just managed to pass and [still

R: [because they are Malays?

Ken: yeah and they managed to get into the U and also get the scholarship

R: mhm

Ken: and we felt that uh ((pause))

R: mhm actually you are right. When something concerns us or when it

        affects us, that's when we start to think about reality, I suppose?

Ken: yes…but on my part, it doesn't affect my relationship with my Malay

        friends. I know this is something done by the politicians…here I think the

        laymen mix very nicely with each other

R: How is here different from the situation in Melaka town?

Ken: In Melaka town we rarely get to meet any Malay customers

R: So Melaka Town has less Malays, right?

Ken: Less Malay customers for me because I only work there, and after office

        hours I come home so I don't go out much there, I don't socialize that

        much there, I just stay in my office most of the time. I don't go to see my

        client there. I expect them to visit me at my office, whereas here, I go to

        see my clients.

R: So would you call that an effective strategy?

Ken: yes yes I mean they're happy with this kind of service.

When I probed, Ken added cautiously but clearly:

> I think this is politics so, it comes back to politics. I'm not in the position to say anything but I think it has to be from both sides…the problem with that is most of the Malays are benefiting from this and it will be difficult…it will be difficult for them to tell their leaders that they don't want this you see so, that will be the problem.

However, having said that, Ken emphasized that "now…I'm not affected anymore. It's okay for me now." His persistent dismissal of his emotions illustrates his positive position alongside the ethnic-other as presented earlier. That is, he maintains a good relationship with the Malays, and blames the government for the bitter experience he encountered. In his narrative, Malays are divided into the laymen and the politicians. More significantly, Ken found it problematic that Malays, who benefit from the "unfair" situation, are not able to inform their Malay leaders about that situation. In other words, Ken's subtle communication and strategic ambiguity had indicated that the problem exists since Malays, in general find it "difficult" to "let go of their privileges" to "remedy" the "unfair" situation. Ken had hinted at an issue that is very sensitive.

<center>The Conception of Self, Other, and Sensemaking</center>

In essence, the interview discourse reveals that matters pertaining to the sensitivity towards other ethnic groups, interethnic communication, religious obligations (and food), and one's ethnic identity in relation to the other are constantly negotiated in the acts of face work and self presentation. Interwoven in all these are traces of negotiations, tolerance, and respect among the ethnic individuals. The narratives include

collective memories, social/cultural acceptance, inequality, and ethnic-awareness which intersect with various strategies, including evading, avoiding, strategic ambiguity, appealing/pleading to rational thinking, cooperating, collaborating, accommodating, and perhaps, dominating. I constantly reminded myself to be openminded as I heard them talk. The informants have not only opened themselves up to me, but also, trusted me with their ethnic lens as they described the situation.

As conversational partners, we enact the "social/purposeful encounter" (i.e., the interview) with a common purpose; that is, we co-construct the narratives which emerged as a result of each other's negotiated discourse based on our own ideological orientation. In my efforts to co-construct the informants' narratives, I enacted in ways that would encouraged me to get to the "heart of the matter" (my research inquiry). It was my intent to understand how Malays and Chinese make sense of each other's presence in the interactional realm. What strategies do they use and how? Thus, I "rode along with" or "partnered with" the individuals as they shared their experiences. In other words, I followed the narrative as it moved in various tangents and asked questions.

As I reflected on the stories and queried my informants for a greater understanding, I concealed my emotions—as a Malay—to the informants especially the Chinese—and revealed, instead, my researcher role. My emotional Malayness[143] was thus hidden so as to synchronize with the emerging congenial sentiments. I did this by not articulating my standpoint. Rather, I would dwell on what they have to say, even if that means I offered something which might (or might not) have been contrary to my position.

---

[143] My outward identity is clearly Malay (e.g., dress, language, religion), but I had to distance my emotion from the contentious issues discussed so as to get close to a mutual truth, and to maintain good rapport with the participants.

In other words, in getting the communicative input, I worked in ways that would coordinate the meaning-making more manageably. As Pearce (2005) eloquently wrote:

> CMM [Coordinated management of Meaning] envisions communication acts as doing things (i.e., as performatives) and thus as making the events and objects in our social world. However, communicative acts cannot be done alone. Each act is done *to, for, against* someone. Further, what is done is usually *after* and *before* what others do. The events and objects of the social world are not only made in communication, the process is one of co-construction, of being made by the conjoint action of multiple persons. (p. 43)

In this respect, I contend that everyday sensemaking is also about *positioning* the self in society a process of reacting which appeals to commonsense. How the self views his or her relation with the other depends much on his or her relationship on a day-to-day basis. That is, the individual performs based on how he or she is perceived in a given situation. That means ethnic sensemaking is clearly embodied within the self and the other. And this is clouded with personal experiences, collective memory, shared/unshared experiences, and perceptions. As such, the self and other embellish each other's sensemaking. They are not necessarily independent of each other's sensemaking. Rather, they are *interactive* of each other's sensemaking. Unlike sensemaking, the mindset of an individual tends to be static even though it is subject to change. That is, it evolves over a period of time. The mindset, in this regard, is a mental or attitudinal orientation which is active during the process of reacting and relating, endlessly drawing sustenance from, and contributing to, the tacit knowledge and experience at a specific situation in life.

In describing the self, I argue that the embodiment of a Malay includes *budi pekerti* (manners), *sopan santun* (etiquette), religious obligation, harmonious relations and indirectness in communication. This intertwines with the dignity of self and family, in particular, and "*bangsa*" (group) in general. From the point of view of a Chinese Malaysian, a Malay embodiment would most likely include the "benefit/resource-related" issues and religion as primary entities, while the other elements might be less transparent. But more important, when we construct a conception of self, we should also consider who constructs it. In other words, from whose point of view is "self" constructed?

As Malays and Chinese embrace the collectivist culture, it is my intention to emphasize that, while Chinese values derive from Confucian philosophy (e.g., Lu, 1998), Malay values do not. Rather, the Malay self is a combination of Islamic principle and the Malay cultural world which originates from the region (i.e., the Malay Archipelago)—a rather complex identity (e.g., see Shamsul, 2005). Historically, *Tanah Melayu* (literally the Malay land) reflects that the Malay group is the autochthonous people of the region. Often times, when intercultural communication scholars make reference to the self in Asian culture, they emphasize Confucian values (e.g., Hecht et al., 2005). They paint a relatively homogeneous picture of the Asian persona with an overwhelming Chinese presence or East Asian presence (i.e., China, Japan, Korea) or single out only these, which is in contrast with the cosmopolitan reality comprising a multitude of the Asian cultural traits namely Arabic, Persian, Indian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Malay and other ethnic identities.

The Malay cultural world is a confluence of Islamic, Indic and *Melayo-Polynesian* influences. At best, as the Malaysian tourism catchphrase says, "*Malaysia, truly Asia*" refers to a congeries or mosaic of both indigeneous as well as migrant characteristics. Within this mosaic, the Malay self has his or her own ecological/cultural niche which embraces Islamic values as the dominant feature. I contend that the theorizing of everyday sensemaking among ethnic groups helps to generate more queries and understanding about why things happen the way they do (or why things do not happen). The contention is, the Chinese have a region or a larger group with which to identify and so have the Indians, whereas, Malays have no image to identify with other than their homeland.

<div align="center">Review of the Research Questions</div>

To better understand the voices of the educated and professional Malay and Chinese Malaysians above, I refer to the research questions guiding this dissertation. In answering these questions, I also reference government documents and/or the media coverage.

Research Question 1: Where and why do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians interact with each other in their everyday life?

As illustrated, the interactional space of Malays and Chinese individuals seems to be everywhere given that one cannot "ignore" the other in daily situations. In Ken's words, "…I think most of the Malay and Chinese here will, at one time or another, have to deal with another race". However, as the study illustrates, individuals mostly interact at the workplace even though their exposure to the ethnic other begins at the school or

university level. In other words, education is one of the crucial factors that exposes these individuals to the interethnic realm where they not only meet with them in class but, also, interact, in one way or the other, in other academic and non-academic corners of campus life. Apart from education, the other components which establish the interethnic "link" include language, business and the workplace. The level of interethnic communication in this sense is more instrumental rather than emotional or personal given that the purpose is to get a particular service, task, or transaction completed.

My observation also pertains towards a "superficial" level of mixing, and interacting at places such as the workplace, post office, the shops, the bank, and the market. At these places, interethnic communication is restricted within the community of shopkeepers, clerks, sellers, customers, clients, and those individuals working at the counters/front desks. Here, not much is exchanged except for basic negotiations as in asking or bargaining for cheaper prices.

To illustrate: I recall one morning standing next to two young females in their teens waiting to be served at the market. Like me, they were waiting to buy the delicious "*kuih*" (Malay delicacies) for breakfast. As I was busy observing them, I let them be served first even though they came much later. They looked at me but did not say anything. I assumed that such "generosity" on my part was not common given that the situation in the market is almost always chaotic. People just pointed out what they wanted, or simply took the food and paid the sellers. And that was what the girls did. They pointed to the food items and waited for the lady to tell them the price. No one was really in line, so to speak. Yet, I don't regard that as "unruly." People were pleasant.

There was a sense of respect, judging from the behavior of the individuals. It was simply the "hustle bustle" of the market scenario that I felt I was not accustomed to, having lived abroad for years. As I was standing there, a motherly Malay seller shoved a small plastic food bag in my hand and said gently, "*Boleh ambil sendiri nak, pilihlah kuih*" (you can take the food yourself, child, just choose) and at the same time asked me, *"Dari KL?"* (Are you from KL?) "KL" here refers to Kuala Lumpur, the capital city. My accent, I assume, must be different from that of the locals. Or, it might be because of my "ignorance" of the "rule." Since then, I became the loyal customer as I bought the same *kuih* from the same person.

That was a captured scenario on my first day at the market. At the kindergarten, tuition centers, and college, interactions were much deeper given that the individuals interact almost daily with the same people. At the same time, they engage in somewhat similar activities, for example, departmental meetings, school activities and others. In the restaurants, the ethnic individuals are clearly segregated. One hardly finds Malays in a Chinese restaurant and vice versa. But having said that, Malays are found everywhere except in the Chinese restaurants (and temples eslewhere) in *Pekan Kecil*. People tend to know each other so easily especially the permanent sellers, the shopkeepers-cum-owners at the counter, the bankers and others.

In essence, Malays and Chinese only interact when there was a purpose. Among others, the interaction falls within the realms of workplace, business transaction, and work visits. Social visits are very rare between Chinese and Malays except when the Malays I know invited the ethnic-other into their homes. As illustrated by Maeda (1967)

who studied the Chinese community in Alor Janggus (Kedah), "[e]ven where they live next door to each other, Chinese and Malays have no everyday social exchange, do not extend greetings at a birth or condolences on a death on either side" (p. 64). The Chinese did not talk about or commit to the "open house" practice, unlike the Malay informants. Rather, they raised more concerns about their "economic survival" in the Malaysian society than the Malays did with regard to ethnic integration. Thus, outside of the work realm, interaction is usually out of the question or very minimal.

Research Question 2: What strategies are used in negotiating differences, and why?

Generally, the Malay and Chinese informants were accepting towards each other. In so doing, they accommodate and tolerate each other's habits and lifestyles. They adapt to the situations as they see fit, and maintain a positive face for selves and the ethnic-other. This was common throughout my observations. I encountered no confrontational episodes nor did I witness any front stage conflicts among these ethnic groups. While Malays resort to defining things in more detail pertaining to efforts to enhance ethnic solidarity, the Chinese adapt to a vague, evasive style for conveying their message. What this means is that, Malays maintain a positive attitude by attempting to provide answers that they believe can help the ethnic individuals integrate. There was no reference to how they think about the Chinese exactly except perhaps, when the recollection about ethnic riot came into play from one informant. The desire to remind others of the "chaos" is embedded in the rhetoric as one informant said rather matter of factly:

…the young generation did not experience it…those who experienced it knew

what happened…perhaps those who did not experience it did not know what

actually happened, they only read about it. So, they forget [about what had

happened]…and do what they like…if Malays feel they are stepped on (i.e.,

"terpijak"), they will rise up hhh ((laughs)).[144]

Meanwhile, Chinese maintained positive attitude by not informing me directly

about their discontentment. That is, they concealed their emotion and treated the event or

happening as something to reflect upon and justify but not to reveal emotions. So, in the

interaction (i.e., the interview), their real emotions about the concerns raised were

unknown to me. These concerns are, to me, quite crucial to discuss, especially when they

were conveyed rather lightly. This is viewed as crucial in progressing with life and the

future. The idea is to look forward, not backward in order to prosper, which is in

accordance with Chinese practices. Even when they *did* look backward (e.g., Ken), this

was done in an indirect manner, somewhat vaguely using signals or clues. That is, hints

were given, repetitions were used, and communicative acts were utilized that require the

researcher, or listener to fill in the gaps. For example, there is ample use of strategic

ambiguity in Ken's rhetoric which I extracted from various lines in the interview

transcript. As Ken said:

Line 1   …like my own experience, I was the second best in my school…

Line 2   but I didn't get a place in the university which I applied to

Line 3   especially in that year when there were only five universities…

Line 4   and we felt that.

---

[144] This was originally uttered in Malay, and I translated directly for the reader's convenience in the review section.

Line 5   But on my part, it doesn't affect my relationship with my Malay

friends.

Line 6   I know this is something done by the politicians…

Line 7   In Malaysia, language is not a problem anymore.

Line 8   We accept it [Malay language] as a national language.

Line 9   I mean, that's the language to unite all the people.

Line 10   But I think, that it's not right for the government to say, if you

want to learn the national language, but you prevent them from

learning uh learning their mother tongue…

Line 11   From now onwards, I'm not affected.

There are many interweaving elements going on in the narrative. If we analyze

line by line, the statements reveal several pertinent points as a result of the applications of

the ambiguous strategy. These include, the projection of self—Line 1, the bitterness, that

is, the problem as perceived by Ken—Line 2, further revelation of the problem (i.e., the

affected situation)—Line 3, emotional expression—Line 4, acceptance of the ethnic-

other—Line 5, blaming factor/accusatory—Line 6, national consciousness—Line 7,

collective acceptance of the national language—Line 8, personal acceptance of and

recognition of the functional aspect of the national language—Line 9, acknowledging the

importance of mothertongue—Line 10, and assurance/denial of emotional self—Line 11.

The rhetoric, in this sense, is one that calls for the other to *anticipate* what

follows, and what is hidden. In my position as a Malay, I am expected to already

understand the situation (and dissatisfaction), and proceed from there regardless of

whether our sensemaking understands each other's expectations. For instance, the

Chinese (e.g., Ken) already know what they disagree with, and with whom, and as such,

would anticipate what I say, and how I react. What should be mentioned here is the fact

that, our anticipation of each other's standpoints might also be based on something which

is entirely different.

The recurrent issues contested fall into a few categories of grievances, that is, the

Malay privilege, NEP, ethnic quotas, and language. They hang together as a key theme

involving inequality or injustice. The speaker would invariably point to the injustices

incurred by him and the other Chinese he knows by the politicians who represent the

government. Directly, he identified ordinary Malays as not guilty based on the claim that

the Malays had nothing to do with it, as he claimed that such discrimination is the work

of the politicians. (With exception, Zahra was directly accused by a Chinese colleague to

have taken away the latter's opportunity for an important position with good allowance.)

There is a tendency to present a monolithic other as though there are few

deserving, competent or hardworking Malays. In the same vein, the plight of the Malays

when competing for jobs in the private sector dominated by the Chinese is almost never

brought up for discussion (see Elias, 2004). Because the Chinese voice is more audible,

the media (including the Internet) is replete with an imbalanced discourse with a

relatively weak Malay representative (e.g., George, 2006). As such, there has been

considerable concern among the government representatives about the spread of biased

and uncredible racial issues of Malaysia.[145] For example, the Minister of Information has

---

[145] See, the local newspaper, *Melaka Hari Ini* (Melaka Today). Wednesday, 2 August, 2006. "*Berita palsu media internet boleh pecah belah perpaduan*" (False news on the Internet can harm integration), p. 21.

called for the government to monitor the Internet biased content perpetuated by irresponsible parties.

Even though the national language is perceived to be well accepted, the Chinese still want to maintain their own language. It is here where the strategic ambiguity further lies. While the acceptance of the Malay language is viewed collectively (through the use of "we"), the function of Malay as a language of unity is suspect (through the use of "I") given that it is a personal acceptance as illustrated by Ken. This further indicates that the Chinese use the strategy of "observing" the way the listener reacts before they commit to any statements. For example, the use of mhm, or repetitions, or even pause, might mean that more convincing input is needed from the researcher given that she is Malay.

Meanwhile, the Malay informants try very hard to respond and not leave any gaps except when addressing sensitive issues such as the pork factor, ethnic segregation, and the ethnic riot. I often ended up having rather long and uninterrupted narratives. They would want to provide details and feel guilty if this can not be done as clearly demonstrated by Reza. At the same time, they were also indirect in sharing about the other. They assumed that, as a Malay, I would know the situation and, as such, the points shared needed no elaboration, or so they thought. For example, when a Malay informant was asked his opinion on ethnic integration, he had this to say:

It's not happening. It's not happening.

…we don't see so, we assume everything is okay, that's all, but then hhh

((laughs))

…we still have Malays with Malays, Chinese with Chinese, it's still happening, it's still happening…

Now, it's much better than before…Malays didn't live in the cities before…because they couldn't afford to buy one in the town…the cost of a house was so high…but, that was before the independence, and just after the independence.

In this context, anticipation is the hidden strategy that is always at work between me, as a researcher, and the informants. As Watzlawick and colleagues (1967) explained, an individual's (re)action is the result of the presence of the other.

Research Question 3: How do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians make sense of interethnic interactions?

The individuals maintain that they view the other as friends, colleagues, or clients. They do not necessarily view the other as ethnic-other in the environment where they most likely meet and interact with them. Individuals are perceived to be those who they cannot possibly avoid, even though the interaction (outside of work or purposeful routines) is almost zero. In this sense, Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians attempt to think positively about the other and, as such, the way they enact their social and everyday routines is affected and affects their thinking.

Even when they interact with and think positively about each other, they regard that as part and parcel of living together as Ken attested: "…at one time or another you have to deal with the other race." Similarly, Alan described his interaction with the Malays as "*terpaksa bergaul*" (Have to mix). In other words, he has to interact with

Malays whether or not he likes it. Implicitly stated, he had no choice but to mix with them. Meanwhile, Ramli felt that he had no problem with the ethnic-other. When I pressed for a reason (i.e., by volunteering his positive attitude), he responded with a laugh. Rather, he humbly disagreed, a clear example of strategic ambiguity and Malay indirectness. In Malay culture, one does not praise oneself, or commonly known as "*angkat bakul*" (i.e., self-praise). However, when I engaged in a co-joint talk by stating that the good interaction might be because "*we* are good," he seemed agreeable even though he punctuated that with a laugh. As illustrated in the excerpt below:

Researcher: What about your ethnic identity? How has that affected you in your daily situations?

Ramli: I don't think I have problem with that

Researcher: Perhaps, you have the right attitude?

Ramli: ah hhh ((laughs)) no

Researcher: or perhaps because *we* are good?

Ramli: aha hhh ((laughs))

I think the government should do more *lah* so that …ethnic races can have better communication, better integration.

Seen in this light, interethnic interactions between Malays and Chinese fall in the zone of ambiguity, whereby the individuals will resort to interacting with the other only when they have to. In other words, one generally will not go out of the way to meet with the other with the intention to interact. Rather, one will do so only when it requires some kind of "meaning-making." For example, the grocery seller makes a far away trip to my

mother's residence to sell goods. The purpose is to make some profit in which the notion of customer means the demand exists; the presence of a willing and active customer means not only is the business running, but it is also active. Similarly, Alisa will befriend Malays and Chinese for educational investment, which means, the more friends you make, the more parents will enroll in the educational centers. In turn, she makes money out of that friendship or connection.

This is not to say that Malays and Chinese do not appreciate each other, but it implies that the individuals manage to get by in everyday life by constantly doing and thinking about their routinized actions. If that includes interacting with the ethnic-other, the individual commits to that without hesitant. However, in maintaining a smooth encounter, these individuals employ various strategies which include being indirect in their approach and words, reflecting on good day-to-day encounters, portraying good, friendly attitude, being mindful, and having a good heart and/or intention. They also consider themselves as tolerant and receptive towards others.

In this sense, interethnic communication takes place frequently in temporary situations. It circulates within the realm of convergence and divergence. What this means is that individuals converge (i.e., meet) in temporary situations (e.g., the market, front yard of a house, organizations/government offices) for purposeful interactions, and diverge (i.e., resort to the privacy of their personal space) when they leave (or temporarily "abandon") these places. A lawyer, for instance, continuously searches for clients while a teacher seeks temporary refuge at the workplace. The interaction in the latter comes naturally as they meet and organize meetings, lectures and others.

On these occasions, both individuals remain civil and pleasant to each other in order to enact a "cooperative" mode of interaction. While my Malay mother and the Chinese vendors are cooperative in the business realm, it is questionable as to how they manage their ethnic differences outside of their own "business" circle.While a social visit during Eid celebration might indicate something more than a business activity, such instances are quite rare. The masses still rely on the authorities to generate programs for societal integration, with these programs including big, official open houses during an ethnic group's celebrations (e.g., *Hari Raya*/Eid, Chinese New Year, Deepavali and others).

In other words, issues concerning inequality and ethnic quotas, for instance, arise only when these individuals return to the confinement of their home and are among their own in-group members. There is bound to be "self talk" as individuals reflect on and anticipate enacted events (the staged self) and matters of the heart. Personal space reveals more of a person's ethnic identity—the back stage self—that most likely would pertain to what one thinks is *fair,* especially between Malays and Chinese.

Research Question 4: When and how do Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians manage/negotiate communication strategies within interethnic encounters?

As illustrated elsewhere, Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians always work in ways that help them to engage in a "face-saving" type of communication. This means that their communicative strategies include indirectness, evasiveness, ambiguity or round-about ways of sharing an issue, attentive listening or sometimes, intense listening in order to wait for conversational "cues" from the other, and close observation of the

other's action and interpretation. When the face is not threatened, these strategies work well. As such, anticipation of how others behave and careful performance of the self is actively switched on, but also, hidden from the overall display of the staged self. This means that face is maintained in a well-guarded manner on the part of the individual as well as the other as I experienced with the Chinese informants.

When face is threatened, as in the case of the failed hair treatment, the individual still engaged in the interactive discourse but the purpose was no longer to please and save the face-other—to use Ting-Toomey's (2005) term. Rather, the mission was to get the message across in an attempt to save own face. So that the person's moral face was honored, the individuals used both direct and evasive ways of managing the interaction. In so doing, they exerted their "rights" and displayed emotions through competing, evasive, and dominating styles. In this sense, how the self reacts depends very much on the other's performance. Had the customer raised the issue of her "dissatisfaction" more indirectly, the hairdresser might have been more cooperative given that her face was not lost in the process. Or, had the hairdresser acknowledged the failed treatment, the customer might have calmed down.

However, in the business realm where utilitarian gains are the main focus, one might be more aggressive in pursuing intentions and making negotiating. The hairdresser, in this situation, might have only considered her business reputation, which is essential to the profitability of her business. Acknowledging a mistake might be considered a road to disaster. So, by convincing the customer of her (the hairdresser's) expertise, the mistake

is indirectly shifted to the customer. When one's image is at stake, one has to protect it regardless of the truth or the other's emotion. The customer is no longer right.

At places where we are most likely to meet the ethnic other, we treat each other politely and with respect. In this sense, our collective identity as a society remains strong in ensuring the smooth running of the society by the actors/participants involved (Weick, et al., 2005). For instance, individuals who evoke conflict will not be appointed to hold any posts on the committee responsible for the safety of the neighborhood.[146] That is done by making sense of actions as well as by anticipating what happens in enacting further actions. Most often, they would avoid interethnic contact if that can be done, especially among the Chinese.

Authority defined rhetoric might also contribute to the way Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians make sense of their interethnic communication and relationships. For example, the Chief Minister of Melaka proudly announced that the ethnic groups in the state have always successfully maintained a good and harmonious relationship.[147] His reference to salutary descriptors such as "since decades ago," "thousands of ethnic Portuguese and Dutch descendants still live here," "they live harmoniously," "we always maintain "*muafakat*" (i.e., togetherness), "unlike other countries," and "we are good examplars to others," among others, pertain towards producing a positive climate for the ethnically diverse community in the state of Melaka, which he claimed to be an exemplar of the ideal Malaysian society. Psychologically, he instills a feeling of collective

---

[146] As shared by one informant during my visit to a government office. The individual showed me an article which addresses the issue; this speaks volumes about the importance of effective communication strategies.
[147] See *Utusan Malaysia*. *Dunia wajar contohi kejayaan Melaka bentuk masyarakat harmoni.* (The world should follow Melaka's success in creating a harmonious society.) 28 July, 2006.

consciousness—the idea of convergence—among these groups. Rhetorically, he projects

the idea of "us-ness," that is, the coming together of a collective society (as illustrated

perhaps, by the grand spectacle). Spiritually, his rhetoric remains embedded, perhaps

more strongly among Malays, regardless of whether it reflects the true situation.

Realistically, such vision or a shared fantasy—to echo Bormann (1983)—of ethnic

solidarity and not merely ethnic advocacy (Zuraidi Ishak, 1991) is one which might be

realized one day or, perhaps at best, debated. But, the more it is discussed, the more

apparent it will be in people's minds.

Research Question 5: In what way do the positionalities and exchanges (negotiations,

bargains, pleasantries etc.) of Malays and Chinese in the society affect the nation's

progress towards national integration?

The way the individuals position themselves in everyday situations does not affect

the nation's progress towards national integration. One reason for this assurance is the

fact that every ethnic group has its own political party through which it can channel

complaints, comments, and hopes or desires to the authority. The Chinese, in this regard,

know about the proper channel, and have so far, expressed the discontentment through

their notable party (MCA), who then delivers their concerns at the government meetings.

As Ken indicated, "the Chinese…have always voiced their rights." Given that he views

the issues in terms of who initiated and who benefits, his rapport with ordinary Malays

remains pleasant and harmonious. Taken that he might also represent the general Chinese

population who share a similar sentiment, the positionalities and communication

exchanges with the Malay population will remain positive and respectful of each other as long as their dichotomous outlook on such matters continues to be upheld.

The presentation of self in everyday life is, therefore, one which aims to promote comfort and harmony with the ethnic-other given that the purpose of interethnic communication is to get things done. The indirect approach used by both Malays and Chinese illustrates the collective culture even though the values that they abide with differ; the Malays are guided by Islam and its teaching, while the Chinese derive their values from the Confucian principles. Business, for instance, needs to be conducted in a relatively, if not very, stable condition. As long as these individuals seek to maintain a considerate and tolerant attitude, the everyday unchaotic environment will prevail as exemplified in the present situation.

However, as demonstrated by this study, meaningful communication between Malays and Chinese outside of the "business" realm is very minimal. While the workplace gives the impression that people are civilized towards each other (probably because such civility supports "utilitarian" gains), social encounters (with their non-utilitarian nature) are questionable. What this means is that intermingling is kept minimal when the ethnic individuals resort to the comfort of their homes. I argue that the community efforts are still very ethnically divided, meaning, there is no synchrony or harmony of community efforts. In some of the places, the response to government initiatives is fairly lukewarm.

The government's efforts will not be effective without a solid and clear grass roots involvement. At least two of my participants were fully aware of their lack of

personal involvement in the community. The government officers who are put in charge of community programs are at a disadvantage because of their own lack of exposure to workable integration initiatives. Put simply, without a concrete and effective feedback, and strong commitment from these ethnic groups, the work is futile. Taken together, despite being indirect and evasive in their approaches, Chinese and Malays, for example, have only managed to "avoid" and contain their concerns temporarily and in temporary situations. With that said, I argue that as long as the individuals participate collectively in the consciousness of demonstrating a dignified presentation of self in everyday situations, our progress towards national integration is affected in only a very gradual and extremely slow manner. With the availability of the Internet, people's concerns can be easily manipulated and biased stories wildly circulated without a proper monitoring of the affected sites. Also, with increasingly biased scholarly writing about ethnic issues in Malaysia, the progress might even be slower, or simply non-existant.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

As I have presented in this chapter, interethnic communication is limited to purposeful exchanges especially business transactions between Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians in everyday situations. Building on the participants' narratives of their everyday experiences, I demonstrate their communication strategies as well as the factors that inhibit in-depth interethnic communication which include differences in religion, language, and employment and social segregation. As Malays do not understand the language of the Chinese, the former resort to using Malay and English in interethnic communication, whereas the Chinese accommodate to the local environment by learning

and speaking the language so as to get by with the ethnic-other. The dynamics of power relations between the dominant and subordinate in this context are blurry. The majority-minority realms are not clear when Malays constantly shop in the minority premises given that we view the relationship as between shopkeepers/owners and customers/buyers.

Much of the literature under interethnic relationships neglects those relationships at the personal (micro) levels. The discourse tends to concentrate on political issues which promote contestations and vested interests and the concerns emerging from the respective ethnic positions. The findings of this study at the pedestrian level suggest that people engage in less political and, perhaps, more shared issues surrounding everyday challenges. Hence, we witness a multitude of *ethnicized* strategies in interethnic communication involving Malays and Chinese. Ethnic persona intertwines with ethnic strategies in generating a front stage self regardless of how one feels towards the other ethnic member. The labeling of a particular ethnic individual is masked by one's desire to have a smooth encounter at the micro level. As such, I witnessed a tremendous display of good, polite communication that intersects with pleasantries, identification with, and respect for, the other.

Put simply, the everyday situations in *Pekan Kecil poses* a scene of "unaffected" individuals who seemed engaged with their routinized actions. The informants' verbalized statement of "I don't have problems with the other" might be perceived as the language of negotiation with the self. With that type of "self talk," one superficially conceals emotions and reveals only the public self. In so doing, the self rationalizes his or

her actions and enacts the social situations through various strategies including

anticipation. Nonetheless, the common public discourse at the individual level is

overshadowed by media driven by political discourse taking place at the macro level.

Chapter 5

Personal Reflections and Future Research Directions

Retrospection and Moving On

As we approach *Station 5* of our journey in *sensemaking*, it is worth reflecting on and taking stock of what we have covered so far. The preceding chapters show that interethnic communication encompasses a wide scope, covering a range of positionalities and transcending political, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Granted that ethnic consciousness is more pronounced in some countries compared to others, Malaysia is one example of a multicultural society where ethnic relations are both challenging and enriching. The scenario is often plagued with "unresolved" problems while, at the same time, the scenario is also showered with "blessings" emanating from social diversity and a cosmopolitan living environment. It is, therefore, not surprising that most of the government policies touch on ethnic issues which call for administrative measures to control tensions in society (e.g., Crouch, 2001). Explaining these issues, Horowitz (1989) observed that "[s]ince Malay officials are a frequent source of policy innovation and 'trouble' emanates from Chinese resistance to some innovations, trouble-averting resolutions disproportionately entail 'pro-Chinese' outcomes" (p. 261). What one takes away from his outsider perspective might also instigate more of the problem imageries as more and more people reflect on such "trouble," each looking at it from their subjective vantage point.

In the same vein, Malaysia is perceived to be in the state of stable tension (e.g., Shamsul, 2005), as well as ethnically polarized (e.g., Tan, 2004). Given such contextual

potpourri, it is expected that ethnic relations are always clouded with ambiguities,

subjective interpretations, hence perceptual discordances, which invariably surface in

interethnic communication, particularly at the interpersonal level. In this chapter, I pull

together the key characteristics of the communicative realm, which allows scope for

some reflections on the nature of sensemaking. In so doing, I reflect on my own journey

into the everyday episodes between the participants in this study and me as a local

researcher. In looking forward, I theorize the concepts of ethnicity, sensemaking and

interethnic communication and present a typology for a better understanding. I, then,

offer some implications that emerge from the study for a future research agenda.

<div align="center">Discussion</div>

This dissertation examines interethnic communication from the perspective of

sensemaking (e.g., Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005), and a combination of theoretical

lenses (e.g., Foucault, 1972, 2000; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) pertaining to self and

other, given that no single theory can accurately explain the everyday phenomenon. The

study, as mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, examined how and why events were

rationalized, what types of experiences were shared through different frames of mind, and

the ways in which Chinese Malaysians and Malay Malaysians differed from each other in

the communication strategies enacted as part of coping with everyday interactions. The

crucial inquiry sought to discover how ethnically diverse individuals make sense of

everyday life.

As the participants articulate their stories, the representation of their narratives

depends on how a researcher makes meaning of those very narratives (Josselson &

Lieblich, 1999). In so doing, the researcher interacts and negotiates with not only the text but, also, the self. In a dyadic relationship, individuals tend to coordinate their actions with their interactants (Bochner, 1989) as I experienced with the informants. From the interactional perspective, the self is said to be engaging in self-regulating behaviors within given contexts (e.g., Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967). That is, as long as there is the presence of *the other*, we work in ways that our behavior is constantly shaped by that very presence. Given such a scenario, Watzlawick and associates argued that we cannot *not* communicate. This extends to the fact that, as social interactants, individuals' everyday lives are constantly shaped by cultural dictates and situational elements.

In a multiethnic setting, who we are in relation to others speaks volumes about ethnicity and sensemaking. At the same time, everyday social reality is experienced rather differently from one individual to another. That is, the everyday context for each individual is unique, fragmented and intensely personal (e.g., Shamsul, 1998b). As Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld (2005) noted about organized sensemaking, "[w]ho we are lies importantly in the hands of others, which means our categories for sensemaking lies in their hands. If their images of us change, our identities many be destabilized and receptiveness to new meanings increase" (p. 416).

In retrospect, Malay-Chinese interethnic communication is typically enacted for a practical purpose involving pecuniary considerations, rather than driven by random social desires. In other words, the Furnivallian (1948/1956) notion of commercial relationship is still noticeable even though the physical boundary of the market activity is no longer restricted to a specific place called market. Superficially, the fluidity of such "business-

type" interethnic communication suggests that Furnivallian concept of a segregated plural society is blurry. This is the case given that ethnic individuals in general are seen to be interacting at various corners of society as they enact their roles as shoppers and sellers.

As long as there is a need for "market-driven" transactions, interpersonal interethnic communication prevails as is the case with our Malay-Chinese informants. This means that market exchanges can take place in the comfort of one's home or front yard given that a business transaction is now more mobile and varied in scale. The type of "*guanxi*" that occurs in this context is "instrumental" (see Chen & Chen, 2004). Even if interethnic communication extends to the realm of social interactions, the scope at this vantage point is conceivably limited, and needs further research. We should ask: What is the motive? Thus far, economic factors are the most prominent binding Malays and Chinese together. As Furnivall (1948/1956) nicely put it:

> In the plural society, the highest common factor is the economic factor, and the only test [sic] that all apply in common is the test of cheapness. In such a society the disorganization of social demand allows the economic process of natural selection by the survival of the cheapest to prevail. (p. 310)

Based on the literature and the study conducted, I argue here that interethnic communication is purpose-driven; more often, it is utilitarian and one-sided as in the practice of open house (i.e., social visits). The mainstream Chinese in Melaka, for instance, do not invite the other (e.g., the ordinary Malays) to their homes (Daniels, 2005) for reasons that are unknown, which merit political, if not scholarly, attention, even though Tan (1988) observed some interethnic visitation occurring in the past between

Baba-Malay friends in Bukit Rambai during ethnic festivals.[148] Babas, however, are often

regarded as not part of the mainstream Chinese by the Chinese themselves given their

unique mixture of Chinese-Malay culture and the fact that the Babas generally do not

speak a Chinese dialect (see Tan, 1982, 2004). In the distant past, they, too, might have

been hesitant to reveal their Chinese identity (see Wee & Wee, 1998). Wee and Wee

revealed that, a century or so ago, when a Baba was asked whether he was a

"Chineseman" by a curious expatriate, he would avoid the question, instead claiming that

he was a British subject[149] To be accepted fully as well as to avoid being discriminated

against in a workplace controlled by the mainstream Chinese, Babas, for example, have

to first learn the Chinese language. Likewise, Malays also encounter a similar

discrimination in the private sector when applying for jobs in the overwhelmingly

Chinese dominated companies as preference is typically given to those who speak

Mandarin (e.g., Daniels, 2005; see also Elias, 2004).

With regard to the lack of ordinary Malay-Chinese social visits, one might only

speculate on religious inhibitions as one of the main barriers to more intimate social

interaction among Malays and Chinese. I recall Kay's sensemaking narratives about

Malay-Chinese relationships as a result of my probing and intense involvement in "our"

interaction:

> *Chinese tak ada buat open house [di Melaka]. Melayu ada; Melayu suka meriah.*
>
> *Melayu ni dia more bekerjasama dengan dia punya bangsa; more cooperation, in*
>
> *my experience. Kampung-kampung lagi ada kerjasama. Memang ada perbezaan*

---

[148] See Tan, 1988, p. 218.
[149] See p. 48.

kehidupan Melayu dengan Chinese. Macam Chinese, kehidupan kita sama kan so,

boleh trust. Tapi, perpaduan [Melayu-Chinese] boleh la. Tapi, [di Melaka] tak

ada kempen perpaduan. Kalau kita campur dengan kaum lain, baru kita tahu.

Dulu saya pun tak tahu pasal Melayu, sekarang bila saya campur, saya banyak

tahu orang Melayu. Kita tengok orang nak campur orang ke, atau tak campur

orang. Itu kena tengok diri sendiri la, peribadi punya hal la.

(The Chinese [in Melaka] do not organize open house. Malays do; Malays like

"festivities". In my experience, Malays are more cooperative among themselves.

In villages, Malays are more cooperative. There's a difference between Malay and

Chinese way of life.[150] Among the Chinese, it's so easy to trust because we have a

similar way of life. But, integration can happen between Malays and Chinese.

But, [in Melaka] there's no integration campaign. If we mix with the other ethnic

groups, we will know [about them]. Previously, I did not know about Malays, but

now, I know a lot since I interact with them. We have to see whether individuals

want to mix with others. That depends on the self, it's very personal.)

In the same light, Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) contended that in Chinese

communication, the "insider" effect "creates a communication context in which outsiders

are excluded" (p. 50), which suggests that the Chinese tend to stay in their own "world"

when compared to the Malays. That is, they stick to their own kind, while at the same

time, prosper through their "*guanxi*" network, rather than, mingle with the ethnic-other as

---

[150] See also, Osman Chuah Abdullah (2002). *Preaching the non-Muslim Chinese in Malaysia.* Kuala
Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia.

we witness in many campuses in Malaysia as well as in the US (see Egan, 2007;

Rabushka, 1973).

However, given the uncertainty surrounding the insider-outsider effect, one can

only guess by virtue of the individual awareness of his or her own group that it is stronger

in one's own ethnic group than in the other. Due to the fluid nature of the "insider-

outsider" notions, Young (2004) suggested that we think about the distinction between

these notions as "an analytical rather than experiential divide" (p. 192). More research

needs to be conducted in this area where we can fully examine the notions of insider-

outsider. That will allow us to ask some basic questions. For example, are Malays

considered "insiders" or "outsiders?" What constitutes the insider-outsider notions with

regard to Malays?

At the interpersonal level, Malays and Chinese adopt indirect and evasive

approaches when dealing with "matters of the heart" or, more specifically, sensitive

issues. Informants prefer to tolerate rather than engage in *problematizing* things that

might harm the "harmonious" relationship between the two ethnic groups. Within both

groups, blaming the other is not a top priority in one's repertoire of social propriety,

especially with respect to communication in everyday life. Only when pressed for further

clarification would an individual open up slowly to reveal the personal self, the voice

(ethos), his or her emotional *appeal* (pathos) to others, and reasoning (logos) concerning

the situation. Interethnic communication, in this sense, is enacted through a carefully

configured presentation of self through the role enactment in daily life as I witnessed in

my fieldwork. Both ethnic individuals performed a non-confrontational communicative style.

My reading and understanding of the Chinese culture also pertains to Chinese communicative styles. For example, in Chinese communication, the concept of "*mian zi*" (or social/positional face) plays an important role (e.g., Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). Embedded in this is "*lian*" (the literal meaning of face). The articulation of problems is achieved courteously within the premise of face-concerns surrounding the social face, and the image ("*mian zi*"). In protecting the face-other and one's personal face, the individuals commit to "mutual-face" concerns with the intention of preserving social harmony (see Ting-Toomey, 2005). According to Lu (1998), harmony is the ultimate goal for Chinese based on Confucian principles. What this means, then, is that Malay and Chinese individuals prefer a *convergence* of ideas (or strategies) to protect each other's image (or face) during day-to-day personal contact. On this, Giles, Coupland and Coupland (1991) contended that:

> [Convergence is a] strategy whereby individuals adapt to each other's communicative behaviors in terms of a wide range of linguistic-prosodic-non-verbal features including speech rate, pausal phenomena and utterance length, phonological variants, smiling, gaze and so on. (p. 7)

Granted this mutually supportive sentiment, I contend that the communicative strategies enacted are a result of indirect and ambiguous approaches which intersect heavily with politeness and face concerns (see Goffman, 1955 for his early works on face; also Brown & Levinson, 1987). As individuals come from collectivist culture,

certain values are shared (e.g., responsibility to the family, group, society) while other values such as religion, though differently practiced, still have a bearing on one's social enactment. Even though Confucian principles and Islamic practices remain distinct, there are values which are shared (and constantly referred to in the back of a culture member's minds) when it comes to respecting the other. In this regard, individuals maintain credibility and competence when dealing with and relating to the ethnic-other.

Notably, while the Chinese maintain their "moral" face of "*lien*"[151] (internal) and "*mien-tzu*" (external) through reciprocal behaviors which heavily intersect with one's integrity and social position (see Hu, 1944), Malays also do so through the notions of "*jaga maruah*" (respecting and taking care of individual's personhood, dignity/pride using various forms of face-saving strategies), and "*jaga air-muka*" (taking care of/respecting face). Scholars refer to this as the "moral-face" (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 2005) that concerns need for respect, dignity, honor, and moral uprightness from the ethnic-other. In essence, at the micro level (i.e., interpersonal/dyadic communication), the self sees the need to maintain a stable condition as and when the other is encountered or believed to be present. The constant daily inquiry of a person's sensemaking is, thus, "what's going on here?" As a person does that, he or she indirectly and spontaneously engages in "self talk" in making sense of not only one's action, but also, one's interpretation of the other's action(s).

The Malay-Chinese relationship is, unfortunately, confounded by a rather elusive image of (subtle) power relations. Although the Malays are numerically dominant (within Malaysia), they lack the global weightage of consciousness as a global diaspora

---

[151] Note the difference in spelling of the "*lian*" or "*lien*" in the literature.

community. It can also be argued that, despite their number, they have always been an economic minority. However, this is rarely articulated or appropriated in a *fair* manner. Typically, when this situation is discussed, a negative portrayal of the Malays as an "indigeneous" cum hostile population occupies the space alongside the "marginalized" Chinese (e.g., Chernov, 2003; Freedman, 2001).

Thus, this makes me wonder about scholarly writing. What right has the person to produce works which are inaccurate and one-sided? Is this what we call a postmodern interpretation, where writers can simply interpret as if they know the history? No discussion about any particular ethnic group should be held in an *ahistorical* fashion. Doing so means we are denying the right of the person to exist. If interethnic communication is to prevail, that is where we should begin our analysis given that individuals' mindets are molded by historical, cultural, social, and political underpinnings. As the term "interethnic communication" indicates, *ethnicity* is the root word, the *key* to understanding other's culture and personal preferences.

Taken further, we might want to scrutinize the notions of *majority-minority* in terms of empowered minority and disempowered majority. In a market-driven situation, whoever controls the market might also dominate the voice in the society even if the voice is that of the minority. Wealth delivers education and economic control, which ultimately determine the capacity to dominate the media and to negotiate and impose ethnic position in society. Such ethnic power relation is likely to color and shape the nature of interethnic communication in everyday experiences. With that said, I argue here that the notions minority-majority have to be carefully examined as these labels might

mean differently to different people. Notwithstanding, they will still voice their disagreement under the same label, minority or majority. For example, while a minority in Singapore is not empowered to stand for their rights (as revealed by Barr, 2006), the minority in Malaysia, especially the Chinese, have ample power and the loudest voice compared to other more marginalized minorities in the same nation-state.

To understand who is a minority and majority in a society, I argue that the case has to be examined *in-situ*. The postmodern interpretation means that the notions are always fluid and relative; each case has to be analyzed historically, culturally, structurally and politically. We have to ask: Does the concept mean the same to everyone? What, then, constitutes a minority? The Blacks in the US and the Chinese in Malaysia are minorities, yet, their situations are different. Chinese Malaysians are powerful economically if one starts to examine among others, the wealth, the jobs in the private sectors that they control, the Chinese private university and institutions, Chinese schools, and the *"guanxi"* network.

Admittedly, not much is known or exposed about the role and significance of *"guanxi"* in Malaysia as those who uphold its rules, as practitioners or beneficiaries will always be reluctant to reveal information on how ethnic discrimination is enacted. Because the Chinese are generally exposed to the printed media in Mandarin, a lot of information concerning how to win competition and move ahead (*kiasu)*, gets circulated among themselves including expressing discontentment. By virtue of their economic dominance (see Chua, 2003), they have easy access to business intelligence and information on how to access opportunities and excel in education. Therefore, they are

able to monopolize the voice, the externally articulated voice with the ethnic network.

"Minority" in this context is no longer about "fear," "oppressed," "excluded" or "weak."

Rather, being a member of a minority entails the right to live to the best level possible,

regardless of the situation in which others find themselves. The rhetoric seems to be

"*what don't I get?*" At the same time, "*what I get/have or what's in there for me?*" is

securely contained and concealed.

In this postmodern world, the representation of the concept minority is

manipulated by those who have the loudest voice. The "subaltern speaks"—to echo

Spivak (1988)—is no longer about the subaltern in its true sense, but it is about the one

with the loudest voice. In reality, the weak ones do not usually get to speak, that is, their

voices cannot be heard. They need an advocate to speak. Those who speak are not

necessarily the subaltern, or the ones who have the most legitimate grievances to express.

Those who speak are usually those with more power or technology to articulate their

standpoints. And it is human nature to always ask for more, and not think about those

groups who do not even have associations or schools to begin with. Take for example, the

Africans in the South Africa who are ladened with the HIV/Aids epidemic. *Do they get to*

speak in the true sense?

So, with regard to the situation in Malaysia, we witness many instances of

negative vibes and distorted information about Malay-Chinese relations and Malay

privileges circulated either in print, or on the Internet (see George, 2006),[152] or even

directly to the outsiders (e.g., foreigners). This distorted information often goes

unchecked and unchallenged. While grudges are expected, inaccurate information is

---

[152] See for instance, p. 189-191.

unacceptable. For example, when certain things such as the anti-Malay riot which witnessed how Malays were "yelled out to leave their land" are discarded and ignored, one starts to wonder what the "truth" really is. Does it reside only with the small group that knows how to articulate their positions?

Personal Reflections and Sensemaking

"Group or ethnic identity is itself a mindset" (Fisher, 1997, p. 71).

The above quote points to the fact that who we are (or who we think we are) is still bound by those around us, as well as by our cultural frame of reference. As I write this, I keep thinking about how our ethnic identity is itself a mindset. I am fully conscious about my own ways of knowing and seeing the world as I make sense of others (Malays and Chinese alike) and interethnic communication. I wonder about the amount of responses I received from the willing participants, and in particular, the Chinese informants. I wonder about their revealed and concealed sentiments. I realize that being Malay (i.e., an inside-outsider to the Chinese informants)[153] means that I might also be excluded from the privy of insider's intelligence. Gao and Ting-Toomey (1998) asserted that the "…Chinese genre of talk involves the notions of "*zi ji ren*" (insiders) and "*wai ren*" (outsiders)" (p. 91), which I have not yet explored and are beyond the scope of this research. At the same time, being Malay, I might also fall into the possible trap of certain tendentious ethnic preconceptions, something of which I might not even be aware.

Yet, I must make this clear. It is *not* my intention to privilege a negative and ethnocentric discourse. Rather, I intend to present a more balanced and "objective"

---

[153] By this, I mean I do not know enough about their culture. I do not speak their language, and thus, cannot possibly gain access to the printed material on their heritage, let alone a nuanced understanding of that heritage.

analysis through the sensemaking episodes in everyday experiences. Too often, we are exposed to writings that are one-sided and ethnically biased. Rarely do we get the picture of the mundane everyday scenarios. While I make sense of other's perspectives, I also make sense of my own perspective. As such, I see the need to articulate a Malay voice. In an interpretive approach to research, "the goal is to understand, rather than predict, human communication behavior" (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 6). In so doing, I reflect on my own subjectivities and tendencies.

As I write, I am fully aware of my positionality; my autoethnographic lens reminds me that I am both a Malay and Malaysian. At times, I confess that I am getting too personal (Miller, 1991) with the subject matter as well as with the informants. At the micro-level of communication, I shared their sentiments, and wish that things could be viewed differently, from both sides. At the macro level, I see how Malays are frequently discriminated against by writers who do not seem to have the readiness to see diversity in the scholarly writings. With conflicting sentiments, I feel the need to articulate a voice from within. This arose as and when I recalled my own positive experience with non-Malay individuals at the elementary school level, high school level, and in the workplace.

My prior experience, then, had always been wonderful and, at the same time, I was ignorant of how a particular ethnic identity can lend you *here*, *there*, or *in-between*. I did not know about the alleged "inequality" and "unfair" treatment of the non-Malays. I did not know about how non-Malays "have to work very hard" to get into the university because of limited space for enrollment. I, too, had to work very hard. What I mean to say is that, I never thought of my "privileged" ethnic position the whole time I was

interacting with them. I never thought of my *bumiputera* entitlement, the quotas, and the

scholarships that are alleged to be "freely" given to Malays. Because of the "haves" and

"havenots" dichotomy, Malays—as a group—are conveniently labeled by the other as

adopting a crutched mentality. But, when the other (e.g., Chinese) receives benefits (e.g.,

scholarships), this situation is often justified as "fair" and the recipients as deserving. The

historical factors pertaining to the inherited position of the "haves" of the Chinese, both

among the elite and the business network community, which were always exclusive (i.e.,

business/occupations have historically been handed from father to son), have never been

discussed by the outspoken Chinese themselves. Rather, these were all labeled under

"pure hard work", and as such, are not shared or revealed to the outsiders.

Upon reflection, I see the need to articulate my Malay voice to the reader at this

station. Not *all* Malays get all these benefits. Otherwise, more Malays would be

successful. Malays, as the majority, still have to compete for everything. Many of my

Malay friends did not manage to enter the university. And not *all* Chinese are ruled out

from getting the benefits. It depends on a person's academic achievement, which

obviously, follows from entry qualifications and is not based on exam grade meritocracy

alone. (With this, we have a screening which involves certain quotas, family

background/income, and others factors.) From the interethnic exchanges in the media

(including bloggers), it appears that a person's academic credential is the only criterion

defining merit in gaining entry to the university as well as admission to employment. As

Eric Liu (a domestic policy advisor to former President Bill Clinton) attested when he

was asked about Asians' achievement at the elite campuses in the US, "[u]ntil all

students—from rural outposts to impoverished urban settings—are given equal access to the advanced placement classes that have proven to be a ticket to the best colleges, then the idea of pure meritocracy is bunk. They're measuring in a fair way the results of an *unfair* system" (see Egan, 2007; emphasis added). Asians, as a whole, he claimed, are tired of having to live up to the standard.

If the argument about merit still holds, then we would be getting the "cream" Chinese applicants in the job market. Yet, my own experience teaching in a predominantly Chinese school and two universities in the English departments where the number of Chinese are substantial suggests that the rhetoric that celebrates the academic achievement of the Chinese was not at all reflective of their performance. My point is, I have not been drawn to witness their "excellent" performance throughout my experiences of working with them. Meaning, each case is context-specific. However, like everyone else, I, too, had to work very hard to get a place at the university. My father was a no-nonsense type, very disciplined and strict too. Education was always his priority. He never wanted us to be in the police force. (The "father-son" passing down of jobs was what Malays had to rely on years before the independence. It was very difficult to gain access into the Chinese business network—without personal contacts (or *guanxi*) as revealed by Elias (2004)—and, hence a better paying job, without knowing their language.)

I recall working until late in the morning to study for an examination. We could not afford extra tuition so (my siblings and) I had to learn everything on my (our) own after school hours. Now, extra tuition is becoming increasingly common in Malaysia,

especially among the Chinese (most of whom would, somehow, have the means to pay for the fees). I also recall being summoned to the principal's office upon the completion of my Form Five exam (or SPM, i.e., Malaysian Certificate of Examination) whose intention was only to congratulate me on my good work. Then, I went abroad to do undergraduate studies, I was the only one in my entire school cohort to have succeeded gaining access to such an opportunity.

Looking back, while not trying to be denigrating, I never once felt that my Chinese friends were doing better than I did. We were comparatively similar, or perhaps, I did slightly better in some subjects, and they did better in others. Yet, there was no sense of arrogance or bitterness on our part. One might say that we were not too exposed to the real situation outside of the school. Five of my Chinese male friends saw me off at the airport when I left for further studies overseas. I was the class monitor, in *Lower Six Science One* (Pre-college level). I remember their faces, and my feelings. I, too, was sad to depart at the age of eighteen. But, life had to go on.

As I grew older, I began to notice the changes in Malay-Chinese perspectives as a result of the print and electronic media. My exposure to scholarly writing has made me more aware of my ethnic privileges and shortcomings from the other's point of view. I contend that life should not been seen in a binary perspective; there must always be the *in-between* ways of seeing things. To be sure though, reading about how Malays are stereotypically perceived, or criticized, without a fair balance of argument makes me more determined to understand people's lives.

As I reflect on my own situation, having to struggle to get good grades at a young age, I have become more defensive and more determined to maintain my Malayness, regardless of what that means to others. I constantly advise my two small children to work very hard in light of the negative image of Malays. Being in the US, too, makes it even more challenging since everything is supposed to be "equal", a fair and level playing field, so to speak, as is implicit in the notion of "no child left behind". There is no affirmative action for the Malays here. But my son is doing very well at his elementary school. He has remained on the "honor roll—*all A's*" list almost the entire time (from Grade Five onwards). What all this means is that I use my own individual, personal experience to debunk negative comments about Malays. More importantly, I ask: why lump all Malays in one category? Why go for a binary perspective? Why not opt for a more emphathetic lens? What about successful and courteous Malays? What happens to the ordinary virtuous Malay voice? Would a sociable personality count at all in a meritocratic organization?

In discussing the "problems" between Malays and Chinese in Malaysia, a recent uncalled for remark by Mr. Lee Kuan Yew (Mentor Minister of Singapore), for instance, is very dangerous and to a certain extent, very *racist*. At the time of writing my dissertation, I recalled Mr. Lee's strong rhetoric as he said, "Our neighbors [Malaysia and Indonesia] both have problems with their Chinese. They [the Chinese] are successful. They are hardworking and, therefore, they are systematically marginalized."[154] His use of "they" automatically categorizes *all* Chinese as successful, and hardworking. And

---

[154] See his full statement on "Lew Kuan Yew stirs it up again" in Asia sentinel[Online]; Retrieved October 5, 2006 from
http://www.asiasentinel.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=198&Itemid=31

because of that, *all* Chinese—as he described it—are systematically marginalized. Unfortunately, he is quite oblivious to the plight of the Malaysians in Singapore who according to Barr (2006), are even more acutely marginalized than the Chinese Malaysians counterpart. *Why did Barr make this claim?* Barr asserted that the Malay Singaporeans are told to rise on their two feet, and not ask for assistance from the government, like their Chinese citizens. But, did the latter really rise on their two feet?

Government assistance, of necessity, is discriminatory. But, the crucial question is, what is the criteria for such assistance? Who are these successful, hardworking people? Where and what is the evidence concerning the source of their success? What professions are they in? What kind of social ladder did they climb? Who "helped" them along the way? What about the role of *guanxi* in Chinese culture? What about the assistance the successful Chinese businessmen receive from the government? Notwithstanding these issues, Mr. Lee's rhetoric has awakened my self-consciousness.

A case in point: My experience with the Chinese, thus far, has not suggested in any way that Chinese are superior and Malays are inferior in their performances. Indeed, I contend that every individual is unique. Whether or not one is successful, depends on a variety of factors, including access to capital, available social support, access to a good education, an environment facilitates education, a stable familial context, and constant parental counseling on what it takes to be successful. People who are (too) poor and isolated cannot possibly have access to most of these factors (e.g., the South African children who have a very bleak future due to the HIV/Aids epidemic).

The crucial question is: how do we make sure everyone gets a fair share of the cake? As stated by one of my informants, if there is no supportive opportunity structure for people to work hard, how on earth are they going to succeed? (Like Oprah Winfrey,[155] we might want to cite the children in South Africa as one such example.) I realized that education is crucial in merging people together, at least, temporarily, given that they will meet the ethnic-other in the building, in class, at school, or on a university campus. While ethnic myths can be denigrating (e.g., when a group is constantly referred to as lazy), or celebrating (e.g., when a group is always celebrated as "industrious"), one can *only* compare one's success with another when everything else is equal. Otherwise, to echo the British historian Toynbee (1934), "[t]he so-called racial explanation of differences in human performance and achievement is either an *ineptitude* or a *fraud*" (p. 245; emphasis added). Importantly, as Eric Liu rightly pointed out, people should "work hard, defer gratification, *share sacrifice* and focus on the big goal" (see Egan, 2007; emphasis added).

I strongly resonate with many of the illuminating perspectives covered in this research, but this is only a beginning. For sure, it has made me reflect more on my own mindset. I realize that as we get deeply involved, we must have the willingness and desire to interact with people. We *have* to know the others' stories. That certainly demands a skill of "know how." Craving for a thick description demands that we must have a positive attitude because such an attitude determines the nature of our relationships with the ethnic-other once we are on the chosen site. We ask: What is our real purpose in communicating across an ethnic boundary?

---

[155] Oprah set up a school for selected African girls in South Africa who are deprived of education.

So, what did I take away from this research? What have I learned from interacting with other individuals? To be sure, this sensemaking research has not only made me conscious of my ethnic identity but, also, my perspective of the other. I realized that, regardless of the "problems," the other is still an individual whom I refer to as a friend, colleague, neighbor, uncle, aunty, etc. in my daily contact. My exposure to them begins from an early education, and from the family and environmental surrounding, which makes a difference in how we view people. Some kind of contact must exist before we can even begin to explore interethnic communication.

My perusal of the literature and the data pertain towards the plurality of voices and multivocality of perspectives. The informants have proven that both Malays and Chinese are polite and strategic social actors in the sea of interaction, especially concerning face-to-face daily encounters. Our co-constructed interethnic communication is full with ambiguities which serve to fulfill the need for self to "temporarily" connect with the other, which is multiculture-driven. Our joint-participation enables us to enact the situation according to our cultural frame of reference which is guided (or constrained?) by values that might derive from religion or tradition. I, too, enacted "face" concerns in preserving harmony. Because my informants were quite tolerant and civil, our communication was one which articulated sensitivity and respect. Thus, I concealed my emotions, portrayed a good attitude, started with a good heart, and thought about good things. I also learned that, without patient probing, I would not get details. At the same time, I realized that with frequent interruptions, the interaction might have ended up

being only a question-answer session (see Riessman, 1993)—*A catch 22 situation, I should think.*

In essence, not only did I have to *probe* each of my informants, but I also had to *anticipate* their action to ensure that the emerging story was relevant to the inquiry. In so doing, I had to keep looking for conversational interactive *cues* in making my moves. That means I had to participate with them in the production of the narratives. At this point, my informants were the staged actors—with their own stories—while I was more of the staged narrator and director, always on guard for the exposed action. As McLuhan (1964) asserted, anticipation gives [people] the power to deflect and control force" (p. 199). That is, we interpret each other's actions as we co-construct the stories. Meanwhile, Blumer (1969) eloquently described the above-mentioned social situation:

> [The symbolic interaction approach] sees a human society as people engaged in living. Such living is a process of ongoing activity in which participants are developing lines of action in the multitudinous situations they encounter. They are caught up in a vast process of interaction in which they have to fit their developing actions to one another. This process of interaction consists in making indications to others of what to do and in interpreting the indications as made by others. They live in worlds of objects and are guided in their orientation and action by the meaning of these objects. Their objects, including objects of themselves, are formed, sustained, weakened, and transformed in their interaction with one another. This general process should be seen, of course, in the differentiated character which it necessarily has by virtue of the fact that people

cluster in different groups, belong to different associations, and occupy different

positions. They accordingly approach each other differently, live in different

worlds, and guide themselves by different sets of meanings. Nevertheless,

whether one is dealing with a family…or a political party, one must see the

activities of the collectivity as being formed through a process of *designation* and

interpretation. (p. 20-21; emphasis added)

So, what about my concerns in doing fieldwork? I contend that we must free

ourselves from *ideological* and *political baggage*. That is to say, we visit the site with an

open mind, more of an emergent approach rather than an *a priori* perspective. While we

have our own interest and ideological construction ready in our heads, we must not

attempt to situate our perspectives with those from whom we aim to learn. We need to

learn about others' culture through their own cultural lens, that is how others live their

lives. In other words, when we attempt to learn about others, we must free our mind from

our own cultural biases or ethnocentrism. (This is, however, far easier said than done.) So

while trying to understand others' ways of life, we are also learning about how we deal

with our own cultural differences. No doubt in the process, we come to terms with such

factors as emotions, personal attachments or dislocations, and difficulties. If fieldwork

requires a degree of wholehearted commitment, how do we overcome cultural barriers

while, at the same time, retain our own identity?

We ought to learn how to avoid making critical judgments and assumptions. I

became very concerned about how I interpreted and situated certain actions and issues.

To echo Wolcott (2005), how do we overcome what is in our minds and hearts? When do

we speak our mind and share what is in our hearts? In this regard, respect for the other should be of utmost importance when we are in the field. I would add that the process should be reciprocal, especially if the subject is difficult to interrogate. Both researchers and the community must learn to respect each others' differences and ways of doing things. The fact that research is highly political makes it even more important for us to weigh the differences between what we encounter and what we want to achieve.

I must know the ethics of doing fieldwork. Who I talk to, and who I choose to talk to, implies an agenda for my work as a researcher. In other words, when interacting with the chosen participants, a researcher must consider the reasons for such a selection. Here, it is crucial that a researcher learn the hierarchical structure of the community so that he or she knows who holds what position in the society. Also, how the data are revealed makes a difference to the way the story is imparted. I acknowledge the limitations of doing fieldwork, including several inadequacies, for instance, language, cultural, and religious barriers. Not knowing the Chinese language made me feel terribly handicapped in "reaching out" to the Chinese informants. There was no "commonality" between us with regard to not only language, but also, religion and even cultural values.

Thus, it must be mentioned that fieldwork is a highly skilled job as it demands fullest attention to the nitty-gritty things in the lives of the other (see Wolcott, 2005). We not only observe people but also cautiously observe individuals to the extent that we might partner with the other to get to the details (see Fisher, 2003). Or, we might want to play the role of "Peeping Tom" in trying to get both sides of the stories, but with a careful understanding of local moves and sensitivities, and possible pitfalls of the fieldwork

technique used. In other words, the darker side of fieldwork also needs to be thoroughly examined.

At the practical level, this study suggests that efforts to mobilize the ethnic groups in development or nationbuilding programs should be crafted in such a way that the programs and policies take into account both the divisive and the unifying factors at the same time. If there must be a dialogue of some kind, or public deliberation, everything must come out in the open. There must be a genuine interest to cooperate and relate with the other. There must be some kind of consensus on what merits "equality" in a multicultural society (see Parekh, 1998). The intent is to promote unity in diversity, not more diversity within diversity. More needs to be done to enhance interethnic communication at the interpersonal level as a catalyst to ethnic solidarity in Malaysia.

As Din (1982) depicted the experience of a tourist encounter almost twenty five years ago:

> The ethnic situation in Malaysia is highy polarized so that the minute the tourist lands at the airport, he is likely to be faced with the customs, immigration, and police officers of one ethnic group (Malay); and as soon as he leaves the airport, he is bound to seek accommodation, eat, and shop in predominantly Chinese establishments. (p. 469)

Din (1982) contested that a tourist's length of stay and his or her frequency of experience would be the decisive factors in the "imagemaking" (p. 469) of a particular ethnic individual (or group). The words "shopkeeper" or "immigration officer," for example,

would have different meanings than in the dictionary.[156] To echo Din, I further argue that it also depends on who the tourist (or foreigner) seeks information from; it is in this context of interethnic communication that such issues as "inequality," laziness," "Malay privileges," "cheating" are brought to the forefront. Thus, we witness a scenario where only one side of the story is played out against the other. As Din (1982) observed, "…none has attempted to assess the role of the outsider [tourist] in the interaction process" (p. 468).

Theorizing Ethnicity, Sensemaking, and Interethnic Communication

As a social participant in the Malaysian context, to be Malay is to be Muslim. As a researcher, to be Malay means that I have to downplay my ethnic identity. This thinking allows me to view things in a non-binary way, that is, from the exclusive and divisive perspective of "us" and "them," to a more inclusive perspective of "us." Embedded in this thinking is the questions of how do we make sense of "us." How do we analyze things in a non-binary way? How do I weigh the perspective of the other fairly?

With that said, I view interethnic communication as an emergent process; it is dynamic and everchanging as the social interactions depend much on the individuals and all other factors that tag alongside those very individuals who participate. What constitutes interethnic communication, effective or otherwise, remains to be further explored, bearing in mind that this process is as significant and complex as the relationship itself. I regard interethnic communication as a realm of sense-making which deserves to be further interrogated in its totality. What facilitates interethnic communication is the *interest* to seek the ethnic-other in interaction. In other words, one

---

[156] See p. 469-470 for details.

must have the *desire* to interact with the ethnic-other to have an interethnic communication. In this sense, interethnic communication can be *self*-driven, *other*-driven, *common destiny*-driven, *rhetoric*/*rationale*-driven or *merit*-driven.

So, will interethnic communication be a non-issue as the ethnic divide becomes more permeable owing to a globalization of societal values and social integration? Or, will it be a priority item for research if the ethnic divide were to become more formidable with the possible rise of stronger exclusive ethnic niches in the future? Clearly, the research agenda would be a long one since, arguably, we are still at the exploratory stage. There is a great deal more to know about the psychological, sociological, political, cultural, policy, and legal dimensions of interethnic communication. The approach, research design, and fieldwork technique itself, are subjects that offer considerable scope for research given that there are still many questions to ask on the most appropriate methodology especially in situations where the researcher is a member of a (dominant) group that is a part of the process.

In the area of applied or action research, the situation in many multiethnic societies such as Malaysia calls for effective research input in policy making and program development affecting social integration, either through school, local community administration or neighborhood outreach activities all of which call for some space for debates on how to improve and promote productive interethnic communication in society. To echo Parekh (1998), the "language of claims and counter claims" in a multicultural society must intersect with such spirits of "charity, goodwill,...mutual respect, and accommodation" (p. 411).

In this regard, the National Unity Department (JPN) was established in 1969 after the ethnic riot with the purpose of conducting a research on ethnic relations, and which later in 1990, operated under the Ministry of National Unity and Social Development (KPNPM; see KPNPM Handbook, 1995; see also Rahim, 2005). The vision to have a national unity hence, *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Nation), was also reinforced in the Dasar Ekonomi untuk Pembangunan Negara (DEPAN), with the intent to call all Malaysians to share their fate/sacrifice (i.e., "*berkongsi untungnasibnya*"; see DEPAN, 1991).[157] The Department of National Unity and Integration (JPNIN), which takes care of the JPN, aims at promoting unity as the key factor in mobilizing a Malaysian nation.[158]

Ethnicity is fluid, and at the same time, I argue that it is further defined, reconfigured, and reinforced by the media or printed materials. Even if one is not conscious of his or her identity, the reinforcement is strengthened by the presence of the other, or specifically, the dyadic other. In so doing, identity becomes defined, vivid and solidified. A person starts to ask: Who am I? Or, what does it mean to be Malay? Association and/or disassociation takes place interchangeably as the person thinks about his or her position. Taken further, the sensemaking episodes of individuals indicate that the self is constantly negotiated and reinforced with the presence of the other.

By this, I mean to say that even if we live among animals (e.g., as in the case of a young woman who was found recently living among monkeys in the jungle of Cambodia),[159] our "being" will most likely be defined by the very presence of these animals. This also means that ethnicity can be held fast or strongly as it is a given. In this

---

[157] See DEPAN, 1991, p. 128.
[158] See its website, www.JPNIN.gov.my
[159] Retrieved January 19, 2007 from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/6275623.stm

sense, ethnicity is also bounded by social, historical, and cultural heritage. Within this

parameter, the insider-outsider role depends on the ascribed identity.

As such, if we draw a model (see Figure 5.1), we have the components of education,

language, workplace and business whereby individuals are constantly exposed to the

other. I refer to these components as the *social contact sites*. These sites of interethnic

communication lead to school, university, work environments or organizations, television

or the media through which we constantly situate ourselves in relation to the other in

making sense of everyday experiences.

Language   Media   Education

Travel Experience ⟷ **Ethnic sensemaking** ⟷ Ethnic Associations
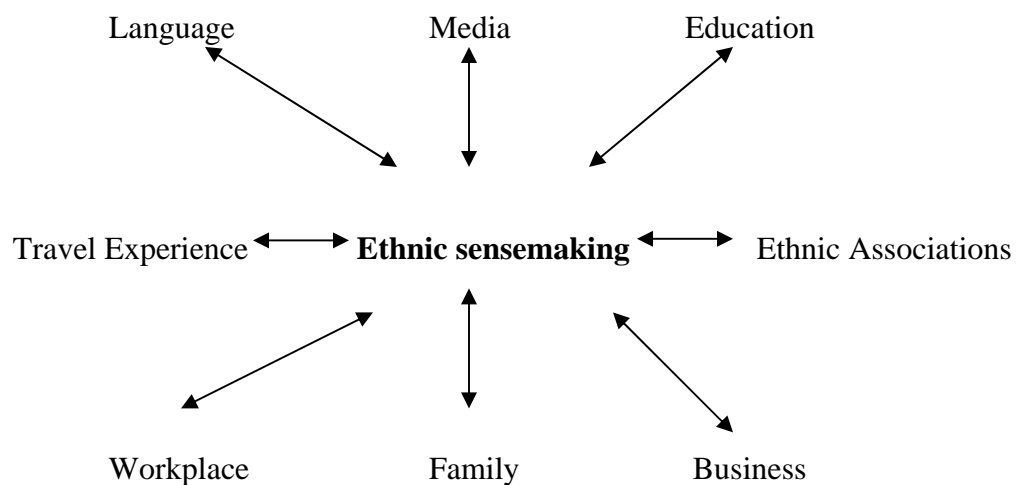
Workplace   Family   Business

Figure 5.1: The contact sites in Malay-Chinese sensemaking

Evidently, there is a tendency for the activity spaces to be compartmentalized or

divided within the realms of these contact sites. What this means is that, while physical

proximity and contact is evident, emotional involvement is missing. Thus, the contact site

is only superficial, always mentally segregated. This further indicates that the process of

relating is more instrumental, rather than, emotional or personal. This is the tendency and to every tendency, there would be exceptions, herein lies the hope for the optimists; a hope for the arrival of the "wall-breakers" who will show the public how rewarding it is to rise above ethnic chauvinism and myopia.

From the perspective of sensemaking, the contacts we have help us to reflect and anticipate our actions as we enact routinized activities in life. The contexts we live in also govern our sensemaking that might further hinder or promote our interethnic communication. Our intersubjectivity is constantly active as we routinely traverse along the social contact sites. Our sensemaking, then, is based on knowledge or input, which has to be drawn out by others if they are interested to know about us, and vice-versa. A search for detailed information requires one to probe the other. Thus, probing underscores sensemaking. Embedded in this, then, is a joint-effort from the two persons engaged in getting information. As such, sensemaking in interethnic communication is also a *participatory* effort.

In retrospect, ethnicity is relationship-based as self negotiates its standing in the society. It is, so to speak, a variable. When interethnic communication takes place, factors such as relationship, the purpose of the interaction, shared identity (e.g., in-group, out-group), social distance or religion, frequency, duration and the whole spectrum of communication variable intersect and interact with each other. Hence, we might draw another model describing the components of interethnic communication (see Figure 5.2):

Ethnic Identity/Labeling   Communication Strategies

Mundane Issues → **Interethnic Communication** ← "Media" Issues

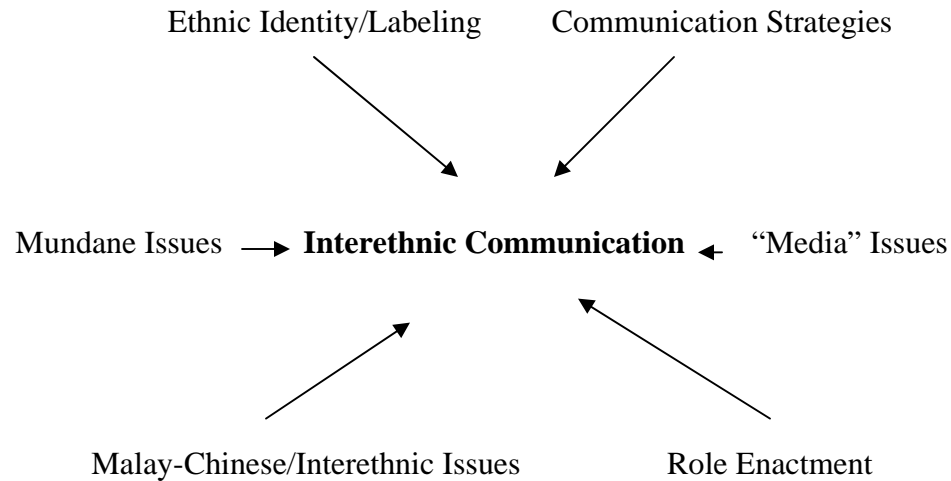Malay-Chinese/Interethnic Issues   Role Enactment

Figure 5.2: The components of interethnic communication

In understanding the components of interethnic communication as illustrated in Figure 5.2, we ask: What do ethnically diverse individuals talk about? I would divide interethnic communication into three possible categories: the layman (or ordinary/"street") conversation, the academic/intellectual conversation, and the political conversation. In all these, we have a multiplicity of roles which individuals enact based on their ideological orientation. Such orientation governs our sensemaking and, in turn, is governed by ideological and/or pragmatic/problem-solving factors. To understand such a complex sensemaking process, I present here a diagram to illustrate (see Figure 5.3):

Mindset ⟷ Job⟷ Education ⟷ Culture

Ethnic Orientation (Belief/Ideology)

Anticipation, *Probing* -- **Sensemaking** -- Selection, Retention, Enactment
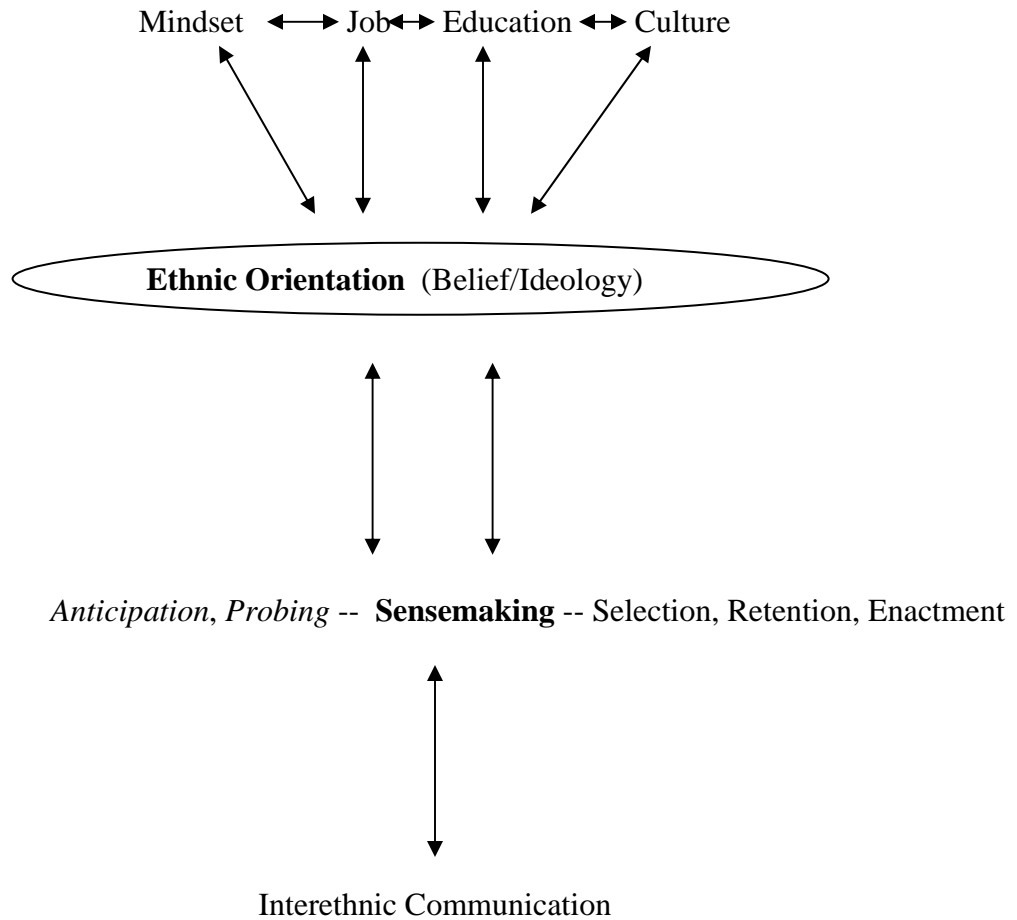
Interethnic Communication

Figure 5.3: Factors influencing sensemaking in interethnic communication

The diagram (Figure 5.3) illustrates the process of sensemaking in interethnic communication whereby the ethnic individuals co-construct the interaction through their participation in educational institution and at the workplace, using the cultural frames they inherit along the way and further contact sites with the other. How they experience their communication and interaction determines as well as reinforces their mindset, hence, sensemaking. In this regard, sensemaking influences and is influenced by the ideological orientation of an individual (Parks, 1981).

Selecting candidates for a job, for example, suggests that the human resource manager knows and is competent to identify the credentials and qualifications of job applicants. There is a relationship between ethnicity and job recruitment. That is, ethnic identity is given economic value, though rarely in an explicit manner. To get the details of the applicants, the recruiter must anticipate and probe into the life of the potential employee. The steps through which the mind allows this to occur are selection, retention, and enactment as Weick (1995) observed. Even though Weick and associates (2005) have included *presumption*, I am suggesting that, in ethnically divided situations, *anticipation* is significant enough to merit recognition as an important stage in sensemaking, rather than included in an embedded fashion in his sensemaking model. As the process is dynamic, sensemaking can be seen as conflict management in a way that it directs us to the prudence of knowing how to smooth the edges so that we can relate with the other to accommodate differences, not highlight them. Park, an American sociologist, forewarned that race consciousness enforces social distance (Park, 2000).[160]

A discussion of interethnic communication is incomplete without demonstrating its inherent differentiation. It would be instructive to propose a typology which would indicate a range of types or categories of the phenomenon. Drawing from the literature on the subject and the result of my interpretive qualitative study, I present here a matrix of interethnic communication (see Table 5.1):

---

[160] He first wrote this in 1939; See also Sills & Merton (2000). (Eds.). *Social science quotations* (p. 180). London: Transaction Publishers.

Table 5.1: Matrix of interethnic communication

Purpose Distance	Commercial	Personal	Political	Professional
Insider	1	2	3	4
Outsider	5	6	7	8
Fluid	9	10	11	12

Table 5.1 presents a matrix of purpose-by-distance interethnic communication categories. Using this frame, there are a dozen specific types of the phenomena which reflects to a degree the exchange strategies between ethnic individuals. The defining dimensions proposed above revolve around the purpose of communication and the social distance between the interactants. Each of these cells might be labeled according to the particular nature of the interaction. This suggests that interethnic communication can fall between two categories of extremes: from a likely negative position in cell 7 with its baggage of negative attributes, such as, prejudice, hatred, racial discrimination, arrogance, and supremacist mindset, to the very positive category in cell 11, which celebrates diversity and differences as is frequently tauted in the government rhetoric (e.g., Ninth Malaysia Plan, 2006-2011), for example, "*muhibbah*" (harmony), *"madani"* (cosmopolitan), and recently *"hadari"* (constructive civility). This differentiation reinforces the situatedness of the subject that contradicts any essentialist attempt to paint a monolithic picture of ethnic relations in Malaysia, either by optimists or pessimists, that is, a polarized representation of interethnic communication.

Table 5.2: Typology of interethnic communication: Situated examples

Purpose / Distance	Commercial	Personal	Political	Professional
Insider	Collaborators	Congenial	Comradeship	Collegial
Outsider	Cautious	Perfunctory	Adversarial	Detached
Fluid	Expedient	Flexible	Accommodating	Innovative

Table 5.2 indicates that there are four common purposes of interethnic communication, which include the commercial, personal, political, and professional. Within these purposes, we have the notions of *insider* and *outsider.* An insider enacts the roles of a collaborator, colleague, partner (as in business), and /or a close friend depending on the purpose of communication. Meanwhile, the outsider tends to be more cautious when it comes to commercial activity, unassuming in the workplace, for example, and perfunctory when it comes to personal matters, and adversarial in the political realm. As the individual interacts, religious belief and attitude intersect and underscore the enactment of the roles. Between the insider and outsider roles is a fluid or oscillating role in which one's claims to identity follow a more chameleon tendency depending on perceived advantages from such choices.

Future Research Directions

"True search does not end. Instead, it points the way for yet another search"

(Glesne, 1999, p. 199).

This study has several implications. First and foremost, in light of the typology

presented in Table 5.2 and the salience of the "Asian" label, especially the literature on

Asian values, we ought to redefine the concept of "self" in Asian cultures. Many scholars

make more reference to Confucian philosophy when discussing Asian values (e.g., Hetch

et al., 2005),[161] than to, for example, Malay values. This might be due to an apparent lack

of materials as to what constitute Malay values. Often times, Asians in the US are lumped

together as a homogeneous group when labels are specified. So, we always hear the

media describing the Asian issues, the Asian dilemma, the Asian values, whereas a close

scrutiny reveals that what they discuss is only, and mainly, the Chinese constituency.

Even when Asian food (e.g., on *Food Network, CNN*) is referred to, it usually pertains to

Chinese cooking.

Secondly, the limited geographical and cultural knowledge of the US media, for

example, suggests that more research needs to be carried out pertaining to each Asian

group, for example, Indians, Nepalese, or Malays, who can be further divided into Malay

Indonesians, Malay Bruneians, and Malay Malaysians. The latter rarely get discussed.

Their gracefulness, hospitality, and warm reception to others and/or foreigners, as many

colonial authors have described, go ignored. For sure, when Malay Malaysians (the

whole group) are discussed, they are often said to be marginalizing the Chinese

Malaysians (the whole group), but I did not find even one instance of acknowledgement

---

[161] See Hetch et al., p. 258.

of situations that reflect the opposite of this situation (that is, Chinese marginalization of Malays). The Malay individual is omitted from the "positive" discursive realm. Rather, essentialist "negative" vibes are poured out with bloggers as the most prominent spinners and biased writers as secondary supporters.

Such is a world of advanced technology in which one does not know the authors but they can nevertheless exert considerable influence on the less informed audience in propagating ethnic image. It just makes me wonder how these ghost writers can truly live side-by-side with people who they should refer to as friends or countrymen rather than as "business rivals". When negative remarks are made, too often, they forget those who are most affected by those remarks—the ordinary citizens who, like Martin Luther King, might also have their dreams of an ethnically harmonious society where interethnic communication is personally enriching for everybody.

The Malay self and the Chinese self might bring points of contestation to the interethnic communication at the macro-level if they were to interact very minimally at the micro-level. A study in China (e.g., Lu, 1998), for example, revealed that there has been a stronger tendency toward the "*Li*" value, than the "*Yi*" value. "*Yi*" values include morality and faithfulness, while "*Li*" concerns utilitarian gains and individual needs (i.e., Chinese individualistic orientation). According to Lu, one of the informants even stated that "the Chinese by nature are selfish and utilitarian" (p. 101), which he believed to be a Chinese cultural trait.

Thirdly, there should be political initiatives to contain the Malay-Chinese problem. For instance, there ought to be some incentives given to research pertaining to

the communalism of each ethnic group in understanding what makes people stick together especially in own group, and why. From the perspective of the informants and my fieldwork observation, communalism among the Chinese is perceived as greater than among the Malays in terms of collectively thinking about their language (e.g., Lee, 2004; Teo, 2003) and the rights to the utilitarian gains (see Maeda, 1967; Rabushka, 1973). Whereas, social practices pertaining to visitation and social interactions other than economic involvement with the ethnic-other tend to be very minimal, to the extent that it is almost unheard of. Rabushka's (1973) study, for example, revealed that Malays in Penang (Malaysia) are more outgoing than their Chinese Malaysian counterparts. This is also attested to by one of my Malay informants who engaged in initiatives to befriend his Chinese classmates, while the Chinese, according to Rabushka (1973) are happier to be left alone and mingle (i.e., shop, eat etc.) within their own in-group members (see also Maeda, 1967).

Fourthly, general education exposes people to others and enhances knowledge about the other. No doubt, the inquisitive mind works to understand the other in more detail. As such, schools and universities should take such every available opportunity to introduce elements of discovery of "otherness" and shift that to a bigger realm of "our-ness" with efforts to promote a more inclusive social orientation to life, a workable and constructive syllabus of some kind. In this context, our *intrapersonal* experience influences the receptiveness of the individual towards the other. As I write, the Malaysian

Minister of Higher Education approved recently a course module for "*Ethnic Relations*"
to be taught as a compulsory subject for all university students.[162]

Admittedly, the Malaysian education system inadvertently excludes Malays from
the realm of the Chinese, but not vice-versa, given that the latter has to learn the Malay
language. Learning a language naturally lands the learner in that culture. Through
educational socialization, people will hopefully discover the goodness in others. As the
Malay adage goes, "*Tak kenal, maka tak cinta,*" (If you don't know, therefore, you won't
love/like), or as a corollary, I would say, "*Tak kenal, maka tak suka*" (If you don't know,
therefore, you won't like"). The challenge then is how to motivate Malaysians to know
the real Malay or Chinese, rather than, taking an easy short cut to stereotyping/profiling.

To echo Shamsul,[163] how do we address the "stable tension?" I suggest that we
explore various strategies. Firstly, at the micro-level, the strategy is to arrive at the
economically just society where the gap between the rich and poor is narrowed down to
an acceptable level. Secondly, we encourage people to have *common* values, drawing for
a repertoire of civil values or universal values. This can be done through a culture of
appreciation of difference in which group representatives can discuss and debate on what
these values should be. Thirdly, we accommodate diversity through cultural integration
as has already been adopted by the Ministry of Culture and heritage. Fourthly, through
such activities as "*rukun tetangga*" (neighborhood vigilante patrol), and "*gotong royong*"

---

[162] See *Utusan Online*. (2007). "*Lahir masyarakat lebih terbuka*" (Create a more open-minded society).
Retrieved 27 January 2007 from
http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/content.asp?y=2007&dt=0128&pub=Utusan_Malaysia
[163] Ibid, op cit.

(doing things together in the spirit of togetherness), ethnically diverse individuals can

meet and interact with each other in carrying out duties for their communities.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

"*Meanings are in people*…they are in *us*, not in messages" (Berlo, 1960, p. 175; emphasis original).

We have now reached our *concluding station*. In retrospect, human communication is about exchanging meanings between people who might have different ways of interpreting. This study sought to understand a variety of this transaction of interpersonal communication. Sociologically, groups by nature are competitive and adversarial, but the demands of modern multicultural living call for the wisdom of living in harmony with the other, accommodating or, at the very least, tolerating (at the very best, appreciating) differences in values and behavior. Whichever sources of wisdom (Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, or Islam), each has its quotable words of wisdom that enjoins this imperative.

The data in this study indicate this fairly ubiquitous presence of well-meaning human proclivity for productive and civil communication. This is not to say that multi-ethnic society is not prone to conflict. It is inherently conflictful. However, the common understanding is that people have to live together and, hence, need to find positive ways of relating to their fellow humans. There are many aspects of interethnic communication that need further *in-situ* analysis, including content, style, and frequency. What can we say about the contact hypothesis, for instance? How frequent is the contact? What are the divisive factors, and how do we manage those factors without evoking further sensitivities and prejudices?

It must be mentioned that until Malay Malaysians and Chinese Malaysians are sincere in their outlook, ethnic integration will remain only at the superficial level. That is, as long as individuals engage in the marketplace activities, irrespective of where those activities take place, a modicum of interpersonal communication is guaranteed. There must be a driving force from within the self to commit to a much deeper level of interaction whereby the individual sees the need to interact with the other as insider-insider, rather than, outsider-insider. There should be less talk and more actions to ensure that such encounters take place.

My contention is that, only through a close rapport with, and understanding of the other in the face-to-face communication can these individuals converge more meaningfully with the ehnic-other and avoid, or at least mitigate, the tendency to see the person in a negative light. That is, once the other is accepted as a friend, it becomes much easier to understand his or her predicament. Through anticipation and probing in our interpersonal communication, we make sense of the ethnic-other as well as our own becoming. Therefore, the articulation of positive vibes and good intentions overwhelm the contestations and the acrimony arising from ethnic differences.

In everyday experiences, interethnic communication involves spontaneous turn-taking and mutual appreciation of each other's position among individuals who choose to communicate. This contrasts with the media and academic world where not only does ethnic demonizing not recognize the individual target but such demonizing also prevents the bearer of the ethnic persona from harboring any personal appreciation for the other. Additionally, the bearer is not empowered to reverse/challenge the exchanges on the spot.

This makes it easier to cast the other in a non-reversible profile, negative or positive. As an example of the positive genre, government publications and tourist promotional material present what might be aptly described as positive profiling of wishful thoughts which privilege utopian images of harmony, cooperation, and endless civilities. Such portrayal is clearly unrealistic in perpetuating a myth. The Ministry of National Integration might have been misinformed of the differences between ethnic relations as experienced daily and the social realities propagated by Ministry officials which contain almost no sign of conflict and contestations.

This study clearly demonstrates how far fetched such images are in the everyday experiences of the ordinary Malays and Chinese whose voices are replete with not only ethnic complaints and contestations but, also, praise and appreciation. Unless this reality is clearly understood, government integration programs might not be productive and, at best, might run the risk of a basic flaw in the analysis of social diversity in Malaysia. While the Chinese are expected to learn the Malay language and indirectly know about the culture, Malays, too, must start learning about the Chinese culture, including their communicating style. A program which begins with such awareness should be designed with interpersonal communication as a focus and taught at an early age as indicated by many of my informants. However, these individuals must not be left to communicate on their own. Rather, they must be molded in such a way that, the education system they go through serves to cultivate a common desire for fraternity rather than hostility.

Culture *is* a mindset. Given that many scholars have written about the stereotypical images of Malay and Chinese behavior, one should start thinking about how

best to portray a realistic behavior of these individuals. If Malays are traditionally viewed as accommodative, passive, or indolent, we should investigate more, not speculate. If Chinese are said to be aggressive, or utilitarian, we have to understand why and in what circumstances. Interethnic communication begins with two individuals at the grass roots level, not at the governmental level. Meaning, if these individuals do not have the interest to know the ethnic-other, their mindset will never be changed. It is time that serious efforts be made to nurture that genuine interest.

References

Abdul Aziz, B. (2001, June). Siapakah Melayu? [Who is a Malay?] *Dewan Budaya*, 8-9.

Abdullah, D. (2002). *China dan Malaysia dalam arena perang dingin 1949-1974*
[Chinese and Malays in the arena of cold war 1949-1974]. Bangi: Universiti
Kebangsaan Malaysia Press.

Abdul Rahman, H. I. (2005). Sejarah politik Malaysia [The political history of Malaysia].
1965-2000. In H. I. Abdul Rahman (Ed.), *Malaysia: Sejarah kenegaraan dan
politik* [Malaysia: History of nationhood and politics]. (pp. 344-373). Kuala
Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Abraham, C. (2004). *The naked social order: The roots of racial polarisation in
Malaysia.* PJ: Pelanduk.

A. Kadir Jasin. (2004, January). Bumiputera miskin harta kerana sikap [Bumiputera poor
in asset because of attitude]. *Dewan Masyarakat*, 28-29.

Alatas, S. H. (1977). *The myth of the lazy native: A study of the image of the Malays,
Filipinos, Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the
ideology of colonial capitalism.* London: Frank Cass.

Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of
nationalism* (Rev. and extended ed., 2nd ed.). London & New York: Verso.

Anderson, L. (2006). Analytic autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,
35,* 373-395.

Ang-Lygate, M. (1996). Everywhere to go but home: On (re)(dis)(un)location. *Journal of
Gender Studies, 5,* 375-388.

Atkinson, J. M., & Heritage, J. (Eds.). (1984). *Structures of social actions: Studies in conversation analysis.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bailey, B. (1997). Communication of respect in interethnic service encounters. *Language in Society, 26,* 327-356.*

Baldwin, J. R., Perry, S. D., & Moffitt, M. A. (2004). *Communication theories for everyday life.* Boston: Pearson.

Banton, M. (1997). *Ethnic and racial consciousness* (2nd ed.). London: Longman.

Barr, M. (2006). The charade of meritocracy. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *169,* 18-22.*

Barr, M. D., & Low, J. (2005). Assimilation as multiracialism: The case of Singapore's Malays. *Asian Ethnicity, 6,* 161-182.

Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind*. New York: Ballantine.

Baxter, L. A. (2004). Relationships as dialogues. *Personal Relationships, 11*, 1-22.

Baxter, L. A., & Montgomery, B. M. (1996). *Relating: dialogues & dialectics*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Beck, C. S. (2005). Becoming the story: Narratives as collaborative, social enactment of individual, relational, and public identities. In L. M. Harter, P. M. Japp & C. S. Beck (Eds.), *Narratives, health, and healing: Communication theory, research, and practice* (pp. 61-82). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Berger, C. R. (1996). Interpersonal communication. In M. B. Salwen & D. W. Stacks (Eds.), *An integrated approach to communication theory and research* (pp.277-296). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. (1975). Some explorations in initial interactions and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research, 1,* 99-112.

Berlo, D. (1960). *The process of communication: An introduction to theory and practice.* New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston.

Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bochner, A. P. (1989). Interpersonal communication. In E. Barnouw, G. Gerbner, W. Schramam, T. L. Worth & L. Gross (Eds.), *International encyclopedia of communications* (pp. 336-340). New York: Oxford University Press.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (1998). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (3rd ed.). Boston : Allyn & Bacon.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2003). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Bormann, E. G. (1983). Rhetoric as a way of knowing: Earnest Bormann and fantasy theme analysis. In J. L. Golden, G. Berquist & W. E. Coleman (Eds.), *The rhetoric of Western thought* (pp. 431-449). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Bowen, E. S. (1964). *Return to laughter*. Garden City, NY: Double Day.

Britten, N. (1995). Qualitative research: Qualitative interviews in medical research. *British Medical Journal, 311*, 251-253.

Broeder, P. (1993). Learning to understand in interethnic communication. *Issues in Applied Linguistics, 4,* 57-89.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brubaker, R. (2004). *Ethnicity without groups.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, E. M. (1972). *The expression of ethnicity in Indonesia.* On problems of development in Southeast Asia. New York: Southeast Asia Development Advisory Group.

Byman, D. L. (2002). *Lasting solutions to ethnic conflict: Four causes of conflict stand.* Baltimore: John Hopkins.

Cartier, C. (2003). Diaspora and social restructuring in postcolonial Malaysia. In L. J. C. Ma & C. Cartier. *The Chinese diaspora: Space, place, mobility and identity* (pp. 69-96). Lanham, MA: Rowman Littlefield.

Carsten, S. A. (2005). *Histories, cultures, identities: Studies in Malaysian Chinese worlds.* Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Cashmore, E. (1994). Ethnicity. In E. Cashmore (Ed.), *Dictionary of race and ethnic relations* (3rd ed., pp.102-107). New York: Routledge.

Chang, H., & Holt, G. R. (1991). More than relationship: Chinese interaction and the principle of kuan-hsi. *Communication Quarterly, 39,* 251-271.

Chawla, D. (2003). Two journeys. *Qualitative Inquiry, 9,* 785-804.

Chen, X. P., & Chen, C. C. (2004). On the intricacies of the Chinese *guanxi*: A process model of *guanxi* development. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management, 21,* 305-324.

Chernov, J. (2003). Plural society revisited: Chinese-indigeneous relations in Southeast Asia. *Nationalism & Ethnic Politics, 9,* 103-127.

Chew, F. P. (2006). Prasangka etnik dalam sastera kebangsaan [Ethnic prejudice in national literature]. *Pemikir, 44,* 59-81.

Chia, O. P. (1997). Intertwining of social life and business strategies: Chinese businessmen in Malaysia. In M. Rutten & C. Upadhya (Eds.), *Small business entrepreneurs in Asia and Europe: Towards a comparative perspective* (pp. 147-171). New Delhi: Sage.

Chin, J. U. H. (2001). Malaysian Chinese politics in the 21st century: Fear, service and marginalisation. *Asian Journal of Political Science, 9*, 79-94.

Chin, Y. W. (2003). *Budaya dan keusahawanan Cina di Malaysia* [Chinese culture and their entrepreneurship in Malaysia]. Bangi, Selangor: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Chua, A. (2003). *World on fire: How exporting free market democracy breeds ethnic hatred and global instability*. New York: Doubleday.

Clair, R. P. (Ed.). (2003). *Expressions of ethnography: Novel approaches to qualitative methods*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Clammer, J. (1983). The straits Chinese in Melaka. In K. S. Sandhu & P. Wheatley (Eds.), *Melaka: The transformation of a Malay capital c. 1400-1980* (pp. 156-173). Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Clement, R., & Giles, H. (1994). Deconstructing the "big picture": Perspectives and layers of interethnic communication. In S.A. Deetz (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 17* (pp. 539-550). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Clifford, J. (2001). Introduction: Partial truths [Writing culture]. In P. A. Erickson & D. Murphy (Eds.), *Readings for a history of anthropological theory* (pp. 598-630). Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press.

Cohen, A. (1974). Introduction: The lesson of ethnicity. In A. Cohen (Ed.), *Urban Ethnicity* (pp. ix-xxiv). NY: Tavistock Publications.

Comber, L. (1983). *13 May 1969: A historical survey of Sino-Malay relations*. Singapore: Graham Bash.

Condit, C. M. (2006). Communication as relationality. In G. J. Shepherd, J. St. John & T. Striphas (Eds.), *Communication as...perspectives on theory* (pp. 3-12). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Condon, J., & Yousef, F. (1975). *An introduction to intercultural communication.* Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill.

Covino, W. A., & Jolliffe, D. A. (1995). An introduction to rhetoric. In W. A. Covino & D.A. Jolliffe (Eds.), *Rhetoric: Concepts, definitions, boundaries* (pp. 3-26). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Craig, R. T. (2001). Communication. In T.O. Sloane (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of rhetoric* (pp. 125-137). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Creswell, J. W. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches.* (2nd ed.) Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Crouch, H. (2001). Managing ethnic tensions through affirmative action: The Malaysian experience. In N. J. Colletta, T. G. Lim & A. Kelles-Viitanen (Eds.), *Social cohesion and conflict prevention in Asia* (pp. 225-262). Washington, DC: The World Bank.

Dahlan, H. M. (1976). An overview. In H. M. Dahlan (Ed.), *The nascent Malaysian society: Developments, trends and problems* (pp. 1-10). Kuala Lumpur: UKM.

Daniels, T. P. (2005). *Building cultural nationalism in Malaysia: Identity, representation, and citizenship*. New York: Routledge.

De Andrade, L. L. (2000). Negotiating from the inside: Constructing racial and ethnic identity in qualitative research. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 29,* 268-290.

Debord, G. (2001). The commodity as spectacle. In M. G. Durham & D. M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keyworks* (pp. 139-143). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Deetz, S. (1982). Critical interpretive research in organizational communication. *Western Journal of Speech Communication, 46,* 131-149.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2002). *The qualitative inquiry reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.). (2003). *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dervin, B. (1992). From the mind's eye of the user: The sense-making qualitative-quantitative methodology. In J. D. Glazier & R.R. Powell (Eds.), *Qualitative research in information management* (pp. 61-84). Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited Inc.

Dervin, B., & Foreman-Wernet, L. (2003). *Sense-making methodology reader: Selected writings of Brenda Dervin*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Deutsch, M. (1973). *The resolution of conflict: Constructive and destructive process.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

Deutsch, M. (1990). Sixty years of conflict. *The International Journal of Conflict Management, 1,* 237-263.

Deutsch, M., & Coleman, P. T. (Eds.). (2000). *The handbook of conflict resolution*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

DeVault, M. L. (1999). Talking and listening from women's standpoint: Feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis. In A. Bryman & R. G. Burgess (Eds.), *Qualitative research* (pp. 86-111). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Diikotter, F. (1997). Racial discourse in China: Continuities and permutations. In F. Diikotter (Ed.), *The construction of racial identities in China and Japan: Historical and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 12-33). Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Dillon, M. (1999). *China's Muslim Hui community: Migration, settlement and sects*. Richmond: Curzon.

Din, K. H. (1982). Tourism in Malaysia: Competing needs in a plural society. *Annals of Tourism Research, 9,* 453-480.

Dodd, C. H. (1998). *Dynamics of intercultural communication.* 5th ed. Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Eddy, L. (2003). Sensemaking on campus: How community college presidents frame change. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 27, 453-471.

Egan, T. (2007). Little Asia on the Hill. *The New York Times.* Retrieved January 7, 2007 from http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/07/education/edlife/07asian.html?

Eisenberg, E. (1984). Ambiguity as strategy in organizational communication. *Communication Monographs, 51*, 227-241.

Eisner, E. W. (1998). *The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice*. Upper Sadle River, NJ: Merill-Prentice Hall.

Elias, J. (2004). *Fashioning inequality: The multinational company and gendered employment in a globalizing world*. Hampshire: Ashgate.

Ellis, D. G. (1999). *Crafting society: Ethnicity, class and communication theory*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

England, K. (1994). Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *The Professional Geographer, 46,* 80-89.

Entman, R.M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication, 43,* 51-58.

Eriksen, T. H. (2002). *Ethnicity and nationalism* (2nd ed.). London: Pluto.

Eriksen, T. H. (2004). *What is anthropology*. London: Pluto Press.

Evans, L. (1973). *The communication gap: The ethics and machinery of public relations and information*. London: Charles Knight & Co Ltd.

Eyles, J. (1988). Interpreting the geographical world: Qualitative approaches in geographical research. In J. Eyles & D. Smith (Eds.), *Qualitative methods in human geography* (pp. 1-16). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Faaland, J. R., Parkinson, J. R., & Saniman, R. (1990). *Growth and ethnic inequality: Malaysia's new economic policy.* England: Chr Michelsen Institute.

Fisher, G. (1988/1997). *Mindsets: The role of culture and perception in international relations* (2nd ed.) Yarmouth, Me: Intercultural Press.

Fisher, M. (Spring 2003). Community building from the inside out: Community rural health project, Jamkhed, India. Carolina Papers. *International Health, 15,* 1-24.

Fisk, E. K. (1964). Special development problems of a plural society: A rejoinder. *The Economic Review, 40,* 121-123.

Foreman-Wernet, L., & Dervin, B. (2005). Comparing arts and popular culture experiences: Applying a common methodological framework. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law & Society, 35,* 169-187.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge & the discourse of language*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Foucault, M. (1988). *Politics, philosophy, culture: Interviews and other writings. 1977-1984.* In L. D., Kitzman (Ed.), (A. Sheridan et al., Trans.). New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (2000). *Power: The essential works of Foucault, Vol. 3.* J.D. Faubion (Ed.) (pp. 349-364). New York: New Press.

Fontana, A., & Frey, J. H. (2000). The interview: From structured questions to negotiated text. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln. (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp.645-672). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Freedman, A. L. (2001). The effect of government policy and institutions on Chinese overseas acculturation: The case of Malaysia. *Modern Asian Studies, 12, 411-440.*

Freedman, A. L. (2003). Malaysia: The Malay-Chinese conflict. In J. R. Rudolph Jr. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of modern ethnic conflicts* (pp. 119-126). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Herder and Herder.

Frijda, N. H. (2000). The Psychologists' point of view. In M. Lewis & J. M. Haviland-Jones (Eds.), *Handbook of emotions* (2nd ed., pp. 59-74). New York: Guilford.

Fryer, D. W. (1965). Economic development in Malaya. *Economic Development and Cultural Change, 13,* 492-497.

Furnivall, J.S. (1948/1956). *Colonial policy and practice: A comparative study of Burma and Netherlands India*. New York: New York University Press.

Gannon, M. J. (2004). *Understanding global cultures: Metaphorical journeys through 28 nations, clusters of nations, and continents*. (3rd ed., pp. 241-254). London: Sage.

Gao, G., & Ting-Toomey, S. (1998). *Communicating effectively with the Chinese*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. New York: Basic Books.

George, C. (2006). *Contentious journalism and the Internet: Towards democratic discourse in Malaysia and Singapore.* Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Gibson, M.K., & Papa, M.J. (2000). The mud, the blood, and the beer guys: Organizational osmosis in blue-collar work groups. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 28,* 68-88.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age* (pp. 187-201). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Giles, H., Coupland, N., & Coupland, J. (1991). Accommodation theory: Communication, contexts and consequences. In H. Giles, N. Coupland & J. Coupland (Eds.), *Context of accommodation: Developments in applied linguistics* (pp. 1-68). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Givon, T. (1989). *Mind, code, and context: Essays in pragmatics.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Gladney, D. C. (1991). *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic nationalism in the People's Republic*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gladney, D. C. (1998a). Clashed civilizations? Muslim and Chinese identities in the PRC. In D. C. Gladney (Ed.), *Making majorities: Constituting the nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States* (pp. 106-131). Standford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Gladney, D. C. (1998b). Getting rich is not so glorious: Contrasting perspectives on prosperity among Muslims and Han in China. In R. W. Hefner (Ed.), *Market*

cultures: Society and morality in the new Asian capitalism (pp. 104-125).
Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Gladney, D. C. (2004). *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, minorities, and other subaltern subjects*. London: Hurst & Co.

Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction* (2nd ed.). New York: Longman.

Glesne, C., & Peshkin, A. (1991). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. New York: Longman.

Goffman, E. (1955). On face-work: An analysis of ritual elements in social interaction. *Psychiatry, 18,* 213-231.

Goffman, E. (1956). The nature of deference and demeanor. *American Anthropologist, 58,* 475-499.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* New York: Anchor Books. Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. New York: Doubleday, Anchor.

Golden, J. L., Berquist, G. F., & Coleman, W. E. (Eds.). (1983). *The rhetoric of Western thought*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company.

Gorden, R. L. (1992). *Basic interviewing skills*. Itasca, IL: F. E. Peacock.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from prison notebooks.* (D. Boothman, Trans. & Ed.). London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Gramsci, A. (2001). (i) History of the subaltern classes; (ii) The concept of "ideology";
(iii) Cultural themes: Ideological material. In M. G. Durham & D. M. Kellner
(Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keyworks* (pp. 43-47). Oxford: Blackwell.

Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*, *78*,
1360-1380.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1980). *Effective evaluation*. San Franscisco: Jossey-Bass
Publishers.

Gudykunst, W.B. (1986). Ethnicity, types of relationship, and intraethnic and interethnic
uncertainty reduction. In Y.Y. Kim (Ed.), *Interethnic communication: Current
research* (pp. 201-224). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Gudykunst, W.B. (2001). *Asian American ethnicity and communication*. Thousand Oaks,
CA: Sage.

Gudykunst, W.B. (2003). *Cross-cultural and intercultural communication*. Thousand
Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gumperz, J.J. (1978). The conversational analysis of interethnic communication. In E. L.
Ross (Ed.), *Interethnic communication* (pp. 13-31). Athens, GA: The University
of Georgia Press.

Gumperz, J. J. (2001). Interethnic communication. In M. Wetherell, S. Taylor & S. J.
Yates (Eds.), *Discourse theory and practice: A reader* (pp. 138-149). Thousand
Oaks, CA: Sage.

Gumperz, J. J. (2005). Interethnic communication. In S.F. Kiesling & C.B. Paulston (Eds.), *Intercultural discourse and communication: The essential readings* (pp. 33-44). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action*. (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Boston: Beacon Press.

Hall, E.T. (1959). *The silent language*. New York: Double Day.

Hall, E.T. (1966). *The hidden dimension*. New York: Double Day.

Hall, E.T. (1976/1981). *Beyond culture*. Garden City, New York: Anchor/DoubleDay.

Hall, E.T. (1995). *West of the thirties: Discoveries among the Navajo and Hopi*. New York: Doubleday.

Hall, E.T., & Hall, M. (1990). *Understanding cultural differences*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.

Hall, E. T., & Whyte, W. F. (1966). *Intercultural communication: A guide to men of action*. In A. G. Smith (Ed.), *Readings in the codes of human interaction* (pp. 567-576)*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Hall, S. (2001). Encoding/Decoding. In M.G.Durham & D.M. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and cultural studies: Keyworks* (pp.166-176).Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Haque, M.S. (2003). The role of the state in managing ethnic tensions in Malaysia: A critical discourse. *American Behavioral Scientist, 47,* 240-266.

Hassan, Ahmad. (2004, February). Keluh-kesah orang Melayu [Malay anxieties]. *Dewan Masyarakat*, 34-35.

Hecht, M.L. (1993). 2002—A research odyssey: Toward the development of a communication theory of identity. *Communication Monographs, 60*, 76-81.

Hecht, M. L., Larkey, L.K., & Johnson, J.N. (1992). African American and European American perceptions of problematic issues in interethnic communication effectiveness. *Human Communication Research, 19,* 209-236.

Hecht, M. L., Warren, J. R. Jung, E., & Krieger, J. L. (2005). The communication theory of identity: Development, theoretical perspective, and future directions. In W. B., Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 257-278). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Heng, P. K. (1988). *Chinese politics in Malaysia: A history of the Malaysian Chinese Association*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Heng, P.K. (1998). Chinese responses to Malay hegemony in Peninsular Malaysia (1957-1996). In Zawawi Ibrahim. (Ed.), *Cultural contestations: Mediating identities in a changing Malaysian society* (pp. 51-83). London: ASEAN Academic.

Hilley, J. (2001). *Malaysia: Mahathirism, hegemony and the new opposition*. London: Zed Books.

Hirschman, C. (1975). *Ethnic and social stratification in Peninsular Malaysia*. Washington: American Sociological Association.

Hofstede, G. H. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Hofstede, G. H. (1997). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind* (rev. ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Holstein, J.A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2002). Active interviewing. D. Weinberg. (Ed.),

    Qualitative research methods (pp. 112-126). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

hooks, b. (2001). Eating the other: Desire and resistance. In M. G. Durham & D. M.

    Kellner (Ed.), *Media and cultural studies: Keyworks* (pp. 424-438). Oxford:

    Blackwell.

hooks, b. (2003). *Rock my soul: Black people and self-esteem*. New York: Atria Books.

Horowitz, D. L. (1989). Cause and consequence in public policy theory: Ethnic policy

    and system transformation in Malaysia. *Policy Sciences, 22,* 249-287.

Hu, H. C. (1944). The Chinese concept of "face". *American Anthropologist*, *46*, 45-64.

Idris, Z. (2001, January). Toleransi mengurangkan diskriminasi [Tolerance reduces

    discrimination]. *Dewan Budaya*, 40-41.

Jabatan Perpaduan Negara [Department of National Integration]. (1994). Kajian

    perpaduan Negara dan penggunaan tenaga manusia dalam pasaran buruh: Deraf

    laporan awal [National integration study and human resource utilization in the

    labor market: Preliminary Report]. Minden, P. Pinang: Center for Policy Research

    Universiti Sains Malaysia.

Jacelon, C. S., & O'Dell, K. K. (2005). Analyzing qualitative data. *Urologic Nursing, 25,*

    217-220.

Jacoby, T. (Ed.). (2004). *Reinventing the melting pot: The new immigrants and what it*

    means to be American. New York: Basic Books.

Jefferson, G. (1979). A technique for inviting laughter and its subsequent acceptance/declination. In Psathas, G. (Ed.), *Conversation analysis: The study of talk-in-interaction* (pp. 79-96). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Jeong, H. W. (1999). Theories of conflict. *Encyclopedia of violence, peace, and conflict, 3,* 511-517.

Josselson, R., & Lieblich, A. (Eds.). (1999). *Making meaning of narratives in the narrative study of lives.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kagitcibasi, C. (1994). A critical appraisal of individualism and collectivism: Toward a new formation. In U. Kim, H. C. Triandis, C. Kagitbasi, S. C. Choi, & G. Yoon (Eds.), *Individualism and collectivism: Theory, method, and applications* (pp. 52-65). New Park, CA: Sage.

Kementerian Perpaduan Negara dan Pembangunan Masyarakat [Ministry of National Integration and Social Development]. (1995). *Intisari program dan aktiviti* [Summary of programs and activities]. Kuala Lumpur: Watan Sdn. Bhd.

Khoo, B. T. (2006). Ethnic structure, inequalities and public sector governance in Malaysia. In Y. Bangura (Ed.), *Ethnic inequalities and public sector governance* (pp. 178-202). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Khoo, K.H. (2004). *Abdullah administration: Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his government from Sun Tzu's perspective.* Subang Jaya: Pelanduk.

Khoo, K. K. (2005). *100 years the University of Malaya.* Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press.

Kilbourn, B. (2006). The qualitative doctoral dissertation proposal. *Teachers College Record*, *108*, 529-576.

Kim, M. S. (2002). *Non-Western perspectives on human communication: Implications for theory and practice.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kim, Y. Y. (1986). Introduction: A communication approach to interethnic relations. In Y. Y. Kim (Ed.), *Interethnic communication: Current research* (pp. 9-18). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kim, Y. Y. (1994). Interethnic Communication: The context and the behavior. In S. A. Deetz (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 17* (pp. 511-538). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kim, Y. Y. (1997). The behavior-context interface in interethnic communication. In J. Owen (Ed.), *Context and human behavior* (pp. 261-291). Reno, NV: Context Press.

Kim, Y. Y. (2001). Mapping the domain of intercultural communication: An overview. In W. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 24* (pp. 139-158). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kim, Y. Y. (2005). Association and dissociation: A contextual theory of interethnic communication. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 323-349). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kimmel, P. R. (2000). Culture and conflict. In M. Deustch & P. T. Coleman (Eds.), *The handbook of conflict resolution* (pp. 453-474). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publication.

Kochman, T. (1981). *Black and white styles in conflict*. Chicago: The University of

Chicago Press.

Kochman, T. (1986). Black verbal dueling strategies in interethnic communication. In Y.

Y. Kim (Ed.), *Interethnic communication: Current research* (pp. 136-157).

Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kua, K. S. (1990). National culture: A just demand or chauvinism? In K. S. Kua (Ed.),

National culture and democracy (pp. 81-91). Petaling Jaya: Kersani Penerbit Sdn.

Bhd.

Kwong, P., & Miscevic, D. (Eds.). (2005). *Chinese America: The untold story of

America's oldest new community.* New York: New Press.

Law, K. Y. (2003) Civic disobedience of Malay Muslims in Post-September 11th

Singapore. *Society for International Development, 46,* 107-111.

Lee, A. (1972). The Chinese and Malay Dilemmas in Malaysia. *Pacific Community, 3*,

561-571.

Lee, K. H. (2004). Differing perspectives on integration and nation-building in Malaysia.

In L. Suryadinata (Ed.), *Ethnic relations and nation-building in Southeast Asia:

The case of the ethnic Chinese* (pp. 82-108). Singapore: Institute of Southeast

Asian Studies.

Lee, K. H., & Tan, C. B. (Eds.). (2001). *The Chinese in Malaysia.* Oxford: Oxford

University Press.

Leong, H. L. (2003). Ethnicity and class in Malaysia. In C. MacKerras (Ed.), *Ethnicity in

Asia* (pp. 88-100). London: Routledge Curzon.

Li, T. (1989). *Malays in Singapore: Culture, economy, and ideology*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

Lily Zubaidah, R. (1998). *The Singapore dilemma: The political and educational marginality of the Malay community*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ling, L. S., Kok, W. K., Yeah, M. O. K., Lim, L. L., Chua, D., & Chua, J. M. (1988). *The future of Malaysian Chinese.* Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Chinese Association.

Lipman, J. N. (1997). *Familiar strangers: A history of Muslims in Northwest China.* Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.

Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Lu, X. (1998). An interface between individualistic and collectivistic orientations in Chinese cultural values and social relations. *The Howard Journal of Communication, 9,* 91-107.

Lyman, S. M. (1973). Review of Betty Lee Sung: The story of the Chinese in America. *The Journal of Ethnic Studies, 1,* 71-72.

Maeda, K. (1967). *Alor Janggus: A Chinese community in Malaya*. S. H. Gluck (Trans.). Kyoto: Asia Institute Books.

Mahathir, M. (1970/1981). *The Malay dilemma* (2nd ed.). Kuala Lumpur: Federal Publications.

Mahathir, M. (1992). *Towards a united Malaysian nation*. Published speech presented at the Shangri-La Hotel, Kuala Lumpur (pp. 1-10). Kuala Lumpur: Ministry of Information.

Mahathir, M. (1993). Malaysia: the way forward. In Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid (Ed.), *Malaysia's vision 2020: Understanding the concept, implications and challenges* (pp. 403-420). Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications.

Majlis Perundingan Ekonomi Malaysia. (1991). *Laporan Majlis Perundingan Ekonomi Negara: Dasar Ekonomi untuk Pembangunan Negara (DEPAN)* [Report of the National Economic Council: Economic Policies for National Development]. Kuala Lumpur: Government Printers.

Malaysia. (2006). *Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2011*. Kuala Lumpur: Government Printers.

Mansor, M. N. (1999). Crossing ethnic borders in Malaysia: Measuring the fluidity of ethnic identity and group formation. *Akademika, 55*, 61-83.

Martin, J. N., & Nakayama, T. K. (1997). *Intercultural communication in contexts*. Mountainview, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co.

Martin, J. N., & Nakayama, T. K. (1999). Thinking dialectically about culture and communication. *Communication Theory, 9,* 1-25.

Mazlan, N. (1998, September). Budi bahasa orang Melayu [Malay courtesy/manners]. *Dewan Budaya*, 47.

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

McCarthy, S. (2005). If Allah wills it: Integration, isolation and Muslim authenticity in Yunnan Province in China. *Religion, State & Society, 33, 2,* 121-136.

McCarthy, S. N. (2003). The rhetoric of benevolent despotism: The political theory of tyranny in Singapore and Burma. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois.

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self, & society: From the standpoint of a social behaviorist.* Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Means, G. P. (1978). Public policy toward religion in Malaysia. *Pacific Affairs, 51,* 384-405.

Merton, R. K. (1972). Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. *American Journal of Sociology, 78,* 9-47.

Merton, R. K. (1995). The Thomas theorem and the Matthew effect. *Social Forces, 74,* 379-424.

Metts, S., & Planalp, S. (2002). Emotional Communication. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly. (Eds.), *Handbook of interpersonal communication* (3rd ed., pp. 339-373). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Miller, N. K. (1991). *Getting personal: Feminist occasions and other autobiographical acts.* New York: Routledge.

Morgan, D. (1988). *Focus groups as qualitative research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Motley, M. T. (1990). On whether one can(not) not communicate: An examination via traditional communication postulates. *Western Journal of Speech Communication, 54,* 1-20.

Murphy, A. G. (1998). Hidden transcripts of flight attendant resistance. *Management Communication Quarterly, 11,* 499-535.

Murphy, A. G. (2001). The flight attendant dilemma: An analysis of communication and sensemaking during in-flight emergencies. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 29,* 30-53.

Nagata, J. (1979). *Malaysian mosaic: Perspectives from a poly-ethnic society.* Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press.

Nagata, J. (2004). Elusive democracry: Appropriation of 'rights' ideologies in Malaysian ethnic and religious political discourse. In S. J. Henders (Ed.), *Democratization and identity: Regimes and ethnicities in East and Southeast Asia* (pp. 225-251). Lanham, MD: Lexington.

Nah, A. M. (2003). Negotiating indigenous identity in postcolonial Malaysia: Beyond being 'not quite/not Malay'. *Social Identities, 9,* 511-534.

National Operations Council. (1969). *The 13 May tragedy: A report.* Kuala Lumpur: NOC.

Noran Fauziah, Y., Teh, Y. K., & Salma, I. (1987). Faktor-faktor yang berkaitan dengan perhubungan kaum: Kes UUM [Factors concerning ethnic relations: A case of UUM)] Seminar Kebangsaan Mengenai Perpaduan [National Seminar on Integration]. 26 - 28 March. Sintok: UUM.

Oatley, K. (1996). Emotions: Communications to the self and others. In R. Harre & W. G. Perrott (Eds.), *The Emotions: Social, Cultural and Biological Dimensions* (pp. 312-316). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ojha, A. K. (2005). Sensemaking and identity development: Different fields, similar processes, but how? *Journal of Intercultural Communication, 10*, 1-8. Retrieved 7 May, 2006 from www.immi/se/intercultural

Oliver, R. T. (1995). "Culture and rhetoric". In W. A. Covino & D.A. Jolliffe (Eds.), *Rhetoric: Concepts, definitions, boundaries* (pp. 353-363). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. Ong, W. (1982). *Orality and literacy*. London & New York: Methuen.

Orbe, M. P. (1995). African American communication research: Toward a deeper understanding of interethnic communication. *Western Journal of Communication, 59,* 61-78.

Orbe, M. P., & Harris, T. (2001). *Interracial communication: Theory into practice.* Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Osman, C. A. (2002). *Preaching the non-Muslim Chinese in Malaysia.* Kuala Lumpur: International Islamic University Malaysia.

Parekh, B. (1998). Equality in a multicultural society. *Citizenship Studies, 2,* 397-411.

Parks, M. R. (1981). Ideology of interpersonal communication: Off the couch and into the world. In M. Burgoon (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook, 5,* 79-108. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.

Park, R. E. (2000). The nature of race relations. In L. Back & J. Solomos (Eds.), *Theories of race and racism: A reader* (pp. 105-112). New York: Routledge.

Patterson, O. (1975). Context and choice in ethnic allegiance: A theoretical framework and Carribean case study. In N. Glazer & D. P. Maynihan (Eds.), *Ethnicity: Theory and experience* (pp. 305-349). Cambridge. MA: Harvard University Press.

Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pearce, W. B. (2005). The coordinated management of meaning (CMM). In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 35-54). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Peters, J. D. (1999). *Speaking into the air: A history of the idea of communication.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Pike, K. L. (1966). Etic and emic standpoints for the description of behavior. In A. G. Smith (Ed.), *Communication and culture* (pp. 152-163). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Pike, K. L. (1954/1967). *Language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behavior* (2nd ed.). The Hague: Mouton.

Pinnington, A. (2004). Organizational culture: Liberation or entrapment. In D. Tourish & O.Hargie (Eds.), *Key issues in organizational communication* (pp. 205-219). London: Routledge.

Porter, L. W. (1996). Forty years of organization studies: Reflections from a micro perspective. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 41,* 262-269.

Potter, J. (1996). *Representing reality: Discourse, rhetoric and social construction.* London: Sage.

Prado, C. G. (2000). *Starting with Foucault: An introduction to genealogy* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Putnam, L. L., & Holmer, M. (1992). Framing, reframing, and issue development. In L. L. Putnam & M. E. Roloff (Eds.), *Communication and negotiation* (pp. 128-155). Newbury, CA: Sage.

Pye, L. (1968). *The spirit of Chinese politics: A psychocultural study of the authority crisis in political development*. Cambridge: Cambridge: MIT.

Rabushka, A. (1973). *Race and politics in urban Malaya.* Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.

Rahim, S. (2005). Approaches to community development in a multicultural setting. In K. Muhammad Kamarul & H. Zaharah (Eds.), *Readings on ethnic relations in a multicultural society: Promoting national unity and the practice of noble values* (pp. 64-68). Selangor: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press.

Rawlins, W. K. (1998). Theorizing public and private domains and practices of communication: Introductory concerns. *Communication Theory, 8,* 369-380.

Raybeck, D. (1980). Ethnicity and accommodation: Malay-Chinese relations in Kelantan, Malaysia. *Ethnic Groups, 2*, 241-268.

Reid, A. (2004). Understanding Melayu [Malay] as a source of diverse modern identities. In T. P. Barnard (Ed.), *Contesting Malayness: Malay identity across boundaries* (pp. 1-24). Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Rich, A. (1974). *Interracial communication*. Pittsburgh, PA: Intercultural Communications Network.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis* (Qualitative Research Methods Series, Vol. 30). Newbury Park: Sage.

Ross, E. L. (1978). Interethnic communication: An overview. In E. L. Ross (Ed.), *Interethnic communication* (pp. 1-12). Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (1995). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: The art of hearing data*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Rusen, J. (2004). How to overcome ethnocentrism: Approaches to a culture of recognition by history in the twenty-first century. *History and Theory, Theme 43,* 118-129.

Rustam, S. (1976). Melayu raya as a Malay 'nation of intent'. In H. M. Dahlan (Ed.), *The nascent Malaysian society: Developments, trends and problems* (pp. 11-25). Kuala Lumpur: UKM.

Said, E. (1997). *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world* (rev. ed.). New York: Vintage Books.

Samovar, L. A., & Porter, R. E. (1988). *Intercultural communication: A reader* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Sandhu, K. S. (1983). Chinese colonization in Melaka. In K. S. Sandhu & P. Wheatley (Eds.), *Melaka: The transformation of a Malay capital c. 1400-1980* (pp. 93-136). Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.

Sanger, P. C. (2003). Living and writing feminist ethnographies: Threads in a quilt stitched from the heart. In R. P. Clair (Ed.), *Expressions of ethnography: Novel*

approaches to qualitative methods (pp. 29-44). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Sanusi, O. (1989). *Ikatan etnik dan kelas di Malaysia* [Ethnic and class solidarity in Malaysia]. Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Savage, V. R. (1984). *Western impressions of nature and landscape in Southeast Asia.* Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Schegloff, E. A. (1992). In another context. In A. Duranti & C. Goodwin (Eds.), *Rethinking context: Language as an interactive phenomenon* (pp. 191-228). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schoenberger, E. (2000). Social and cultural dimensions of Americanness: A new geography of identity? In Clark, G. L., Feldman, M. P. & Getler, M. S (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of economic geography* (pp. 315-330). Oxford: OUP.

Schwartz, S. (1990). Individualism-collectivism: Critique and proposed refinements. *Journal of Cross-cultural psychology, 21,* 139-157.

Scollon, R., & Scollon, S. B. K. (1981). *Narrative, literacy, and face in interethnic communication.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Scollon, R., & Scollon, S.W. (1994). *Intercultural communication.* Cambridge: Blackwell.

Scott, J.C. (1990). *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shamsul, A.B. (1996). Nations-of-intent in Malaysia. In S. Tonnesson & H. Antlov (Eds.), *Asian forums of the nation* (pp. 323-347). Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.

Shamsul, A.B. (1998a). "Ethnicity, class, culture or identity?" Competing paradigms in Malaysian studies. *Akademika, 53*, 33-60.

Shamsul, A. B. (1998b). Debating about identity in Malaysia: A discourse analysis. In Zawawi Ibrahim. (Ed.), *Cultural contestations: Mediating identities in a changing Malaysian society* (pp. 17-50). London: ASEAN Academic.

Shamsul, A. B. (1998c). Bureaucratic management of identity in a modern state: "Malayness" in postwar Malaysia. In D. R. Gladney (Ed.), *Making majorities: Constituting the nation in Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Fiji, Turkey, and the United States* (pp. 135-150). CA: Stanford University Press.

Shamsul, A. B. (2001a). 'Malay' and 'Malayness' in Malaysia reconsidered: A critical review. *Communal/Plural, 9,* 69-80.

Shamsul, A. B. (2001b, May). Perpaduan: Satu konsep, pelbagai tafsiran [Integration: One concept, various intepretations]. *Dewan Budaya*, 8-9.

Shamsul, A. B. (2004a). Texts and collective memories: The construction of "Chinese" and "Chineseness" from the perspective of a Malay. In L. Suryadinata (Ed.), *Ethnic relations and nation-building in Southeast Asia: The case of the ethnic Chinese* (pp. 109-144). Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Shamsul, A. B. (2004b). A history of an identity, an identity of a history: the idea and practice of 'Malayness' in Malaysia reconsidered. In T. P. Barnard (Ed.), *Contesting Malayness: Malay identity across boundaries* (pp. 135-148). Singapore: Singapore University Press.

Shamsul, A. B. (2005). Making sense of national unity in Malaysia: "Break-down" versus "break-out" perspectives. In K. Muhammad Kamarul & H. Zaharah (Eds.), *Readings on ethnic relations in a multicultural society: Promoting national unity and the practice of noble values* (pp. 3-11). Selangor: Universiti Putra Malaysia Press.

Silcock, T. H. (1963a). Communal and party structure. In T. H. Silcock & E. K. Fisk (Eds.), *The political economy of independent Malaya: A case-study in development* (pp. 1-27). Singapore: Eastern University Press.

Silcock, T. H. (1963b). General review of economic policy. In T. H. Silcock & E. K. Fisk (Eds.), *The political economy of independent Malaya: A case-study in development* (pp. 242-275). Singapore: Eastern University Press.

Silcock, T. H., & Fisk, E. K. (Eds.). (1963). *The political economy of independent Malaya: A case-study in development*. Singapore: Eastern University Press.

Simon, H. A. (1982). *Models of bounded rationality*. Cambridge: MIT.

Simonsen, S. G. (2005). Addressing ethnic divisions in post-conflict institution-building: Lessons from recent cases. *Security Dialogue, 36*, 297-318.

Singh, R., Jayant, L., & Martohardjono, G. (2005). Communication in a multilingual society: Some missed opportunities. In In S. F. Kiesling & C. B. Paulston (Eds.), *Intercultural discourse and communication: The essential readings* (pp. 45-57). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Smith, M. E. (1978). The case of disappearing ethnics. In E. L. Ross (Ed.), *Interethnic communication* (pp. 63-77). Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press.

Smith, T. E. (1964). Immigration and permanent settlement of Chinese and Indians in Malaya: And the future growth of the Malay and Chinese communities. In C. D. Cowan (Ed.), *The economic development of South-East Asia: Studies in economic history and political economy* (pp. 174-85). London: Allen & Unwin.

Sowell, T. (1996). *Migrations and cultures: A world view*. New York: Basic Books.

Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the subaltern speak? In C. Nelson & L. Gross (Eds.), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 217-313). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.

Stage, C. W., & Mattson, M. (2003). Ethnographic interviewing as contextualized conversation. In R. P. Clair (Ed.), *Expressions of ethnography: Novel approaches in qualitative methods* (pp. 97-106). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Steinberg, S. (1981). *The ethnic myth: Race, ethnicity, and class in America*. New York: Atheneum.

Steinfatt, T., & Christophel, D. M. (1996). Intercultural communication. In M. B. Salwen & D.W. Stacks (Eds.), *An integrated approach to communication theory and research* (pp.317-334). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

St. John, J., Striphas, T., & Shepherd, G.J. (2006). Introduction: Taking a stand on theory. In G. J. Shepherd, J. St. John & T. Striphas (Eds.), *Communication as…perspectives on theory* (pp. xi-xx). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stoney, B. O. (1989). The Malays of British Malaya. In A. Wright. (Ed.), *Twentieth Century impressions of British Malaya* (pp. 131-137). Singapore: Graham Bash.

Suryadinata, L. (Ed.). (2004). *Ethnic relations and nation-building in Southeast Asia: The case of the ethnic Chinese*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Syed Husin, A. (Ed.). (1984). *Ethnicity, class and development Malaysia*. Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J.C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. C. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), *The social psychology of intergroup relations* (pp. 33-53). Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. (1986). The social identity theory of group behavior. In S. Worchell & W. Austin (Eds.), *Psychology of intergroup relations* (2nd ed., pp. 7-17). Chicago, IL: Nelson Hall.

Tan, C. B. (1979). Baba-Chinese, non-Baba-Chinese and Malays: A note on ethnic interaction in Melaka. *The Southeast Asian Journal of Social Sciences, 7,* 20-29.

Tan, C. B. (1982). Ethnic relations in Malaysia. In D. Y. H. Wu (Ed.), *Ethnicity and interpersonal interaction* (pp. 35-62). Singapore: Maruzen Asia.

Tan, C. B. (1983). Chinese religion in Malaysia: A general view. *Asian Folklore Studies, 42,* 217-252.

Tan, C. B. (1984). Acculturation, assimilation and integration: The case of the Chinese. In A. Syed Husin (Ed.), *Ethnicity, class and development Malaysia* (pp. 189-211). Kuala Lumpur: Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia.

Tan, C. B. (1988a). *The Baba of Melaka: Culture and identity of a Chinese Peranakan community in Malaysia.* Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications.

Tan, C. B. (1988b). Ethnic relations project: The Hui Hui (Chinese Muslims) in Terengganu. Kuala Lumpur: Institute of Advanced Studies University of Malaya.

Tan, C. B. (2000a). Socio-cultural diversities and identities. In K. H. Lee & C. B. Tan (Eds.), *The Chinese in Malaysia* (pp. 31-71). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tan, C. B. (2000b). Ethnic identities and national identities: Some examples from Malaysia. *Identities, 6,* 441-480.

Tan, C. B. (2002). *Chinese minority in a Malay state: The case of Terengganu in Malaysia*. Singapore: Eastern University Press.

Tan, C. B. (2004). *Chinese overseas: Comparative cultural issues*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Tan, E. K. B. (2001). From sojourners to citizens: Managing the ethnic Chinese minority in Indonesia and Malaysia. *Ethnic and Racial Studies, 24,* 949-978.

Tan, T. J., Ho, W. F., & Tan, J. L. (2005). *The Chinese Malaysian contribution.* Kuala Lumpur: Center for Malaysian Chinese Studies.

Tannen, D. (1984). *Conversational style: Analyzing talk among friends*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Taylor, S. J., & Bogdan, R. (1984*). Introduction to qualitative research methods: The search for meaning* (2nd ed.). New York: John Wiley.

Teo, K. S. (2003). *The Peranakan Chinese of Kelantan: A study of the culture, language and communication of an assimilated group in Malaysia*. London: Asean Academic Press.

Thock, K. P. (2005). *Ketuanan politik Melayu: Pandangan kaum Cina* [Malay political

    hegemony: Chinese views]. Kuala Lumpur: Universiti Malaya Press.

Thomas, R. M. (2003). *Blending qualitative & quantitative research methods in theses*

    and dissertations. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

Ting, C. P. (1976). Some problems of Chinese assimilation in Peninsular Malaysia. In H.

    M. Dahlan (Ed.), *The nascent Malaysian society: Developments, trends and*

    problems (pp. 27-38). Kuala Lumpur: UKM.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1985). Toward a theory of conflict and culture. In W. B. Gudykunst, L.

    Stewart, & S. Ting-Toomey (Eds.), *Communication, culture, and organizational*

    processes (pp. 71-86). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1986). Conflict communication styles in Black and White subjective

    culture. In Y.Y. Kim (Ed.), *Interethnic communication: Current research* (pp. 75-

    88). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). Intercultural conflict styles: A face negotiation theory. In Y. Y.

    Kim & W. B. Gudykunst (Eds.), *Theories in intercultural communication* (pp.

    213-238). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1993). Communicative resourcefulness: An identity negotiation theory.

    In R. L. Wiseman & J. Koester (Eds.), *Intercultural communication competence*

    (pp. 72-111). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1999). *Communicating across cultures*. New York: Guilford.

Ting-Toomey, S. (2005). Identity-negotiation theory: Crossing cultural boundaries. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Theorizing about intercultural communication* (pp. 211-233). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Ting-Toomey, S., & Oetzel, J. G. (2001). *Managing intercultural conflict effectively*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Toale, M. C., & McCroskey, J. C. (2001). Ethnocentrism and trait communication apprehension as predictors of interethnic communication and use of relational maintenance strategies in interethnic communication. *Communication Quarterly, 49,* 70-83.

Toynbee, A. J. (1934). *A study of history*. London: Oxford University Press.

Tracy, S. J. (2000). Becoming a character for commerce: Emotion labor, self-subordination, and discursive construction of identity in a total institution. *Management Communication Quarterly, 14,* 90-128.

Tsang, E. W. K. (1998). Can *guanxi* be a source of sustained competitive advantage for doing business in China? *Academy of Management Executive, 12*, 64-73.

Tunku Abdul Rahman, P. A. (1969). *May 13: Before and after*. Kuala Lumpur: Utusan Melayu Press.

Valentine, G. (2005). Tell me about…: Using interviews as a research methodology. In R. Flowerdew & D. Martin (Eds.), *Methods in human geography: A guide for students doing a research project*. (2nd ed., pp. 110-127). Harlow, England: Pearson: Prentice Hall.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2000). Discourse and access. In R. Phillipson. (Ed.), *Rights to language: Equity, power and education* (pp. 73-78). London: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Wang Ma, R. (2005). Shifting identities: Chinese Muslims in Malaysia. *Asian Ethnicities, 6,* 89-107.

Watson, C. W. (1996). The construction of the post-colonial subject in Malaysia. In S. Tonnesson & H. Antlov (Eds.), *Asian forums of the nation* (pp. 297-322). Richmond, Surrey: Curzon.

Watson, J. S. (2001). Making sense of the stories of experience: Methodology for research and teaching. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science, 42,* 137-148.

Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H., & Jackson, D.D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes.* New York: W.W. Norton.

Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. H., & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: principles of problem formation and problem resolution.* New York: Norton.

Wee, V., Jacobsen, M., & Tiong, C. W. (2006). Positioning strategies of Southeast Asian Chinese entrepreneurs. *Journal of Contemporary Asia, 36,* 364-383.

Wee, H. C., & Wee, B. (1998). *The virtual Malacca story*. Kuala Lumpur: Purple Production Sdn. Bhd.

Weick, K. E. (1969). *The social psychology of organizing*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Weick, K. E. (1979). *The social psychology of organizing.* (2nd ed.). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Weick, K. E. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weick, K. E., Sutcliffe, K. M., & Obstfeld, D. (2005). Organizing and the process of sensemaking. *Organization Science, 16,* 409-421.

Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative research interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Wilder, C. (1978). From the interactional view—A conversation with Paul Watzlawick. *Journal of Communication, 28,* 35-45.

Wilson, P. J. (1967). A *Malay village and Malaysia: Social values and rural development*. New Haven: Hraf Press.

Winzeler, R. L. (1985). *Ethnic relations in Kelantan: A study of the Chinese and Thai as ethnic minorities in a Mala*y *state*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wolcott, H. F. (2005). *The art of fieldwork* (2nd ed.). Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Worden, N. (2005). 'Where it all began': The representation of Malaysian heritage in Melaka. *Journal of Heritage Studies*, *7, 3,* 199-218.

Wu, D. (1982a). *The Chinese in Papua New Guinea, 1880-1980*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.

Wu, D. (1982b). Ethnic relations and ethnicity in a city-state: Singapore. In D.Y. H.Wu (Ed.), *Ethnicity and interpersonal interaction* (pp.13-36). Singapore: Maruzen Asia.

Young, Jr. A. A. (2004). Experiences in ethnocgraphic interviewing about race: The inside and outside of it. In M. Bulmer & J. Solomos (Eds.), *Researching race and racism* (pp. 187-202). New York: Routledge.

Yousef, F. S. (1978). Communication patterns: Some aspects of nonverbal behavior in intercultural communication. In E. L. Ross (Ed.), *Interethnic Communication* (pp. 49-62). Athens: The University of Georgia Press.

Zawawi, I. (Ed.). (1998). *Cultural contestations: Mediating identities in a changing Malaysian society*. London: ASEAN Academic.

Zuraidi, I. (1991). *The rhetoric of racial harmony: An analysis of presidential addresses of three multiracial leaders of the Alliance Party on the issues of racial harmony and independence of Malaya, 1955-1957*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Ohio.

Appendix A

Interview Outline/Topics

A. Demographic Information of respondents
(For research profiling purposes only)

1. Ethnicity   Malay (   ) Chinese (   ) Mixed heritage (   )
2. Gender   Male   (   ) Female (   )
3. Age   18 and above: please specify (   )
4. Education   Please indicate: _____

B. Content Outline

1. Individual experience: past and present.

    a. Reminiscence/recall - describe everyday experiences in Malaysia. Talk

        about worst/best experiences and explain why.

2. Outcome/Reflection:

    a. How such experiences influenced the individuals.

    b. Describe the different levels of interaction.

3. Action: How respondents overcome the difficulties/challenges encountered in

    communicating with other ethnic individuals.

4. Construction of the self and the other:

    a. How they view/describe selves.

    b. How they describe/define the "other" in everyday experience.

5. Assumptions concerning ethnic integration:

    a. What they think about efforts to promote ethnic integration in Malaysia.

    b. Share the different levels of ethnic experience/promotion, if known.

6. Assumptions concerning the interactional realm:

    a. How the respondents view the interactional realm as a site for promoting interethnic understanding.

    b. Whether they are conscious/aware of the interactional realm as a site for promoting interethnic communication.

7. Assumption about activity space: How the respondents describe the use of space and facilities by different ethnic individuals in the area.

8. Assumption concerning effective interethnic communication:

    a. What is needed to communicate effectively with the other?

    b. Ideas concerning different levels of human understanding and intentions.

9. Ethnicized knowledge:

    a. How ethnic identity enables or constrains interaction.

    b. Whether an individual's rank or position matters.

    c. How politics (especially communal parties and leaders) influence attitude towards other ethnic individuals.

10. Open questions/Further Comments.

Appendix B

Interview Questions: A Sample[164]

1. Can you tell me about your everyday communication/interaction

    experience/workplace experience in Malaysia?

    a.   What's your best or worst experience?

    b.   How do you cope with the daily situations?

    c.   What language do you use to communicate?

2. How has that experience affected you?

    a.   How did you feel after each encounter?

    b.   Can you share your experience on a particular situation?

    c.   How does communicating with the other make you feel?

3. How have you overcome the difficulties/challenges you encountered?

    a.   What strategies do you use?

    b.   How do you speak with your ethnic-other?

    c.   Have you been in a conflict before?

4. How do you describe/define the "other" in your everyday interaction/experience?

    a.   What do you think about the ethnic-other? (Malay/Chinese)?

    b.   Do you feel that your ethnic identity affects your everyday experience?

5. What do you think about the efforts to promote ethnic integration in Malaysia?

    a.   Are there any programs that you think are workable? Why, or why

          not?

---

[164] The questions here are only a guide; the actual questions were adjusted based on the willingness of the informants to readily provide responses.

      b.   What types of programs/efforts that you think are not working?

6. How do you view your interactional realm as a site for promoting interethnic understanding?

      a.   What do you think about your interaction space?

      b.   What do you think about communicating at the place(s) you've mentioned?

7. How do you describe the use of space and facilities by different ethnic individuals in your area?

      a.   Do people share facilities at your workplace or, in your community?

      b.   What do you or these people do together, if any?

      c.   What do you think about the interaction space?

8. What has to happen for you to communicate effectively with the other? (Are there situations or topics or kinds interactions where it is easier for you to communicate effectively?)

      a.   As an individual, what do you think a person should have to communicate better?

      b.   Why can't some people interact with each other?

9. How has your own ethnic identity enabled or constrained you/your interaction?

    a. Do you feel threatened by your ethnicity?

    b. How do you feel about communicating with the other?

10. Lastly, do you have any other opinions/points to share?

Thank you for participating in this interview. If you would like to do follow-up interviews, or clarify your responses, please let me know.

Appendix C

Fieldwork Schedule

*June 19, 2006 – August 18, 2006

WEEK	ACTIVITY
1	(i) Mapping and strategizing access to sources/respondents (this includes: observing common activity space of respondents' everyday situations, talking with known sources and using snowballing technique). (ii) Acquisition of documentary materials. (iii) Making appointments with prominent individuals if possible; politician/government official/community leader/School/College principal for a wider understanding of sensemaking in interethnic interpersonal communication.
2	(i) Doing in-situ observations at relevant places including the market, the restaurants. (ii) Making appointments for interviews with key respondents (Malays and Chinese). (iii) Observing and interviewing respondents as and when necessary.
3	(i) Scheduling time of interview proper with key respondents; one to two interview(s) per day. (ii) Traveling to respondents' homes/meeting venues for interviews. (iii) Observation.
4	(i) Interviews with respondents. (ii) In-situ Observations.
5	(i) Interviews with respondents. (ii) In-situ Observations.
6	(i) Interviews with respondents. (ii) In-situ Observations.
7	(i) Storage and final checking of data with respondents. (ii) Meetings with informants for clarification.
8	Final checking of data/retrospection