EMOTIONS: AN INSIGHT INTO HOW MALAYSIANS EXPRESS THEMSELVES

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Abstract
This paper examines the mode of expression used by multiethnic Malaysians when experiencing five aspects of emotions: anger, sadness, discontentment, fear and happiness both in the situations of 1) when alone and 2) when in the presence of others. Specifically, the paper aims to detect whether spoken words, written words, silence or action is applied. Data were collected through a self-administered survey which was modeled after Wong’s (2010)’s doctoral thesis. The major aim of this survey was to obtain information on how Malaysians express their emotion during interactions. The theoretical construct applied here is that of social constructionism. A total of 12 questions were developed for the questionnaires that consist of 47 items which were provided with responses based on four ranges of the Likert scale. A total of 655 Malaysian respondents comprising Malays, Chinese and Indians from the the Klang valley in Selangor participated in the survey. SPSS was used to quantify the findings, presented in histograms. Analysis indicates that Malay and Chinese respondents were less inclined towards sharing their negative emotions whereas Indian respondents were less inclined towards sharing their positive emotions. This phenomenon could explain why Malaysians react differently in difficult situations such as a crisis or a riot.

Key words: emotions, Malaysians, silence, spoken words

Introduction
Malaysia is a multiethnic, multicultural and multilingual society where different ethnic groups learn to live and practice their own cultures, religions, traditions, and lifestyles amiably. The demographic nature of Malaysia shows that there are three dominant groups
with 67.4% Malays/Bumiputras, 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indians and 0.7% other minority (US Department of State, 2012). Malaysians have come a long way even prior to the amalgamation of the nation as one in 1957. They are diverse in terms of culture, religion and language but Malaysians also share similar traits in that they are generally collectivists by nature. They value the opinion of others. However due to their constant exposure to diverse cultures and values brought about by advent in technology and education, some Malaysians have also become individualistic (see Lailawati, 2005). This paper reveals similarities and differences.

Local studies (Asmah, 1992; Jamaliah, 1995; Asma & Pedersen, 2003; Kamisah & Norazlan, 2003; Thilagavathi, 2003; David & Kuang 2005) indicate that the communication styles of the Malays are generally indirect whereas the communication styles of the Chinese have been found, to some extent, to be more direct (David & Kuang, 1999). Each cultural group carries its own cultural traits. Asrul (2003), for instance, mentions that the Malay community is more steeped into traditions than other ethnic groups. In a study of Chinese behavior, Kuang et al. (2011) mention that the Chinese were more stoic since they chose to remain silent even when emotionally turbulent while Indians were more vocal when faced with similar situations. Likewise, Thilagavathi (2003) discovered some differences in their reactions to compliments.

**Emotions**

Emotions have been the concern of sociological studies in recent decades (Kemper, 1990; Scheff, 1990) because one’s emotion can affect one’s communication style. Emotions are the result of one’s thoughts and these thoughts affect the behavior of individuals. How these emotions are expressed is culture specific (Wierzbicka, 1997) with some better at expressing their emotions verbally and others non-verbally for example by providing feedback through
facial expressions, body movements, use of space or even silence. Para-kinesthetically, emotions may also be expressed by shouting, screaming or sighing.

All human beings experience emotions. When that happens, one’s body temperature may rise or dip since emotions affect the physical functions of the body. Emotions can be hidden but since they are felt internally, they can be assessed by measuring one’s blood pressure. If left uncontrolled emotions may lead to more explicit behaviour, gestures and verbal expressions. Awang-Rozaimie (2011:173) mentions that emotion is a “psychological affect that affectively react toward cultural cues or changes” and that when a person becomes aware of these psychological reactions (happiness, sadness, anger, fear, disgust and surprises), he/she then becomes better able to respond appropriately. Emotions are feelings we experience as a result of some physiological changes (Shaffer, 1983). Of the many emotions human beings experience, those like anger, sadness, fear, disgust or discontentment are easier to assess than emotions like confusion, disillusion or depression. This is because the former are commonly experienced and easily understood by others whereas the latter are more abstract and may take more experiences to realize and understand.

The significance of investigating emotional expression is documented in many studies on emotional recognition (Scherer & Ellgring, 2007; Juslin & Scherer, 2005; Keltner & Ekman, 2000; Scherer, Johnstone & Klasmeyer, 2003). Scholars (see Awang-Rozaimie, 2011) explain that a person’s response towards an emotion is dependent on factors such as ethnicity, linguistic background, religion and other social elements. In short emotion is a complex reaction system which could be attributed to one’s actions, beliefs, values and so it is likely to vary culturally and according to the social events one is involved in (see Anand, Toegel, & Kilduff, 2007; Rich, 2005). Paul Ekman (2003), a psychologist, working on nonverbal body expressions claims that emotions are due to our parents’ constant input during our childhood and sometimes, those feelings may be masked. This was tested by Ekman where he found
that when *alone* Japanese and Americans displayed the same facial expressions in response to seeing films of surgery and accidents, but when a scientist sat with them as they watched the films, the Japanese more than the Americans, masked negative expressions with a smile. He thus concludes that in private, the respondents’ expressions were more innate but when in public; their expressions were “masked”.

In a Malaysian study focusing on stress Siamak et al. (2012:6) came to the same conclusion, “… it is plausible that childhood and succeeding psychosocial experiences in emotional affectivity, personal values and social support will influence people’s reactions toward stressors in the up-coming life such as university life”. Another local researcher, Yong (2010:482) who looked at how Malaysian school students are different from their western counterparts in school settings says that Malaysian students tend to be “quiet, shy, and reticent in class” and they “rarely express opinions or emotions openly”. What these studies show is that emotions can be affected by sociocultural variables such as culture, gender, ethnicity and religion as well as settings.

**Definition of emotions**

The definition of emotion differs according to researchers, (see Wierzbicka, 1994) but it is generally accepted that emotions are feelings one experiences due to some physiological changes which affect transformation in one’s internal system and often, how one thinks can affect how one feels. Emotion is also a personal state of being and one can experience a number of emotions at a number of emotions at the same time, unconsciously. Plutchik (2010) explains that all emotions can be categorized into four groups, each of which includes a pair of opposites:

1. Happiness/ sadness
2. Acceptance/d disgust
3. Anger/fear
4. Surprise/anticipation

This paper focuses on five aspects of emotions including a) anger, b) sadness, c) discontentment, d) fear and e) happiness because they are more common among people. They are also easily identified through behaviour or actions. Two situations of 1) when alone and 2) when there is someone else around were also applied to show the possible differences.

Emotions can be expressed verbally and nonverbally during interactions but observations show that emotions are more explicitly communicated via the verbal mode of communication. However, there are some situations where emotions are experienced but not expressed (see Wierzbicka, 1994) at all due to certain circumstances, traditional conventions, or as a result of cultural norms. In some culture certain emotions are contained within the person’s internal system through self control and this may occur for various reasons. For instance, anger may be expressed verbally through shouting or it may be expressed nonverbally but via action through a punch. Additionally, people who have self control may hold back their anger by keeping silent, which has been interpreted as a way of concealing one’s feelings or emotions. Alternatively, there are those who choose to express their emotions via written words. The neurocultural theory offered by Burgoon et al. (1996) assumes that emotional expressions are innately prewired in the human brain but through experience, people learn how to display these emotions according to culture-specific rules. Andersen and Guerrero (1998) explain that some emotional expressions which are present in public situations may not be present in private situations and such an occurrence indicates that these emotional expressions function as a form of interpersonal communication rather than as an expression of internal feelings. Nonetheless, the two situations have not been clearly distinguished. Nonverbal expression of emotion may sometimes be interpreted differently depending on the decoder of the message as well as their personal interactions. Such kinds of expressions of emotion have raised some interest in researching the potential
connection between culture and communication of emotional states during interpersonal communication, particularly in the contexts of Malaysia as a multicultural and multiethnic society.

Wong (2010) conducted two surveys on the emotional expressions of the British and Japanese people in expressing anger, sadness, fear, dissatisfaction and happiness in both the situations of 1) when alone and 2) when in the presence of others. In the first survey, she found that the British considered showing emotions in public as distasteful, an act that should be suppressed or avoided. In contrast, the Japanese tried to control their emotions in the public domain so as to show deference to others or to maintain harmonious status quo. For the Japanese, it appears that being non-emotional in public is highly valued and it was considered as a result of social norms. However, in the private situation, for both cultures, there was more room for emotional expressions. The British were quite careful at showing sadness in the private situation whereas the Japanese allowed more emotional expressions.

In the second survey 640 Japanese were classified into four different age groups (Wong, 2010) and it was found that emotional expressions in close and non-close relationships and generational differences were obvious. When experiencing dissatisfaction, sadness and anger, the oldest generation (aged 57 and above) used spoken words to express these emotions to someone who was close to them. In contrast, they used a more indirect method (written words) without any accompanying facial expression or body actions with someone who was in distant relationship. The younger generation (aged 19-30) however, used a lot of actions and spoken words to express fear, anger and joy explicitly. Among the youngest generation (aged 19 and below), written words were more preferred than spoken words. In addition, they also used more actions to express emotions to someone who is of close relationship. Nonetheless, silence was preferred when they were experiencing anger or dissatisfaction with others when in a non-close relationship. In other words, showing or controlling one’s
emotions among Japanese was very much dependent on the degree of closeness in a relationship.

Aim

This paper examines 655 Malaysians who are of three different ethnic backgrounds in expressing five aspects of emotions: anger, sadness, discontentment, fear and happiness in two situations: 1) when alone and 2) when in the presence of others. The paper also hopes to detect which of the following modes encompassing spoken words, written words, silence or action are more commonly applied.

Research Questions

How do Malaysians express emotions (anger, sadness, discontentment, fear and happiness) when alone and when in the presence of others?

Which of the following communication mode of expression (spoken words, written words, silence, and action) are more commonly applied by Malaysians to express their emotions.

Methodology

This study examines four areas of Malaysians’ communication pattern: spoken words, written words, silence and action. The data was collected using a questionnaire based on a survey conducted by Wong (2010) for her doctoral thesis which investigated the application of silence between British and Japanese respondents in the United Kingdom (UK). A trial questionnaire was developed and piloted on 3 postgraduate students for their feedback on the items and responses. The questionnaire was then fine-tuned in terms of wordings, questions and provided response choices. Subsequently, the questionnaire was again refined to see if the were clear and understandable before administration.

Respondents were recruited from personal contacts first before they were extended to contacts of these contacts through a snowballing effect. Subsequently, more than 700
respondents who were both young and middle aged responded to our call. The respondents were from different parts of the country comprising working adults, tertiary students, and office staff of three public universities in the Klang Valley. Only 655 of them met our criteria i.e. they answered all the questions. The demographic data shows that 326 of the respondents were Chinese, 255 were Malays, and 101 were Indians to represent the ethnic population of this country. After respondents were identified and an explanation about the study was provided, they were told that if they were not happy, they could refrain from taking part in the survey. The questionnaire was then administered by the researcher and the research assistants who explained the questions and the items to the respondents. Both English and Malay languages were used to explain. Respondents were allowed to take the questionnaires back. The questionnaires were subsequently collected back after a week.

The questionnaire had a total of four areas for retrieving information but for the purpose of this paper, we focused only on emotion. Two situations were provided to the respondents i.e a) when alone and b) when in the presence of others. The aim was to elicit information as to which mode of communication (spoken words, written words, silence or action) would be preferred by the respondents of the three dominant ethnic groups whilst experiencing the emotions of anger, sadness, discontentment, fear and happiness. Likert’s scale encompassing four values of “always”, “sometimes”, “seldom” and “never” was used. SPSS statistical software was then used to analyze the data and Chi-square test (X2) was used to find the p value which was calculated as smaller than $p<0.05$. Data are presented in histograms while the analysis is presented via descriptive statistics based on frequency.

**Social constructionism**

This study applies the theoretical framework of Porter and Samovar (1998) who argue that culture affects the display and recognition of emotions by specifying how, when, in what social context and by whom emotion is displayed and recognized. Through a process of
socialization people learn to communicate their emotions either through expressing or inhibiting them. According to Andersen and Guerrero (1998) some emotional expressions that are present in public situations are not often present in private, which demonstrates that these expressions function as forms of interpersonal communication rather than merely as expressions of internal feelings. We interpret that private in this context is taken to mean when an individual is alone and public to mean that when an individual is with someone else.

Data analysis

Data are presented in terms of percentage to show their differences or similarities. The presentation and discussion will be done in two stages. In Stage I methods of expressing emotion when alone are discussed and in Stage II methods of expressing emotion when in the presence of others are analyzed.

Stage I analysis: When alone

Question 1: Which of the following methods of communication would you use most to convey your message when YOU ARE experiencing the following emotions: anger, sadness, discontentment, fear and happiness?

(a) Silence

(b) Action (smile, cry, throw something, etc)

(c) Spoken words (including telephone someone)

(d) Written words (letter, email, sms, etc.).

**Fig 1. Use of silence to show emotions when alone (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadness</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discontented</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fear</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Happiness</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1. Use of silence to show emotions when alone

**Silence.** Figure 1 shows the responses of the three ethnic groups when they experience five types of emotions: anger, sadness, discontentment, fear and happiness. The figure illustrates that the three ethnic groups would respond almost in similar ways. The majority prefer silence when they experience anger but not when they experience happiness. Nevertheless, while all the three ethnic groups express anger in silence, they differ in the way they express sadness, discontentment and fear.

More than half or 56% of Malays remain silent when angry, 42% remain silent when sad, 41% remain silent when in fear and 30% remain silent when discontented. Only 8% will keep silent when they experience happiness. This could mean that Malaysian Malays are more verbal when they experience happiness. As for the Chinese, 56% remain silent when angry, 52% remain silent when sad but only 44% remain silent when in fear and 37% remain silent when discontented. Only 8% choose to keep quiet when experiencing happiness. In contrast, 53% of Indians remain silent when angry, 47% when sad, 32% when in fear and 31% when discontented. Only 9% keep quiet when experiencing happiness.

![Fig. 2: Use of action to show emotions when alone (%)](image)

Figure 2. Use of action to show emotions when alone

**Action.** Figure 2 illustrates the statistics of respondents who would respond by action when demonstrating the five aspects of emotions. The term action, in this context, refers to smiling, laughing, body movements and other gestures without the use of words.
It appears that majority of Malaysians resort to using actions to express their happiness. More than half of Malay and Chinese respondents (60%) say they will express themselves through actions when they experience happiness. Only 40% of Indians use actions to express their happiness. However, when it comes to negative emotions like anger, sadness, discontentment and fear, there is some difference in the reaction of the three ethnic groups.

It appears that Malays use actions when experiencing the following emotions: sadness (41%) fear and anger (29% each). Chinese use actions when experiencing the following emotions: sadness (34%) anger (27%), followed by fear (23%). Indians use actions to express emotions in this order: anger and sadness (33% each) followed by discontentment (19%).

The statistics given also show that 41% of Malays would opt for action with silence when in sadness, 29% indicate that they would opt for action plus silence when in anger, and when in fear, 27% say they would opt for action and silence when discontented. In comparison, 34% of Chinese claim to prefer action when sad, 27% when angry, 23% when afraid and 22% when discontented. Similarly, 33% of Indians opt for action with silence when in anger and in sadness with 19% opting action when in discontentment and 18% when in fear.

**Figure 3: Use of spoken words to show emotions when alone (%)**

![Bar chart showing the percentage of respondents choosing spoken words for different emotions: Anger, Sadness, Discontented, Fear, and Happiness. Malay, Chinese, and Indian respondents are compared.](image)

*Figure 3. Use of spoken words to show emotions when alone*

**Spoken words.** Figure 3 shows that most respondents prefer spoken words in expressing happiness and this applies to 56% of the Indians. In contrast, 40% Indians would vocalize their fear, 39% their discontentment, 29% their sadness and 23% their anger. Among the
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Chinese, 45% would vocalize their happiness, 36% their discontentment, 33% their fear and 23% their anger. In comparison, 41% Malays claim they would vocalize their happiness, 40% would vocalize their discontentment, 25% their sadness and 22% their anger.
Figure 4. Use of written words to show emotions when alone

Written words. Figure 4 shows that using written words to express one’s emotion is not the preferred mode for most participants. Written words, in this context, means writing emails, letters or sending short messages to express one’s emotions. It appears that this mode of communication is the least preferred by the Malays who scored very low in expressing all five types of emotions by written word.

20% of the Chinese respondents say they would use written words when experiencing discontentment, 19% use it when experiencing happiness and sadness but only 14% would use written words when experiencing anger and 11% when in fear.

In comparison, 26% of the Indian participants would use written words to convey their joy but only 23% would write to express their discontentment while 15% may resort to writing when sad, 12% when in fear and 9% when in anger.
Table 1. *Emotions that can trigger Malaysians into silence when alone*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Highest order</th>
<th>Lowest order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malays</td>
<td>Anger (56%), sadness (42%), fear (41%) and discontentment (30%)</td>
<td>Happiness (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Anger (56%), sadness (53%), fear (44%) and discontentment (37%)</td>
<td>Happiness (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>Anger (53%), sadness (47%), fear (32%) and discontentment (31%)</td>
<td>Happiness (9%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Silence. In general, regardless of ethnic groups, Malaysians are prone to keeping silent when alone and when experiencing anger. They become more vocal in sharing their happiness when they are alone.
Stage II analysis: in the presence of others

In this section the responses with regard to when in the presence of others situation are discussed.

Figure 5. Comparison of two situations in the use of silence

Silence. Figure 5 indicates that there is a drop in the overall percentage of the respondents who resort to keep silent when in the presence of others during expressions of emotions. Some differences of the three ethnic groups, however, were also detected.

It seems that even in the presence of others, Malays were quite consistent in their mode of expressing three types of emotions: anger, sadness, and discontentment. Data show that they would observe less silence when afraid (41% → 32%) or when happy (8% → 4%) when in the presence of other people.

On the other hand, the Chinese seem to prefer sharing their feelings when experiencing all the five types of emotions when in the presence of other people.

The Indians appear to control their anger and happy emotions more than the other two ethnic groups when in the presence of others. An increment of 2% can be seen. However, they were more willing to share their emotions with others when they were discontented (31% → 28%) or when afraid (32% → 19%).
**Figure 6.** Comparison of two situations in the use of action

**Action.** Figure 6 shows a comparison of two situations (when alone and when in the presence of others). Our analysis indicates a comparison of two statistics. The above figure indicates that Malay and Chinese respondents are more controlled in their actions when experiencing negative emotions. In contrast, Indian respondents would react with actions when they are sad (33% → 35%), when in fear (18% → 22%) and when happy (40% → 51%) as compared to the situations when they are alone. However, they would maintain control in showing their anger through actions when in the presence of other people.
Figure 7. Comparison of two situations in the use of spoken words

**Spoken words.** Fig.7 shows that in general, compared to the situation when alone, the respondents are more vocal in expressing all the five emotions when in the presence of others (with exception of happy emotion for the Indians). However, there are also variations among the three ethnic groups. In the presence of others, it appears that the Chinese would become vocally expressive when they are angry (23% →43%); showing an increase of 20% and when sad (18% →33%) showing an increase of 15%.

In comparison, Malays become more vocal (22% →34%) when angry and when in the presence of other people. This event shows an increment of 8% while among the Indians who become more vocal (23% →34%) when angry and when in the presence of others, the increment was higher(11%).

This result indicates that the respondents tend to show their anger more often when in the presence of others as compared to the situation when they are alone. The Chinese, in particular, do this more.
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**Figure 8.** Comparison of two situations in the use of written words (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Malay</th>
<th>Chinese</th>
<th>Indian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anger</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sadness</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discontented</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fear</strong></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Happiness</strong></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figures when alone*

*Figures in the presence of others*

**Written words.** Looking at the low score in terms of percentage (<10%) as illustrated in Figure 8, it can be seen that written words are not the preferred mode of expressing neither positive nor negative emotions. This mode applies to both the Malay and the Chinese respondents while in the presence of others.

As for the Indians, it appears that if someone is around there is a higher percentage of the respondents sharing their emotion of happiness (18%) and discontentment (17%) in written words. Comparatively, the percentage of Malays doing the same is very low but the Chinese preference seems to range in between the two other ethnic groups’ preference.

This result provides us with the understandings that the Malaysian respondents are not only verbally expressive in expressing both negative and positive emotions, but they are also economical or “time-savvy”. In other words, they do not waste too much time in expressing themselves using written words rather; this is accomplished through verbal means.

The data shows that compared to written words, spoken words encompassing face to face and telephone interactions, were more preferred by the respondents than written words. This may suggest that spoken words provide the fastest means of conveying one’s emotions and thoughts.
Table 2. *Emotions that Malaysians do not share/discuss*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>Highest order</th>
<th>Lowest order</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malays</td>
<td>Anger (54%), sadness (41%), fear (32%) and discontentment (27%)</td>
<td>Happiness (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>Sadness (46%), anger (41%), fear (31%), and discontentment (28%)</td>
<td>Happiness (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indians</td>
<td>Anger (55%), sadness (32%), discontentment (28%) and fear (19%)</td>
<td>Happiness (11%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Order of emotions not shared.** As table 2 illustrates, there are differences in the ways that the three ethnic groups demonstrate their emotions. Clearly, they seem to share some similarity where the emotion of anger and sadness is concerned. Data indicate that anger and sadness are two emotions less likely to be shared with others. In contrast, the positive emotion of happiness was most likely to be shared with others with analysis indicating that Malaysian Indians sharing this emotion to a lesser degree compared to the Malays and Chinese.

**Discussion**

This study has attempted to locate how Malaysians express themselves when experiencing five types of emotions: anger, fear, sadness, discontentment and happiness in two situations; 1) when alone and 2) when in the presence of others. Our study revealed that Malaysians tend to express themselves differently depending on the two situations. Besides similarities, there are also variations among the three ethnic groups. Malays showed the highest tendency to use actions and silence in both situations but Indians showed the lowest tendency to do so. The Chinese, nonetheless, seemed to range in between these two counterparts.
In addition, the majority of the Malaysian respondents preferred to remain silent when facing emotions but they may use body movements and other gestures to express their feelings. Thus, the Malaysians’ silence is not totally inscrutable, unlike other cultures. From this study, it can be learnt that the silence adopted by Malaysians is more noticeable as their emotions can be read by their actions or movements.

Andersen and Guerrero (1998) have shown that some emotions present in the public domain may not be present in the private domain. So, what kinds of emotions do Malaysians share with their friends or relatives who may happen to be around when they are experiencing these five types of emotions? Our study indicates that in general, more than half of the Malaysian respondents prefer to keep silent, when angry, regardless of the two situations (refer Figure 5). However, more Malaysians (from all the three ethnic groups) prefer to express themselves when experiencing happiness in both situations. There are however, variations when they experience sadness, fear, and discontentment.

Our study also indicate that when in the presence of others, Malays were quite consistent in their mode of expressing the three types of emotions: anger, sadness, and discontentment by keeping silent. However, they were more willing to share their fear and happiness when in the presence of others.

On the other hand, the Chinese seem to prefer sharing their feelings when experiencing all the five types of emotions when in the presence of others.

There were, nonetheless, more Indians who appear to control their angry and happy emotions when in the presence of others. In contrast, they were more willing to share their discontented emotions when in the presence of others.

Our study also suggests that showing anger through action while in the presence of others is less favored by Malaysians. Additionally, Indians seemed to be the most expressive people among the respondents, using nonverbal cues for emotional expression. They were also more
careful in showing their happy emotions in both situations whereas the other two ethnic groups would become more talkative in the presence of others when experiencing happiness.

It is not certain why the three ethnic groups differ in terms of sharing their five emotions especially anger. It is possible that this behavior is attributed to their lack of training in childhood as Plutnik (see above) has suggested that childhood input as well as social norms which emphasize the notion of not expressing emotions in public could be a possible factor. In addition, he also said that such a behavior is probably practiced because it is seen as polite or respectful. In addition, it could be due to some religious norms which advocate that life is destined by God. It is very probable that Malaysians behave this way because they have not been taught how to deal with negative emotions from young. Subsequently, they suppress these emotions as a way of meeting social requirements.

**Conclusion**

Understanding the dimensions of culture can help in understanding reactions or non-reactions to emotions. There are differences in the way certain emotions are expressed across cultures. Hofstede (1984) argues that cultures that maintain status and power differentials among community members tend to underrate the intensity of fear, anger and sadness. Our study suggests that Malaysians are careful not to show their negative emotions, particularly anger. This could be due to culturally acquired rules of interaction since the three ethnic groups appear to be similar in the way they express their positive and negative emotions. By knowing the cultural rules of the respective ethnic groups that exist within a multicultural nation, by understanding their interactions particularly in the expression of negative emotions among various ethnic groups, mutual tolerance and understanding can be developed and honed for racial integration and harmony. Further, from the observance of silence by those experiencing negative emotions, it could be deduced that this is their way of maintaining
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harmony (see Asrul 2003 who discusses non-confrontational values of the Malays). Such values need to be understood in interactions across cultures in a multicultural country.

Acknowledgements

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