**Gender differences in coping with disagreements: Focus on young Malaysians**

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**Abstract**

This study focuses on Malaysian youths and their preference in coping with disagreements situated in three domains: home, education and workplace. The home domain embraces close relationship namely parents, siblings, close friends (including boyfriend/girlfriend). The education domain encompasses lecturers, classmates and administrative staff while the workplace domain focuses on bosses and colleagues. Respondents were asked to answer 14 questions which provide responses towards dealing with disagreements. A non-probability sample of 641 students, 190 male and 437 female (14 missing value) from an urban area in the Klang valley with 85% being aged 21-25 years old completed the voluntary survey. Likert’s 5-scale item (always, frequently, sometimes, rarely, never) were provided. Two open-ended questions which require them to explain why such strategies were employed were added to elicit additional information on their coping mechanisms. Data were then analyzed using SPSS version 16. Only the significant results (p<0.05) were taken for discussion to provide insight of gender differences in the choice of coping mechanisms after disagreements. The findings of this study can enable members of society to better understand men and women and their emotions which can lead to better human interactions for the good of family, workplace and society.

**Introduction**

Nature created men and women differently because of the need to procreate. Nonetheless, how and why men behave and act differently from women may not necessarily be due to nature but to environment. History is one source of evidence depicting the power men have over women and in present day societies it is still the way of life although changes are taking place. There are real differences between men and women which have not been uncovered until people write about it. Gray (2004)’s book on men and women originating from different planets has, to some extent, enabled society to become more aware of these differences but thus far, the level of
understanding in the different ways men and women cope with emotions is still an area to be explored.

Gender differences in terms of behavior, language use, ability, attitude and consumerism have been studied and highlighted by sociolinguists (see Coates 1998; Holmes 2006; Mills 2000; Tannen 1994, 2001) and in the Malaysian context Aminah (2009), Amir et.al (2012), Wong and Hanafi (2007) have also showcased studies depicting gender differences. These studies not only look at how men and women differ in classroom talk but also at the workplace and in terms of attitude, behavior, management styles and consumer habits. In our search for substantiations of gender differences in dealing with emotions, we found that little has been done on gender differences in coping with disagreements, which are normal facets of life.

Disagreements are inevitable in human interactions because people have personal orientations towards certain issues. They can disagree over a particular subject matter including objects or personal traits, attitudes, and behaviours. Where western societies may appreciate direct confrontations if there are disagreements, it appears that conflicts are more often avoided in the Malaysian context. This trait is attributed to the Malaysian behavior which has been described as a ‘high-ambiguity-tolerant culture’ where people ‘don’t feel threatened by unknown situations’ (Devito, 2008, p. 39). Such a community, according to Devito (2008), accepts that uncertainty is a way of life and that rules which dictate communication and relationships may not always be the practice with others. Since most Malaysians are tolerant of such uncertainties, it would seem that maintaining social harmony is their priority (Asrul 2003). Some strategies have been identified and one of them is the indirect way of speaking which has been supported by studies (see Asmah, 1995; Jamaliah, 2000; David and Kuang, 1999, 2005; and Thilagavathi, 2003). Kuang, Wong and David (2011) in their study of Malaysians also found that most Malaysians avoid conflicts by resorting to silence. This use of indirectness and silence may be interpreted as attempts to maintain social harmony but they may also be interpreted as having poor communication skills in dealing with confrontations since there are two sides to a coin. A poor ability to express oneself during conflicts is also an indication that negative feelings are kept restrained or suppressed.

**Expectations of societies**

The issue of gender and the idea and patterns of relationships between males and females is a social order which have been firmly built into every aspect of society – institutions, public spaces, private domain, media representation, art and attire. This social arrangement supports and is in turn, supported by structures of convention, ideology, emotion and desire which are so well interwoven that it becomes difficult to separate gender from other aspects of life (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003: 34). Gendered views, when widely reinforced and practised, develop men and women just
as they are expected and when either deviates slightly from the norm, they may behave with a sense of uneasiness. In observing the work culture in New Zealand, Holmes argues that some women experience differential treatment in the workplace, “... in many workplace contexts, men’s discourse styles have been institutionalised as ways of speaking with authority... as a result, women are less likely to be perceived as potential leaders and those who do move into leadership positions face a double bind ‘regarding professionalism and feminity’... (Holmes, 2006 p. 35).

Stereotypical views of males and females continue to educate and nurture young children before they enter adulthood. As Kottak (2009:221) says: “Human attitudes, values and behavior are limited not only by our genetic predispositions – which are difficult to identify - but also by our experiences during enculturation”. In addition, family make-up is another important feature that contributes to young children's development (Fincham & Osbourne, 1993). Peace-loving parents or aggressive parents do determine how their children will turn out and Porter & O'Leary (1980) have indicated that family hostility including quarrels, sarcasm and physical abuse can affect how young people view the world and three major styles of conflict resolution such as attacking, avoiding, and compromising or discussing have been identified (see Rands, Levinger & Mellinger, 1981). The “attacking" resolution style involves being verbally abusive, angry, and sarcastic; the "avoiding" style involves withdrawing after arguments, avoiding talking, and becoming cool and distant while the "discussing" style involves trying to understand a partner's feelings through reasoning tactics for the sake of reaching a compromise.

Inter-parental conflicts destabilise the family environment and Grych & Fincham (1990) note that children exposed to frequent parental conflicts which are aggressive and poorly resolved tend to suffer from adjustment problems when they grow up. Children exposed to occasional, well-resolved, and non-child focused conflicts between parents have less problems adjusting themselves. Camara & Resnick (1989) also mention that the type of verbal attacks and avoidance tactics used by parents to resolve conflicts can impact on their children. This means that the family background has an influence over the way children behave when they grow up. Studies by psychologists as those mentioned say that physically violent fathers develop children who are physically aggressive while parents who used negotiation and compromise to resolve disagreements would develop children who display greater social competence in interactions with their peers.

In looking at how men and women deal with problems, Conner (2008) mentions that women treat sharing and discussing a problem as opportunities to explore, deepen or strengthen their relationships with the person whom they are talking with. Women seem to be more concerned with how a problem is solved rather than solving the problem itself. Men, on the other hand, find that solving a problem presents an opportunity for them to demonstrate their competence, their strength of resolve, and their commitment to a relationship. How the problem is solved is not nearly as important as solving it effectively and in the best possible manner. Conner (ibid.) also adds that men have a
tendency to dominate. They tend to assume authority in a problem solving process and feelings are set aside but this is on the understanding that the dominance hierarchy was agreed upon in advance and respected. Men, it appears, are often distracted and do not attend well to the quality of the relationship while solving problems (Conner, 2008).

**Emotions and disagreements**

Emotions are feelings developed due to what one thinks and it is natural for a person to want to find a release to these emotions which can be good or bad. Emotional expression refers to the way an individual outwardly displays his or her emotions (King & Emmons, 1990) while emotional restriction refers to a difficulty in understanding or dealing with and expressing emotions (Kilmartin, 1994). Men are said to be more restrictive when expressing themselves (Pennebaker, 1995) whilst women have been identified as more willing to express their feelings. The ability to express one’s own feelings or emotions is socially constructed and can be cultivated in the upbringing process as the above section has explained. Fathers who do not show their emotion and affection easily usually prohibits their children from crying, moping, sulking or throwing tantrums in front of others. Affectionate fathers, on the other hand, give personal attention to their children and would console and encourage their children to express themselves. Different parental guidance thus serves as models in cultivating emotional expressiveness for young children who experience two key interpersonal domains in early childhood life, i.e. family and education.

Everyday communication is about an exchange of rational ideas between people who are equal and devoid of power (Habermas, 1984). He suggests that it is a communicatively achieved agreement which has a rational basis for communication to take place. Neither party can impose on the other, whether instrumentally or through intervention, and whether directly or indirectly. Agreements can be obtained by force, “but what comes to pass manifestly through outside influence or the use of violence cannot count subjectively as agreement because agreement rests on common convictions” (Habermas, 1984 p 287).

Hovatter (1996) observes that disagreements are often induced by one’s personal orientation system (values, needs, interests and intentions) and depending on one’s personality and tolerance level, one can disagree subtly or quietly or one can disagree vehemently. He further adds that as long as the tolerance level is not overstressed, a disagreement may or may not be conveyed and if it is conveyed, may be done in a non-verbal manner suggesting that the individual’s emotion is within control.

Mohamad Baianonie (2003) agrees saying that it is easier to agree than to disagree. When people are in agreement, they behave properly with others but when they are in
disagreements, they do not know how they should behave. This implies that disagreements can affect human behavior and attitude.

Disagreements can occur at all levels of communication: between family members, between superiors and subordinates, between people of equal status, and between strangers. Disagreements between a superior and a subordinate (including parents and children) are expressions of power and hierarchy whereby those with the power assert themselves through disagreements while those without or with least power succumb by suppressing their feelings for the disagreements. The more outspoken subordinate may react to the disagreements explicitly but this behavior may be attached with a risk and so negative consequences. Ultimately, subordinates tend to avoid disagreements by suppressing their feelings. In this regard, it is thus very important that we learn to understand how people (men and women) cope with disagreements since the finding can shed light on the power structure of a society.

**Aim**

This paper examines how young Malaysians cope with disagreements in three domains: family, education and workplace. The findings will reflect the social reality of Malaysians in their daily lives. Taking findings from their choice of coping mechanisms in general including keeping silent, we attempt to understand why men and women react and cope with disagreements in a certain manner. Where there is a significant difference between men and women, we attempt to seek justifications on how social construct and gendered perspectives affect the way they cope with disagreement.

**Limitation of the study**

The focus of this study is on the choice of coping mechanism employed by the volunteers but we did not provide the contexts of the disagreements and we acknowledge that this could be a broad context of speculation. However our domains of disagreements listed in the questionnaire were fixed: family (parents, siblings and close friends), education (lecturers, classmates and administrative staff) and workplace (bosses and colleagues). This can help narrow the context of disagreements and thus overcome our limitations.

**Significance of study**

The findings of this study which focuses on youths will enable both men and women to detect their own strengths and weaknesses when dealing with disagreements. This knowledge can empower them by allowing them to adjust their behavior patterns whilst dealing with others across cultures, boundaries and social positions. More importantly, the findings of this study can enable members of society to better understand men and their emotions which can lead to better human interactions for the good of family, workplace and society.
Method

Malaysian youths from an urban area of the Klang valley were recruited on a voluntary basis to understand their preference of coping mechanisms after disagreements situated in three domains: home, education and workplace. The home domain embraces close relationship namely parents, siblings, close friends (including boyfriend/girlfriend); the education domain encompasses lecturers, classmates and administrative staff while the workplace domain focuses on bosses, and colleagues. Respondents comprising a non-probability sample of 641 students, 190 male and 437 female (14 missing value) with 85% being aged 21-25 years old were asked to answer 14 questions which provide responses towards dealing with disagreements. Likert’s 5-scale item (always, frequently, sometimes, rarely, never) were provided. Two open-ended questions which require them to explain why such strategies were employed were added to elicit additional information. Data were then analyzed using SPSS version 16. Only the significant results (p<0.05) were taken for discussion to provide insight into gender differences in the choice of coping mechanisms applied after disagreements. Analysis will then discuss based on the findings. The demographic information of the Malaysian respondents are provided in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21-25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>190</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>548</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

The findings of this paper will present statistics which are highlighted according to the significance of the coping mechanisms provided. The questionnaire provided a total of 27 items of coping mechanisms but not all were significantly employed. The male and female differences are presented below. Analysis is divided into two parts: I. Coping mechanisms and II. Disagreements and reasons.

I. Coping Mechanisms

1. Cry

This coping mechanism seems to demonstrate some significant differences. Figure 1 is presented.
In the comparison of men and women preference in selecting ‘cry’ as a coping mechanism, our data show that ‘cry’ is a preferred coping mechanism used by women who would ‘frequently’ (14%) and ‘sometimes’ (33%) resort to it after disagreements. Almost half of the male respondents said they would ‘never’ (49%) use ‘cry’ as a way out to release their emotion compared to only 13% of their female counterparts.

2. Mope/sulk
To mope or sulk is to withdraw and then refuse to talk but it is also accompanied by an unhappy demeanor.
As figure 2 highlights, 39% females claim to sometimes mope/sulk with 22% saying that they ‘frequently’ sulk. In comparison, 36% males say that they ‘sometimes’ mope/sulk and 24% claim that they never mope/sulk and 10% females claim they never mope/sulk.

3. Feel unhappy, sad and cannot concentrate
As we can deduce from Figures 3, 4, and 5, these feelings were generated as a result of disagreements.

Gender differences manifest clearly in ‘feel unhappy’ with 20% male respondents saying that they ‘always’ felt unhappy as compared to female respondents (17%) as shown in Fig. 3.

Regarding ‘feel sad’, Figure 4 illustrates that there is not much difference in the category of ‘always’ feel sad. It appears that 25% of the female respondents ‘frequently’ feel sad.
Only half of the male respondents (13%) and 27% would ‘rarely’ feel sad and 9% of them would ‘never’ feel sad after disagreement. These indications suggest that feeling sad after disagreements is more likely to be experienced and felt by women than men.

When it comes to the feeling of ‘cannot concentrate’ on work/study after disagreements, male respondents seem to lose their concentration more than females. Data suggest that 17% claim that they would ‘always’ lose their concentration and 25% claim they would ‘frequently’ lose their concentration. In contrast, only 16% and 21% females would ‘always’ and ‘frequently’ lose their concentration. Statistics show that 40% of the females say they ‘sometimes’ feel they cannot concentrate on whatever they do after disagreements.

4. Write into journal
Writing may be a therapy for some people after disagreements and this was provided as a coping mechanism for the respondents.
Figure 6 indicates that writing into a journal is quite unlikely to be selected by both genders as a coping strategy after disagreements. More than half of the male respondents (55%) and 43% female respondents said they ‘never’ write into journals. However, if we analyze carefully, 9% of the female respondents were more prone to write into a journal than 2% of the male respondents who claim to do so.

5. Play games

An activity such as playing games may help to de-stress disagreements and this too was provided as a coping mechanism.

Figure 7 shows that gender differences can be noticed clearly in this mechanism of playing games which may serve as an exit of emotions. Statistics indicate that 19% and
31% of the male respondents would ‘always’ and ‘frequently’ immerse themselves in playing games compared to the low percentage of the female respondents (12% and 16% respectively). The females revealed a higher percentage in ‘rarely’ and ‘never’ categories than their male counterparts.

6. Keep feeling to myself
This mechanism is a withdrawal symptom and the findings are presented in Figure 8.

![Fig. 8: Keep the feeling to myself](image)

Keeping the feeling to oneself after disagreement seems to be a coping strategy that is frequently used by both genders although the differences can be seen in female respondents who opt for ‘frequently’ (26% female) and the male respondents who opt for ‘sometimes’ (35% male) categories. This indication may suggest that it is a Malaysian culture to bottle up their negative feelings after disagreements. The reason of doing so will be further investigated in another survey.

7. Share feelings with parents
Some people need to share their feelings and the mechanism of sharing with parents was provided in the questionnaire.
From figure 9, it can be deduced that after disagreements, only one third of both genders would ‘sometimes’, ‘frequently’ or ‘always’ share their feelings with their parents. Data indicate that this coping mechanism is more likely to be preferred by female respondents. Statistics show that the percentage of 'rarely' and 'never' share feelings are higher in the male respondents (32% and 15% respectively). Nonetheless, we acknowledge that this may depend on the type of disagreements which can or cannot be shared with parents.

**8. Share feelings with friends**
This mechanism encompasses sharing with close friends and boy/girl friends.
Figure 10 shows that female respondents (18% - always share) are more inclined to share their feelings with friends as compared to 10% of their male counterparts. To be able to share feelings with friends and talk to others may help the person involved to clear the negative feeling faster but clearly, males prefer this mechanism less than females.

II. Disagreement with parents and reasons

Respondents were asked to rate the frequency of disagreements with people at home, tertiary institution and workplace. Only the results of categories of parents and close friends were found to be significant. Respondents were asked whether they would express themselves if they have disagreements with parents.

As Figure 11 indicates, male respondents were overall more expressive (19% always express and 27% frequently express) than their female counterparts (21% rarely express and 9% never express).

The reasons provided are illustrated in Figure 12. The question provided for Figure 12 was: Can you identify some of the reasons why you would express yourself verbally when having disagreements with your parents and to what extent these will be used?
Analysis of Figure 12 show that 31% male respondents claim to ‘frequently’ express themselves verbally as compared to the 24% female respondents and the significant reason was to ‘show respect to their parents’. Data also highlight that 40% of female respondents say they ‘sometimes express’ verbally while having disagreements with parents.

a. Reasons for expressing themselves after disagreements
Several reasons were provided to respondents in explaining why they express themselves after disagreements.

As Figure 13 illustrates one reason that stood out as a choice was that they express themselves after disagreements with their parents because they want their parents ‘to be aware of their feelings’. This finding is particularly significant for the female
respondents as 25% of them ‘always express’ their disagreements as compared to 18% of their male counterparts.

To detect gender differences Figure 14 is provided and it shows that there is gender variation (difference) in the reasons made by male respondents who ‘always’ (17%) and ‘frequently’ (30%) want to express themselves more than their female counterparts who ‘sometimes’ (39%) express disagreement verbally to their parents.

![Fig.14: The need to express myself to my parents](image)

\[X^2(8)=19.6, p<0.012\]

b. Disagreement with close friend and reasons

To generate responses to the their reasons for expressing disagreements with friends, the question: Can you identify some of the reasons why you would express yourself verbally when having disagreements with close friends and to what extent these will be used? is provided.

![Fig. 15: Disagreement with close friends & expressiveness](image)

\[X^2(8)=21.1, p<0.007\]
Statistics shown in Figure 15 indicate that male respondents are more expressive (13% always express, 28% frequently express) than female respondents (10% and 24% respectively) who express themselves to their close friends. The percentage of ‘rarely’ express is higher in female respondents (22%) than male respondents (18%).

Another reason which stood out quite significantly was the ‘need to express myself’. This is illustrated in Figure 16 which shows that the reason for both genders expressing their disagreements verbally to their close friends was due to the need to express themselves.

![Fig. 16: The need to express myself to close friends](image)

As statistics indicate the difference between the two genders is that male respondents scored higher percentage in the ‘always’ (19%) and ‘frequently’ (27%) categories than their female counterparts with 16% and 26% respectively.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

From this study which focused on the responses of 641 youths including males and females, it can be deduced that Malaysian youths appear to have some ability to handle disagreements in three domains: family, education and workplace. A set of coping mechanisms comprising various coping mechanisms commonly employed by young people were provided. Our study indicate that there were no significance in the findings presented in the education and workplace domain hence this paper deals only with the family domain.

Of the total of 27 coping mechanism provided for after disagreement situations, eight stood out more prominently as Malaysian youths’ preferred choices. These were: cry, mope/sulk, feel unhappy/sad/cannot concentrate, write into journals, play games, keep feeling to myself, share feelings with parents, and share feeling with friends.
Findings suggest that disagreements in the family domain can influence female respondents’ emotions more than their male counterparts. As discussed in the above section on how society molds male and female children to become adults, our findings indicate that the male and female respondents did not deviate exceptionally from the norms of society. Statistics indicate that females were more inclined towards choosing coping mechanisms such as cry and mope/sulk which can be assumed as more related to ‘feminine’ ways. Female respondents were also more prone to experiencing feelings of unhappiness and sadness after disagreements. They also showed a tendency to cope with negative feelings (after disagreements) by sharing their feelings with their parents and friends. This finding confirms what Conner (2008) says about women in solving problems and we think this is related to the need to want to build relationships with those they talk to through the process of solving problems.

Male respondents, in contrast, were more likely to participate in active coping mechanisms such as playing games. Just as Conner (2008) describes, male respondents were unable to focus on relationships, and ultimately, after disagreements, they were more likely to find themselves unable to concentrate.

Our study provides statistics which suggest that both genders do not prefer to write into journals after disagreements. Therefore, writing is not a preferred choice of the younger generation in this country even if it is claimed to be therapeutic by counselors and psychologists. In addition, both male and female Malaysian youths also have a tendency to keep feelings (negative feelings after disagreements) to themselves although less females chose this path. Based on this, we think that Malaysian youths can vary from choosing to express themselves verbally or that they can choose to keep their feelings to themselves. Perhaps this trait has been influenced by the Malaysian norm which emphasizes on maintaining social harmony (Asrul 2003).

Our study also shows that when asked if they would voice themselves after disagreements with parents, more males claim to verbally express themselves because of their respect for parents. They also claim that by voicing themselves after disagreements, their parents would be aware of their feelings. This indication seems to show that the power structure of the Malaysian society is beginning to change slightly as previously no children would dare express themselves to their parents after a confrontation.

In looking at their disagreements with close friends, it was again noted that males were more expressive than females and this is in accordance with the norm of society where men are expected to express themselves ‘strongly’ and women are supposed to submit or obey (see Kilmartin 1994 and Pennebaker, 1995). The Malaysian respondents also claim that their reason for voicing themselves after disagreements with friends was due to their need to express themselves. Indirectly, this could be interpreted as a show of male power as the section highlighted by Conner (2008) depicts.
Our overall results reveal that male respondents were behaving according to social norms while female respondents were acting in tandem with what society expects (see Kilmartin 1994 and Pennebaker, 1995). The findings of this study have shown that gender differences exist in two aspects of disagreements among young Malaysians: coping mechanism preferred in dealing with disagreements and reasons for voicing their disagreements.

Having the ability to understand gender differences in this situation can make a huge contribution to society because now men and women know how they would react and behave after disagreements and within a marriage, home or social context, such a difference can promote a healthy relationship and deepen mutual understanding. And to quote what Conner (2008) says, “when men seek to understand and appreciate that which is feminine, they come to a deeper understanding of their self. And when women seek to understand that which is masculine in men, they come to appreciate and understand more about their own masculinity”.

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**References:**


