

Conflict Communication Management Strategies Among Indonesian Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDH) and Malaysian Employers: An Intercultural Comparison

¹Abdul Hadi Sulaiman, ¹Jamilah Othman, ²Inon Beydha Lukman and ¹Jeffrey Lawrence D'Silva

¹Laboratory for Citizenship and Leadership, Institute for Social Science Studies,

²Institute for Social Science Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Malaysia

Abstract: This study discusses the intercultural conflict communication management strategies between Indonesian Foreign Domestic Helpers (FDH) and Malaysian Malay employers. This comparison study were using a quantitative survey (Questionnaire) and was conducted in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. About 200 people (Employers and FDHs) were selected as the respondents through convenience sampling technique and referral chain. The findings of the study showed that both employers and FDH engaged in practiced low context communication and also two-way communication patterns among each other. Whereas for the intercultural conflict communication management strategies, the employers and Indonesian FDHs engaged more on integration strategies. This study proposes that employers and FDHs could strive together to identify, respective cultures and learn to understand each other's culture in order to find conflict communication management strategies that would bring harmony in their relationships in fulfilling the expectations of both parties in terms of work demand.

Key words: Communication patterns, communication conflict management strategies, Malaysian employers, foreign domestic helpers, intercultural

INTRODUCTION

Migration of Indonesians to Malaysia and vice versa is one long history that started since ancient rulers and colonization period. This continuous migration is prolonged because there are similarities in language, communication, culture and religion between these two countries. Until 30th June, 2008, it was found that as many as 256,097 foreign domestic helpers in this country. There were 237,256 (92.64%) FDH in Malaysia were Indonesian citizens, 10,112 were Philippine citizens, 8,729 FDH were from other countries like Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, India, Nepal, Laos and others.

The presence of Indonesia FDHs in Malaysia is important to the family and job institution because many families in Malaysia are using the service of Indonesian FDHs are needed for child care, elder care, care of ill family members and completing household chores. This situation in which many women are pursuing their careers in government, medical, business as executives, lecturers and so on they do not have time to deal with the family affairs during their time out of home (Ariffin, 2001). Although, the importance of Indonesian FDHs is acknowledged, however the presence of Indonesia FDHs

in Malaysian families is little understood by the employers (Kassim, 1997; Zainol, 2004). This situation often triggers interpersonal conflict between Indonesia FDHs and Malaysian employers which in turn caused conflict between the Indonesian and Malaysian government (Lee and Sivananthiran, 1996; Robinson and Bessell, 2000; Parrenas, 2001).

The large number and the increasing number of FDH had given rise some negative symptoms that worries the government. The increase of variety criminal cases; such as abuse, violence, FDHs escaping, unpaid salaries of FDH, FDHs killing employers or employers killing FDHs, fraud, unclear hours of work are all due to the social problems, language, culture and communication differences among FDHs, employers and also agencies. In 2006, it was identified that 18.000 of Indonesia FDHs escaped from employers because of a variety of reasons. Although, Indonesia and Malaysia are kindred countries and have much in common such as communication and culture but there remains a variety of conflicts and abuse cases between Indonesia FDHs and Malaysian employers, caused by misunderstanding.

Uncertainty of reference and respective power led to conflict triggered by both parties (Zainol, 2004). Indeed, there are many literature on increases of criminal rate,

conflict between employers and FDHs, conflict between agencies, employers and foreign domestic helpers, violence, exploitation, moral problems (Ariffin, 2001; Anne-Marie, 2003) which impacted to Malaysia either directly or indirect. Nevertheless, a study which really gives attention to the communication conflicts between Indonesia FDHs and Malaysian employers still has not been found. As such, this study tries to see conflict communication from the angle of cultural differences between Indonesian FDHs and Malaysian employers. Hence, this study makes the effort to increase the information source based on the quantitative studies in the context of communication conflict as a basic point that is the source to emergence of intercultural conflict in a relationship between employers and domestic helpers. The findings of this study hope to give a more meaningful awareness and description to employers, domestic helpers, employment agency and other concerned parties on cultural differences and form of communication issues existed in the effort to reduce negative outcomes of conflict. The study aims to:

- Identify the communications pattern between Malaysian employers and Indonesia FDHs
- Identify the communication conflict management strategies of Malaysian employers and Indonesia FDHs
- To compare the differences in communication patterns practice between Indonesia FDHs and Malaysian employers
- To compare the differences of Indonesian FDHs and Malaysian employers in communication conflict management strategies

Intercultural communication conflict: Intercultural communication conflict is defined as the miscommunication or clash communication style or misunderstanding in the interests, beliefs, practices, customs, culture, rules or goals and also misunderstanding between the different cultures who are straightly interdependent and have a commitment to maintain a relationship that exists between them (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2001). Folger *et al.* (2001) in Rosli 2001, define communication conflict as the interaction of human communication that requires a mutual need to achieve the goal but have different objectives and feedback disturbances imbalance exists between them, where the interference is intended process of communication that are not clear and perfect.

Causes conflict intercultural: Conflicts occur through a variety of sources, identifying the issues or causes of

conflict is important in resolving each conflicts. Conflict resolution will not occur if the parties cannot identify the significant issues involving the other parties. Handling conflict effectively means taking a proactive step in understanding the sources and potential conflicts and strive to resolve conflict. Information about the causes of intercultural conflict also important for individuals who are identified to help conflict (Fontaine and Richardson, 2003).

Cultural differences and communication context: To study the causes of conflict in relations between individuals of different cultures, researchers must understand the cultural differences among individuals in conflict. When not taking into account their cultural differences, it will be difficult for your eyes and see their actual cultural differences (Edward, 1998).

High-context cultures vs. low-context cultures in communication: According to Edward (1998), concept of high/low cultural context is not a bipolar concept. Instead it should be viewed as a continuum of concepts from low to high. Therefore, there are countries that can be categorized as very high context, high-medium context, low-medium context and there is also low context. This theory to the concept-centric contexting. Every culture in the world has a pattern of conduct contexting.

Gudykunst *et al.* (1996) discusses the concepts of high-and low-context cultures. In a high-context culture, more information is contained in the setting a more is shared by the two people communicating, so the message needs to contain less information. In a low-context culture on the other hand, less information is contained in the setting and less information is shared by the two people communicating so the message needs to contain snore information. People in low-context cultures put value in words but people in high-context cultures put value in the context of communication. This difference in communication style influences how people resolve conflict in this way, generally in low-context cultures, people prefer to separate the issue of the conflict from the person but in high-context cultures, people in general view the issue of the problem and the person as interrelated (Salleh, 2005). All note that when interpreting a communication, people from different cultures place different levels of importance on the context of the communication.

Cultural context of Malaysia today has changed from high-context cultures to low-context cultures derived from globalization and social mobilization among them, for example due to local culture had to take time working or studying in countries such as low context in the

United States, Britain and Australia. Malaysian culture has been mixed because of a new culture exists as a result of contemporary cultural mixing in the multi-ethnic of Malaysian society and has been changing the cultural context of Malaysia towards a low context culture low (Salleh, 2005).

Conflict communication management strategies: Face Negotiation Theories (FNT) is the conflict management strategies as communication among individuals may be practiced to enhance positive self-image (self-face), to support or challenge the image of others (other-face) or to protect the image of both parties in relation to each other (mutual-face), in situations of conflict. According to the theory of FNT who tend to low-context culture tend to view themselves as more independent or not depends on the person rather than high-context culture while individuals who usually have a high context culture style that sees himself as interdependent with others and take the responsibility to both parties, either to themselves or to others (Ting-Toomey and Oetzel, 2003).

Integrating strategy: Individual practices manage to balance relations with interpersonal conflict to ensure both parties achieve the goal of conflict, once aware of the conflict arises, these individuals will use all methods of conflict management which is sure to keep face both sides of conflict. This strategy is the win-win or gain-gain situation.

Dominating strategy: Attitudes that have a high desire of personal goals and attitudes of primary care for the relationship. Strategies that take reasonable actions in order to ensure goals are achieved in an interpersonal relationship. The approach taken can be described as win-lose in which your winnings due to the influence of status and power. This is a strategy in which the power consumption of a conflict that will use the power to reach the goal. This strategy is a low-level degree in face concern to the other.

Avoiding strategies: Take the attitude that low weight of both (self or others). This strategy saw the conflict as something that must be taken away in any circumstances. This approach will lead to a high level of frustration to the parties involved. A personal goal not be achieved and so do relationships. Individuals who are in conflict will often withdraw from threatening situations. The approach that can be taken is to withdraw from the situation and are easily lost or failed to mention. In other words, it allows the individual to another win.

Face negotiation theory: Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2003) explains that the conflict management strategies among individuals from different cultures can be identified through the FNT, a theory that explains how individuals from different cultures manage conflict.

FNT focuses on the relationship between conflict and communication between cultures and provides a deep understanding about the communication conflict management strategies. Whether it is considered suitable or not suitable to the relationship among individuals of different cultures, the assumptions of conflict was:

- Individuals from different cultures often concerned about self face
- Importance of face concern among those of high cultural context is different from the importance of face concern in the face of low context cultures
- The importances of face concern different causes are also different strategies to manage conflict

Individualism-collectivism culture: Another major variable is in the theory of FNT is cultural Individualism-Collectivism (I-C). Individualism is a social pattern that contains a weak relationship with individuals who feel themselves alone, selfish, towards personal goals than others. Collectivism is a social pattern that contains a close relationship with individuals who see others as part of their own or more collective (family, colleagues, race and nation) and willing to emphasize collective goals than personal goals (Triandis *et al.*, 1995).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study is a quantitative research survey using questionnaire instrument was developed adapted from a study by Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2003) on face concern in interpersonal conflict: A cross cultural empirical test of the face negotiation theory. This study focused on identifying the patterns and relationship of intercultural communication conflict management strategies. The population of this study was Malaysian citizen employers and Indonesia FDH who legally entered Malaysia to work in Kuala Lumpur. There were 200 respondents (100 employers and 100 FDHs) involved in this study. This study do use since, the chosen respondent were scattered and may were unwilling to participate. This study used convenient sampling and referral chain.

By recognizing the fact that not all employers in Klang Valley areas employ Indonesian FDHs and also not all employers or FDHs willing to answer the questionnaire

form that was prepared, subsequently referral chain technique was used to obtain suggestion for future respondents.

Questionnaires form was distributed to respondents in March to May, 2009. Each questionnaire was attached with clarification letter relating to the study and permission to conduct this study and letters of support were issued by President of Association FDH Agency in Malaysia. There were 10 enumerators (6 of whom were Indonesian students) were briefed on data collection requirements and processes. The data was analyzed by using the computer through SPSS version 17 software programme. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the findings based on the objectives of the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 displays the employer’s in terms of gender, race, religion, marital status, level of education, employment status and total income. A majority of the employers were female (60%). All respondents in this study (100%) were Malays also Muslims. In terms of marital status, a majority of the respondents (93%) of were married. Many of the respondents (48%) were graduates at the degree level and 87% of them gainfully employed with 83% of them received their incomes between RM3000-10000.

Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the Indonesian FDH in terms of gender, ethnic, religion, marital status, level of education and their employer.

Table 1: Respondent profile

Employer’s profile	Percentage
Gender	
Male	40
Female	60
Race	
Malay	100
Religion	
Islam	100
Marital status	
Single	2
Married	93
Divorce	4
Widow	1
Level of education	
SPM/PMR	8
Diploma/Certificate	22
Degree	48
Master	22
Employment status	
Employed	87
Unemployed	13
Total income (RM)	
≤3000	1
3,001-10,000	83
≥10,000	16

These respondents were 100 female Indonesian citizens, while 68% were originally from Java (West Java, East Java and Middle Java) and all of them were Muslims. Only 40% respondents are married and 84% of the respondents obtained the education in secondary school level and below. From the overall respondent, 24% were 1st time working as FDH and the other 76% used to work as domestic worker with different employer.

This study is parallel to Ignacio and Mejia (2008) which found that Indonesia FDH respondents entered into Hong Kong and worked as FDH between the ages of 21-42 years. It contrasts with Philippines FDH respondents that entered Hong Kong between the age of 23-53 years. It is also indicated that 75% of Indonesia FDHs were aged ≤30 years and unaware of labour rules and regulation. This is in contrast with Philippines FDH respondents who were more matured and aware in such rules. A survey reported by Ignacio and Mejia (2008) also revealed that education level factor also played an important role in determining an experience and knowledgeable of the FDH. It showed that 55% (n = 69) Indonesia FDH does not finished their secondary school, compared to the majority of (n = 72) Philippines FDHs which completed their education at diploma and degree level.

Table 3 portrays the level of communications pattern variables namely high context communication, low context

Table 2: Respondent profile (FDH)

FDH’s profile	Percentage
Gender	
Female	100
Ethnic	
West Java	18
East Java	26
Middle Java	24
North Sumatera	13
South Sumatera	2
Madura	7
Others	10
Religion	
Islam	100
Marital status	
Single	35
Married	40
Divorced	19
Widow	6
Level of education	
None	7
Basic	44
Lower secondary	32
Upper secondary	11
Vocational certificate	2
Pondok/pesantren	4
Employer	
First	24
Second	43
Third	18
Fourth and above	15

Table 3: Level of respondent communication pattern (Employer and Indonesia FDH)

Variables	Level	Employer			Indonesia FDH		
		%	M	SD	%	M	SD
Communication pattern							
High context	Low (1.00-2.33)	3	3.31	0.53	2	3.19	0.49
	Moderate (2.34-3.66)	74			84		
	High (3.67-5.00)	23			14		
Low context	Low (1.00-2.33)	1	3.44	0.41	2	3.39	0.54
	Moderate (2.34-3.66)	66			69		
	High (3.67-5.00)	33			29		
One-way	Low (1.00-2.33)	4	3.58	0.48	3	3.58	0.53
	Moderate (2.34-3.66)	56			53		
	High (3.67-5.00)	40			44		
Two-way	Low (1.00-2.33)	0	3.89	0.56	0	3.78	0.48
	Moderate (2.34-3.66)	29			34		
	High (3.67-5.00)	71			66		

Table 4: Level of communication conflict management strategies

Variables	Level of managing	Employer			Indonesia FDH		
		%	M	SD	%	M	SD
Communication conflict							
Avoidance strategy	Low (1.00-2.33)	46	2.69	0.76	29	2.99	0.80
	Moderate (2.34-3.66)	44			54		
	High (3.67-5.00)	10			17		
Domination strategy	Low (1.00-2.33)	10	3.32	0.61	49	2.50	0.71
	Moderate (2.34-3.66)	71			44		
	High (3.67-5.00)	19			7		
Integration strategy	Low (1.00-2.33)	3	3.54	0.54	5	3.51	0.52
	Moderate (2.34-3.66)	47			49		
	High (3.67-5.00)	50			46		

communication, two-way and one-way communication. Overall, the majority of the employers (74%) and FDHs (84%) were categorized into moderate high-context communication level; $M = 3.31$, $SD = 0.53$ and $M = 3.19$, $SD = 0.49$. For low context communication variable on the other hand, 66% of the employers and 69% of the FDHs were categorized into moderate low-context communication level; $M = 3.44$, $SD = 0.41$ and $M = 3.39$, $SD = 0.54$. Meanwhile, for one-way communication variable, a little >50% of the employers (56%) and the FDH (53%) were categorized into moderate one-way communication level; $M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.48$ and $M = 3.58$, $SD = 0.53$. For two-way communication variable, the majority of the employers (71%) and FDH (66%) were having high two-way communication level; $M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.56$ and $M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.48$.

To identify the priority in communication selection based on either high or low context, this study found that both employers and FDH practiced more low-context communication compared to high context communication. Whereas for determination of one-or two-way communication practices among employers and FDHs, this study found that employers and FDHs practiced more two-way communication in their relationship. This finding is parallel to Inon's qualitative study which found most Malaysian employers practice more on two-way

communication with their FDHs, however in most cases, the role as employer is more important. While to some domestic workers, they said that they heard and followed the entire employer's order.

Table 4 shows the level of strategies in dependent variable, namely; communication conflict management strategy. There were three strategies that were used known as avoidance, domination and integration strategy. Generally, the level of avoidance practice among employers is balanced with the percentage of 46% in low and 44% in moderate level ($M = 2.70$, $SD = 0.76$). Whereas for FDH respondents on the other hand, the level of avoidance strategy practice is in moderate level as much as 54% ($M = 2.99$, $SD = 0.80$).

For the domination strategy practice among employers and FDHs, this study found that the employers (71%) practicing at moderate level; $M = 3.32$, $SD = 0.61$ and FDHs (49%) practicing at low level; $M = 2.50$, $SD = 0.71$. Finally for the integration strategy, some employers (50.0%) and FDHs (49%) practice integration strategy at moderate levels; $M = 3.54$, $SD = 0.54$ and $M = 3.51$, $SD = 0.52$. Therefore, it can be concluded that most employers and Indonesia FDHs practice more on integration strategy in managing their communication conflict. Findings of this study is parallel to Ting-Toomey and Oetzel (2003) study which found

Table 5: Difference in conflict management strategy practice between employer and Indonesia FDH

Communication conflict	n	M	SD	t	p-values
Management strategy					
Avoidance strategy					
Employer	100	2.69	0.76	-2.689	0.008*
FDH	100	2.99	0.80		
Domination strategy					
Employer	100	3.32	0.61	8.754	0.0001*
FDH	100	2.50	0.71		
Integration strategy					
Employer	100	3.54	0.54	0.501	0.617
FDH	100	3.51	0.52		

*Level of mean at 0.05

that selection of the strategy in managing communication conflict was driven by that situation and level of conflict, however generally, it is shown that individual which practice collectivistic communication tend to choose avoidance and/or integration strategy compared to domination strategy while individual which practiced individualistic culture on the other hand, used to practice domination strategy in managing communication conflict among those in different culture.

The independent sample t-test was also used to determine whether Malaysian employers and Indonesian FDHs differ significantly in the intercultural communication conflict management strategy practice. Based on Table 5, the results indicates employers and Indonesian FDHs were significantly differ in practicing avoiding strategy, ($t(200) = -2.689, p = 0.008$). Indonesian FDHs have a significantly higher level of practicing avoiding strategy ($M = 2.99, SD = 0.80$) than employers ($M = 2.69, SD = 0.76$). Significant differences also exist between employer and Indonesian FDH in terms of domination strategy practice ($t(200) = 8.754, p = 0.0001$). Employer have a significantly higher level of practicing dominating strategy ($M = 3.32, SD = 0.61$) than Indonesian FDH ($M = 2.520, SD = 0.71$). Unfortunately for difference of integration strategy practice, Table 5 show that there is no significant difference for integration strategy practice between employer ($M = 3.54, SD = 0.54$) with Indonesia FDH ($M = 3.51, SD = 0.52$) ($t(200) = 0.501, p = 0.617$). Overall, it was identified that there is a wide differences between Malaysian employers and Indonesian FDHs in their intercultural communication conflict management strategy that covers avoidance and domination strategy while there is no differences in integration strategy.

A study by Donald and Shockley-Zalabak (1986) in the context of organizational conflict management, showed that the employers prefer to use the domination strategy in managing conflict compared to the professional group that practiced more on integration strategy. On the other hand for the support group, avoidance strategy is more practiced in managing the organizational conflict.

CONCLUSION

From the findings of this study, it can be found that:

- In the context of practicing communication patterns, Malaysian employers and Indonesian FDHs consistently practiced low-context communication, the two-way communications and more concern for self-face
- While in the context of the practice of intercultural communication conflict management strategy, Malaysian employers practiced more integration and dominating strategy. Meanwhile, Indonesian FDHs was adopting integration and avoiding strategies

IMPLICATIONS

Suggestion for the employers and Indonesian FDHs are:

- Employers and FDHs should be more sensitive on the issue of culture (lifestyle, communication skills, workings) practiced by employers or FDHs, respectively
- Responsible party such as Immigration Department, Ministry of Home Affairs and Persatuan Agensi Pembantu Rumah Asing (PAPA) should play a more effective role in issuing and channeling the information to civil society in giving relevant information about the FDHs culture in a country
- Employers and FDHs should be more careful in managing the communication conflict so that a harmony relationship can be shaped in order to avoid violence in household

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