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Coping With Cross-Cultural Interactional And Relational Difficulties: Strategies Used By African Graduate Students In A Local Malaysian University

Background

Although intercultural communication plays an important role in the lives of international students, it is not an easy process and is not always successful. Intercultural interaction can be a stressful event, as argued by some scholars such as Kim (1995) and Ward & Rana-Deuba (2000). Successful intercultural encounters can hardly be achieved without engaging in extensive interaction and developing good interpersonal relationships with the host nationals. But as Begley (2000) points out, many intercultural communication scholars concur that intercultural interactions are more problematic than intracultural ones because the participants' behaviors are shaped by culture in ways usually not recognized. As such, international students are bound to experience communication difficulties in living in an unfamiliar environment with different cultural values, as argued by many scholars (e.g., Lin and Yi 1997; Furnham 1997; Begley 2000). A review of literature on the type of intercultural communication difficulties suggests the following as common communication difficulties experienced by sojourners, including international students: language difficulty, difficulty in interaction and making friends with host nationals, prejudice and discrimination, adjusting to social customs and

norms, and verbal and non-verbal communication (Phang 2002).

Several coping strategies are available to international students to manage their communication difficulties. Coping strategies represent thought and actions that people use to deal with uncertain and stressful situations (Auerbach & Gramling 1998). Among the widely accepted conceptualization of coping strategies are those proposed by Folkman & Lazarus (1985), and Carver, Scheier & Weintraub (1989). Although somewhat different, they propose two types of coping strategies: problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping involves doing something to alleviate the problem causing the distress. Efforts are made to change the stressful situation through problem solving, decisions making or direct action. The coping strategies that are categorized under problem-focused include active coping, restraints coping, confrontation coping, and seeking instrumental social support. Emotion-focused, on the other hand, is that which involves cognitive, intra-psychic and behavioral efforts that are directed at reducing or managing emotional distress and regulating stressful emotions. In the emotion-focused coping, the strategies involved are acceptance, positive reinterpretation and growth, self-control, seeking emotional social support, distancing and behavioral disengagement.

While there have been substantial studies on the adjustment or adaptation of international students, as pointed by Jacob (2001), Tsang (2001) and Pawanteh (1999), few studies specifically investigate the types of communication difficulties faced by these students and the strategies used to cope with the difficulties. Most of the studies done on the adjustment and adaptation issues do not specifically focus on the aspect of communication as experienced and played out by the international students. Most of the past studies have been quantitative in nature. Studies that adopt qualitative approach are not many. Another important gap in the area of international students adaptation research is the lack of research conducted in the developing countries.

The flow of foreign students has been from the developing nations to the Western industrialized nations. However, although developed countries host a bigger population of international students, the developing countries are receiving foreign students in increasing proportion. While

there are a small number of students from the industrialized nations who study in the Third World, the number of Third World students studying in other Third World countries is significantly larger. Over the recent years, Malaysia, for instance, has hosted a significant number of students from other countries, and continues to do so today.

There were approximately 10,443 foreign students in Malaysia in the year 2001, as reported by the *New Sunday Times* (February 3, 2002). In the academic year 1999, among the universities tracked, the International Islamic University hosted the highest number of international students (1,503), followed by Universiti Putra Malaysia (502), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (426) and Universiti Malaya (372).

In spite of the growing importance of international education to the country, not many studies have been done on international students in Malaysia. One of the recent studies found was by Pawanteh (1999), which described the experiences and accounts of early adaptation and culture shock of international students from four different countries. International students in the Malaysian universities not only need to deal with academic challenges, but also with new customs, languages, food, living arrangements, and social life to mention a few. Communication, understanding and learning may be inhibited by the cultural values gap between the international students and the local people.

The communication experiences of international students in Malaysia may vary (and significantly) with those who are studying in other countries as the cultural milieu influence the communication experiences. Jacob (2001), for instance, argued that students from African countries might have some concerns that are different from international students from Asia.

Research Question

Given the growing importance of international education to Malaysian interest and the dearth of local literature on international students in the country, there is a need to understand the coping strategies employed by international students in dealing with the communication difficulties they encounter in their interaction with the locals. The present study focuses on the experience of African students in a Malaysian public university in the Klang Valley. The reason

for studying the experience of African students is that they make up the largest group of international students in the study site. Specifically, the study is guided by the following research questions: What are the factors that contribute to the communication difficulties experienced by African students when interacting with Malaysians? And how do they cope with the communication difficulties?

Methodology

The present study employ a qualitative inquiry approach as it attempts to uncover the workable coping strategies used by the African students in a public Malaysian university. A qualitative approach is used because it is important to capture the richness and gain an intensive description and holistic understanding of the communication difficulties and coping strategies of the students. A case study design was used for the purposed of this study. As purported by Merriam and Simpson (1995, p. 108), a case study is an "intensive description and analysis of a phenomenon or social unit such as an individual, group, institution or community," and "it involves investigating "many, if not all, variables in a single study," instead of surveying a few variables across a large number of units. It seeks holistic description and interpretation and "uncovers the interplay of significant factors that is the characteristics of the phenomenon." In this study, the "case" refers to a specific group of informants, which are the African students, in a specific setting, which is Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM).

The graduate student population in UPM is well diverse with students from Asia, Africa and Arab countries. For the academic year 1999/2000, UPM hosted 558 international students. African students make up the largest number of international graduate students in UPM— about thirty percent.

A total of 12 African graduate students from Eastern and Western Africa (three nationalities from each region) were selected as subjects of the study by using the snowball sampling method. The key informant of this study, who was a very active committee member of the International Students Association and has close relationships with other African students, was the first informant; he was asked to recommend other African informants who he thought fitted the criteria set

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by the researchers: (i) are willing to participate in the study by giving enough details and in-depth descriptions of their experiences, (ii) are able to converse with the researcher in English, and (iii) have had interaction with Malaysians in the campus for at least 3 months at the time of the interview. The researcher worked together closely with the key informant in gaining access and approaching the participants of the study. Apart from those recommended by the key informant, each participant was also asked to recommend other interviewees who he or she thought would meet the criteria.

The data was gathered through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews and observation in the informants' social settings. At least two or more interviews were conducted with most of the informants, except for four of the informants who were very busy and did not have time for subsequent interviews. Each interview ranged from 45 minutes to three and a half-hour. In the interview, in addition to the demographic questions, the informants were asked open-ended questions of the nature of communication difficulties when they interact with Malaysians, and how they handle the difficulties. The data gathered was "grounded" from the study, and not obtained from pre-determined questions or variables, to ensure the richness and the in-depth description of the study. Interviews were also conducted with 6 Malaysians who have regular or intensive interaction with the Africans. This is used as a form of triangulation to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. All in all the informants were 8 African males and 4 African females, ranging from 26 to 45 years old, and have been studying in UPM for 3 to 25 months at the point of the interview. Four were Doctoral students, and 8 were Masters students.

Results and Discussion

While intercultural communication is a useful tool for knowledge and cultural exchange, and helps in fostering relationship with the locals, there are inevitable difficulties to it. Many of the African informants have voiced that communication with the locals is not an easy task. The level of difficulty experienced by the informants varied; the intercultural communication difficulties are more marked in their early years of stay in UPM. Five major areas of

difficulties emerged from the data: (i) reservation towards foreigners, (ii) lack of greeting, (iii) indirectness in communication, (iv) interrogation, and (v) gender issue. These difficulties boiled down to one— a difficulty in social interaction and relationship building with the locals. All of the informants categorically mentioned this communication issue.

Many of the Africans pointed out that cultural difference is the major factor that contributes to the difficulties. As said by one of the informants, "it is a matter of cultural differences ... that create the communication problem." Another informant concurs with the view: "The difference between people comes from their culture." One informant provided an account that underscores the role of culture. The difficulty encountered in greeting is attributed to assumption of similarity between Malaysians and Africans. As reported by this particular informant, "I was thinking that certain things that were in my society was something general ... But I realized that that was not the right thinking, I realized I was wrong ... like you see the greeting and I was thinking that everywhere in the world, with greeting the first thing."

Language is another important contributing factor to the communication difficulties between the African students and locals, especially in the area of reservation towards foreigners. Several informants found that many of the locals they interact with do not seem to speak English confidently. One informant cited an example from his interaction with the locals to illustrate the lack of confidence in the language and the problem of evasiveness:

> There're few friends around that initially we interact but later they were running away. So one time I master the courage and asked: "Why are you doing that? I talked to you some few days ago, and this time you're behaving like you don't know me." He said, "Oh brother, my English is not, not that strong, don't know, what to say."

Another African respondent complained: "The Malay prefers to speak in Bahasa, they want to speak in their language. This may be one of the reason why they do not want to be in contact with the Africans." According to another informant, she talked to some of the local officers and they told her that the reason why Malaysians appear reserved was

partly because of the language problem. They were advised to know Bahasa Malaysia. The language constraints in relational development is best summarized with the comment given by one Malaysian informant: "That is the problem, because most of the staff talk in Bahasa Malaysia, so I guess [name of her African friends] not being able to understand Bahasa; it is disadvantage for building relationships with the locals." The Africans confessed that it is difficult to mix around with the locals as they can neither understand nor speak the local language. According to one African informant: "Inside the college, you find the Chinese all the time speak in Chinese, and the Malays all the time speak in Malay, and the Indians also, only on very a few occasions, you will hear Chinese and Indians speak English. But most of the time, they speak their language."

The present analysis also point to the prejudice and stereotype factors in the difficulties encountered by the Africans. Some of the informants complained that the image of the Africans portrayed by the media has been rather negative. This factor makes the Malaysians wary of interacting with the Africans. According to the key informant:

> ... The Western media ... there is a bad image about Africans; that make things complicated. This has affected very much the image of Africans. Africans are passive, as dangerous people, that you should keep away from them. And this stereotype definitely adds to the already existing communication difficulties ...

Some of the African informants have attributed the reservation of Malaysians towards the Africans to their limited exposure to Africans. This is in fact supported by the data from the local informants. A following comment by one of the Malaysian informants captured the point: "Africans are new to me. Because you don't really know them, so you don't know what is their reaction or what is the consequences of being too friendly to them, you know."

The above section has answered the research question on the factors that contribute to the interactional and relational difficulties. The findings support the notion that knowledge on cultural differences, language, prejudice, and stereotype are generic factors of cross-cultural communication difficulties.

The subsequent section will seek to answer the research question of how the African students cope with the communication difficulties.

The African informants admitted to experiencing some psychological discomfort associated with the difficulties they encountered. The following phrases describe their feelings: "You feel upset," "You feel bad sometimes," You feel rejected," and "Feeling that these people don't want to talk to me." A few of them who are rather new in the country used stronger words to express their discomfort: "So depressed," and "I was really disappointed." To regulate the psychological discomfort and stress, they used various coping strategies. Many of the strategies suggested by Folkman & Lazarus (1985) and Carver, Scheier & Weintraub (1989) are employed by the informants to deal with the discomfort and stress associated with the communication difficulties. Two categories of coping suggested by the literature emerged from the data: (i) problem-focused, and (ii) emotion-focused.

Among the four sub-categories of problem-focused coping (active coping, restraints coping, confrontation coping and seeking instrumental social support coping) that emerged in the analysis, the active coping strategy seems to be the most common strategy. Learning and understanding about the local society, learning the local language, and following the local rule are three active coping strategies found useful by all of the informants. As aptly said by one African informant:

> ... As a foreigner, the locals are not obliged to understand you. It is you who have to understand them, and behave and adjust accordingly ... whenever you learn more about the local people, that will help you to deal with them, to avoid any kind misunderstanding or communication problem.

Two specific methods extensively used by the African informants in learning and understanding the local culture are the interaction strategy and observational strategy. The interaction strategy involves a pro-active engagement and interaction with locals. More than half of the African informants mentioned that this strategy helped them to improve their interaction and relationships with locals. They suggested that by having more interaction with locals, they could learn to understand them better and thus reduce the

communication problem. As summarized by one informant:

> Because you want to know more about the other
> people and how do they behave, how do they think
> about their culture (pause) and this can happen
> through more and more interaction (pause)
> whenever you develop some kind of close relations
> with the Malaysians, many of the communication
> problem disappear.

One informant gave an example of how he used observation to help him understand why women did not shake hands with him:

> You don't shake hands with a lot of people here. So
> I don't force to shake hands with people, especially
> the Muslim women. If I forget, I just withdraw my
> hand, because over there we greet everybody, we
> touch. But here you don't, so I learn it later. So
> with time I get used to it.

Learning local language is another important strategy. Most of the African informants admitted that they have to learn local language— a bit of local language helps. According to many of the informants, if they speak the local language, the locals appear friendlier, and this gives them the feeling that the locals understand them better. The informants said that they learned Bahasa Malaysia through a number of ways; this includes taking language courses, dabbling in the language with local people, learn from media or from signs and notices around.

In addition to active coping, the restraints coping is also a strategy commonly used by the African informants. The specific strategy that are related to restraints coping include avoiding doing things that are not in line with the local culture, avoid criticizing or forcing the situation, and taking things as they come. Five of the informants mentioned avoiding doing things that are not in line with the local culture as one of their coping strategy. A couple of the informants gave a common example of how they cope with the absence of shaking hands in the Malaysian greeting. As pointed out by one informant: " ... if they extend their hand, then I extend my hand, but I don't extend my hand first."

Face saving is an important in the Malaysian culture. Since Malaysians are very sensitive to criticism, they felt that they should not criticize the people here. This issue is best summarized by one of the informants: " ... You have to be very cautious, don't criticize the same way you used to make in your country." Another informant elaborated: "We don't say bad things, because in general Malaysians don't like criticism. Why should I criticize? Malaysia is doing well in many things, more and better [than his country], why should I come here and criticized? It's not logical. That is why I keep quite, whenever you say anything which can create problem, just try to avoid it."

Several informants used confrontation coping to deal with the difficulties they encountered. However, this coping strategy did not emerge as a common strategy. The three specific strategies of confront coping mentioned by the informants are (i) reacting to the other party, (ii) trying to change the attitude of locals, and (iii) educating or explaining to the locals. Three of the African informants said they used reacting to the other party to cope with the communication problems. One of the informants mentioned: " ... Sometime I go into confrontation. I just confront the other person telling him you were wrong in so and so and you should do so and so, like that, ... openly." One informant recalled his experience in coping with the problem of Malaysians conversing with him before a courtesy greeting: "Please, this is not the way if you want to talk to me ... please greet me first before you talk to me." The local responded, "Oh sorry, sorry, how are you?" I answered, "Fine." Then we start chatting.

Another informant reported using the strategy of changing the attitude of the locals. He recounted his experience in dealing with the problem of non-responsiveness of the locals to greetings: "So I say salam and there was no respond. I say again, *assalamualaikum*, no response. I come closer to the person [put his face closer] and said, *assalamualaikum*, yeah until the person responded back by saying *waalaikumusalam*. Then I go."

Seeking instrumental social support is another important coping strategy mentioned by a number of the informants. This particular coping strategy involves seeking advice, assistance, or information. Discussing with fellow colleagues helps the informants to relieve their discomforts. Some of

them said they also discussed their difficulties with their Malaysian friends.

In addition to the problem-focused coping strategy, the informants also reported using other strategies categorized under the emotion-focused coping strategy. Acceptance, reinterpretation and growth, and self-control strategy are commonly use by the informants to reduce or manage emotional distress. Among these, acceptance seems to be more prevalent. The informants readily used the strategy of accepting the local culture and people in dealing with their problem of interacting with Malaysians. As aptly summed up by one informant in accepting the way Malaysians initiate conversation, "That's the culture here, that's the accepted way, I cannot come and superimpose my own. I try to accept, because if I don't accept, I will have problem." This observation suggests the importance of cultural tolerance in intercultural encounters.

Another psychological positioning that helps the informants in coping with the difficulties is by adopting an attitude of approaching life as a challenge or a learning experience and trying to look at things more positively. Five informants mentioned this positive reinterpretation and growth coping strategy. By seeing things differently, the Africans were able to make friends with the locals, although with some problems. As pointed out by one informant:

> I think I can get along with everybody here, the Chinese, Indians, and the Malays. Because I have lived with a lot of different people and I know that most people, most of us have our own individual differences and cultural practices. And I feel nobody is perfect, all of us have our own bad sides.

Along with positive attitude, self-control is another useful strategy mentioned by the respondents. Four informants indicated that they made deliberate efforts to keep their feelings to themselves and not to lose temper. As pointed out by one informant, "What can we do? We can't be angry everyday, because it means I lose my temper again, I will be angry with a lot of people everyday." Another informant said, "I don't want to do things to hurt people. I don't go into detail to hurt people." One informant pointed out that he had

to conceal his inner feelings because he could not express them the way he would express at home.

The data also revealed that some of the informants used behavioral disengagement occasionally. A sense of frustration or resentment can be detected in the strategy of not taking the effort to interact or resolve an issue. For instance, two informants pointed out that unless the locals showed an interest with them in interacting, they would normally not do anything or take any initiative to start or sustain a conversation. "I feel that if you are interested to talk to me, then I will start. If I feel that you are not ready to interact with me, and I make myself expensive, I am not ready to interact with you," voiced one of the informants.

Conclusion

It is evident that intercultural communication experience of the African students while interacting with Malaysians is problematic in nature. The main problem encountered relates to social interaction and relationships building. The finding is very much in line with Pawanteh's study (1999), which revealed that the difficulties in the daily life of the informants have to do with the management of interpersonal relationships with the locals. This difficulty is attributed to differences in culture, lack language competency, prejudice and stereotype, and limited cultural knowledge.

A range of cognitive, affective and behavioral strategies is available to cope with the discomfort or stress associated with the interactional and relational difficulties. The coping strategies used may not be successful or make them more interculturally competent, but in a way, they help the African students to reduce the anxiety or stress generated by the problems. Among the strategies, active coping, restraint, acceptance, and positive reinterpretation are preferable and workable coping strategies. These are the strategies used by the informants if they want to adapt and blend in with the local culture. Increase interaction and observation are the two main methods of active coping used by the subjects to learn and understand the local culture. These methods are similar with Taylor's study (1994) of the behavioral learning strategies of interculturally competent individuals used in developing intercultural competence in the host culture.

The findings also concur with the idea of host language competence in increasing sojourner's ability to cope with the uncertainty and anxiety in intercultural encounters. As pointed by Gudykunst & Sudweeks (1992), one of the best ways to learn about people from other culture is to study their language. If the African students make an effort to speak the local language, the host nationals usually take this as a positive sign, and the attempts to use the local language will increase the host national's desire to get to know foreigners as individuals.

Acceptance and positive reinterpretation are form of emotional-focused coping that seem to make the informant more interculturally competent. This occurs when they try to endure the cultural traits of the Malaysians by regulating their emotion, instead of trying to do something or change the way Malaysians initiate and manage their interaction. It appears that the African students used the behavioral disengagement, a counter productive strategy only when they felt frustrated with the situation.

The primary contribution of the present study lies in the insights it provides into the various specific ways the cultural and communication style differences are played out in the interaction and relationship building between the African students and Malaysians. A training program for the new international students should sensitize them of the difficulties in relating and developing relationships with the locals. It is expected that they will experience some degree of psychological stress and discomfort. They should be advised on the usefulness of active coping, restraining, acceptance and positive reinterpretation in managing the anxiety and discomfort associated with the interactional and relational challenges when communicating with the locals. Intercultural communicators must use all the possible cognitive, affective and behavioral coping strategies available to them to manage the intercultural communication challenges, as argued by Kim and Paulk (1994).

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