

Explicating Muslim Family Communication Strategies for Peace in Thailand's Deep South

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Abstract

Family communication is a way of exchanging verbal and non-verbal messages among family members. It is basic, small but vital in any society, particularly Muslim communities in the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and some parts of Songkhla, Thailand, as it cultivates and raises righteous members. Through family communication, members tend to feel at ease to express their thoughts, feelings, needs, love, admiration and connection to one another. It is not only relationships, but also an atmosphere that creates better understanding and peaceful relationships among members in the family. In the ongoing southern unrest and violence, family communication is the best way to build warm relationships and trust among family members. This article aims to discuss the four strategies of Muslim parents in the south of Thailand have done to develop good lines of communication to build peace in family. These include creating time for talking, being active listeners, paying attention to non-verbal messages, and greeting any members with the Islamic greeting. Therefore, effective communication in a family plays an important role to foster and strengthening relationship among family members.

Keywords: Family Communication, Peace, Southernmost Provinces of Thailand

Strategi komunikasi keluarga untuk perdamaian dalam kalangan penduduk Islam di Selatan Thai

Abstrak

Komunikasi keluarga adalah suatu bentuk pertukaran mesej lisan dan bukan lisan di kalangan ahli keluarga. Ia adalah teras yang kelihatan kecil tetapi sebenarnya penting dalam mana-mana masyarakat, termasuklah dalam masyarakat Islam di wilayah Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat dan beberapa bahagian di Songkhla, Thailand. Secara idealnya, komunikasi keluarga dapat memupuk dan melahirkan anggota keluarga yang baik pekertinya. Hal ini demikian kerana setiap ahli keluarga akan cenderung berasa selesa untuk menyatakan fikiran, perasaan, keperluan, cinta, kekaguman dan meneguhkan kesalinghubungan mereka. Ianya juga adalah suasana yang mewujudkan pemahaman yang lebih baik dan hubungan yang sejahtera dengan setiap anggota dalam keluarga. Dalam konteks kekacauan dan keganasan yang kerap tercetus di selatan Thailand, komunikasi keluarga adalah cara terbaik untuk membina perhubungan yang mesra dan membentuk kepercayaan di kalangan ahli keluarga. Artikel ini bertujuan membincangkan empat strategi oleh ibu bapa Islam di selatan Thailand untuk membentuk komunikasi yang baik bagi membina keamanan dalam keluarga masing-masing. Pertamanya, ibu bapa akan meluangkan masa untuk berbual; menjadi pendengar yang aktif; memberi perhatian kepada mesej tanpa lisan, dan menyapa setiap ahli keluarga dengan ucapan secara Islam. Rumusannya, komunikasi yang berkesan dalam keluarga memainkan peranan penting untuk memupuk dan mengukuhkan hubungan sesama ahli keluarga dan seterusnya mewujudkan keamanan dalam persekitaran.

Kata Kunci: *Komunikasi keluarga, Perdamaian, Daerah sempadan Thailand*

Introduction

The term “peace” and “peace-building” came up and become widely recognized among people in the southern part of Thailand in the early 2004 as a result of unrest and insurgency on 4 January. Over the past years, the Thai government has cooperated with people in both governmental and non-governmental organizations to reconcile differences, normalize relations in order to prevent the resumption of violent conflict by creating peace through public hearing, dialogue, as well as peace talks to find solutions and bring peace to the Deep South of Thailand. In this regard, communication plays an important role to help achieve peace and stability in the southern unrest and violence.

Peace is common individual value and fundamental human needs. Everyone who lives in the conflict area wants to live peacefully and free from violence. Peace means the absence of conflict. This definition helps to refocused peace to more personal or small group level. At this level, what is widely studied in communication is conflict resolution. Peace can then have more personal meanings such as living in harmony, cooperation, good will seeking and reconciliation. All these things are possible at broad and narrow levels. Only human beings can transform hostility into relationships of peace. It is humans that start and end conflict, and peace-building is not just an institutional task, but a human one (Jovan McCullum-Lawrence, 2014).

According to Pawilai (2003), peace is intangible ; individual cannot touch a sense of peace by the five traditionally recognized senses such as sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste but most be by hearts and minds. Peace belongs to individuals; everybody can make it real and tactile in everyday lives, starting from talking and communicating with members in family, the smallest but very importance unit in society, particularly in the ongoing conflict in the south of Thailand. Part of social conflict is caused by family problems, deriving from ineffective communication in family (Department of Women’s Affairs and Family Development, 2011).

Prasertsuk (2015) states that the root cause of family problems today is lack of communication in the family. This is because family members assume that they all know and love each other without telling. It is, therefore, not essential for them to communicate frequently and openly. In practice, however, relying on only mindreading can lead to feelings of loneliness, distrust, frustration, resentment or hurt. Therefore, communication is the key to healthy family relationships.

Marital and family researchers have discovered that unhappy family relationships are often the result of negative communication patterns (Peterson and Green, 2009). The family that communicates in unhealthy ways brings more conflict, stress for family members, and difficulty in everyday interactions. There is no way to completely avoid family conflict. However, being able to communicate frequently, openly and honestly can strengthen family communication and contribute towards sustainable peace in society as a whole.

This article was modified from my research on building a culture of peace in Muslim community in southern Thailand through family communication (Benharoon, 2012). The study aims to find ways to set sustainable peace in Muslim-dominated provinces in the south to live harmony, cooperation, and reconciliation. In the southern region, situation of unrest and violence, good communication among family members could establish good lines of communication that lead to build a culture of peace. Communication within the family is extremely important (Peterson and Green, 2009). Thus, it is the healthy way and the greatest skills that aids in conflict resolution (Brower and Darrington, 2012) in both inside and outside family.

Muslims in Thailand

Thailand is made up of 76 provinces and a predominantly Buddhist country. It has a total population of 69.18 million (July 2017, UN estimated). Of which 75 percent are from the Thai ethnic groups. About 14 percent are Chinese and 11 percent are Malay-Muslims and non-Thai groups such as Indian, Pakistanis, Cambodian and Vietnamese. They speak different dialects, but Thai is the principal language of education and government and is spoken throughout the country. Next to Buddhism, Islam is the second major religion in Thailand.

Thailand's Muslim population is diverse, with ethnic groups having migrated from as far as China, Pakistan, India, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and Indonesia, as well as ethnic Thais, while about two-thirds of Muslims in Thailand are the Malays.

This discussion focuses on the Malay-Muslims in the southernmost provinces of Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat and some parts of Songkhla. The vast majority of the Muslim population is predominantly Malay, about 80 percent of the region's population. They are Malays of the Malayo-Polynesian ethnolinguistic group, whilst most of the Thai population are Siamese or closely related Lao of the Tai-Kadai ethnic group. The Malays are Muslims and Islam is their way of life, while the Thais are predominantly Buddhists. Most of the Malay-Muslims are bilingual: they speak the Thai national language and a local dialect, Pattani Malay, which is similar as that spoken in Kelantan, an east coast state in Malaysia and Thailand neighbouring country. Their custom, culture and traditions are more closely related to those of the Malays in Malaysia than the majority of Thai people (Suhrke, 1989). This adds to the culturally unique identity of the Muslims in the south of Thailand. Due to these differences, the Muslims in the southernmost provinces refer to themselves as 'Malay-Muslims' whilst the Thai government prefers to call them 'Thai-Muslims'.

The high number of Malay origin inhabitants in the southern region is due the historical nature of the area, which was once under the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Patani, an Islamic Malay Kingdom established in the 19th century, but later annexed to Thailand in 1901.

Family Communication: Initial Stage to Peace-building in Society

Individuals cannot deny the importance of family, the basic unit in society and the single most important influence in a child's life. Prasertsuk (2015) notes that the family unit is where family members are socialized. It is the pillar of every community and Muslim communities in particular. The family is regarded as the cornerstone of a healthy and balanced society (Dhami and Sheikh, 2000). Within every family there are differences of opinion, approach, style, and expression.

Communication in the family can help the members to avoid conflict, keep the peace and reinforce lasting bonds. This means that when ones attempt to communicate, they are trying to establish a commonness with another individual (Thames and Thomason, 1998). If individuals are able to make peace possible in their family, they can at least expand a culture of peace to others regardless of nationality, religion and identity.

Family is where we first learn to communicate. It is central to human experience and communication plays a central role in the family (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Without communication, family members will not know what each other thinks or feels, and never understand each other's point which can make difficult family relationships. Family communication is a basic communication process of human being. It is through family communication that parent-child relationships are formed; they convey love, feelings, thoughts and connection to one another. This is the way through which verbal and non-verbal information is exchanged between family members.

Thames and Thomason (1998) defines family communication as more than just the exchange of words between family members. It is not just the words we speak but also components like facial expressions, eye contact, body language, tone of speech and posture. Family communication, then, is about sharing information with verbal and non-verbal cues. In particular, Thames and Thomason (1998) brought attention to listening in parallel is important as communication because it allows people to understand family member's point of view. Basically, family members communicate to share their feelings, to express love and admiration, to exchange ideas, to gain knowledge, and to increase understanding of others. They further point out that clear, open, and frequent communication is a basic characteristic of a strong and healthy family. Family that communicates in healthy ways is more capable of problem-solving and tends to be more satisfied and peaceful with their relationships.

Peterson and Green (2009) state that family communication can be divided into two areas: instrumental and affective communication. Instrumental communication is the exchange of factual information that

enables individuals to fulfill common family functions. In the meanwhile, affective communication refers to how family members share their emotions with one another. They further suggests the seven keys for building effective family communication; these are 1) communicate frequently; 2) communicate clearly and directly; 3) be an active listener; 4) communicate openly and honestly; 5) think about the person with whom

you are communicating; 6) pay attention to non-verbal messages, and 7) Be positive. The seven keys are significant to help maintain strong and healthy family relationships. These must be built on a foundation of trust, listening, and understanding. The family researchers maintained that a strong and healthy family, where the basis of a healthy society is always found, is the key to bringing peace to the society and the whole world.

Living with more people means more opportunities for communication and greater chances for conflict to arise. It is important to establish good lines of communication with family members to ensure that all family members' feelings are expressed, ideas get heard, and conflicts get resolved. When individual has a problem, other members around can help to resolve and find solutions. This will finally grow intimacy and positive relationships among them. A culture of peace, then, could happen at home. It is only in a peaceful situation that planned activities are possible.

Under the current southern conflict, members in each family have different perceptions, ideas, and thoughts. They interpret social reality and the violence differently. Family communication could lead to a better understanding of the conflict among family members. If something wrong happens with children, guardian can offer advice through family communication to find solutions together. Communication among family members seems simple. However, it can actually be a challenge as each individual has a different personality and a different way to view the world. Different viewpoints can sometimes clash, leading to misunderstandings, fights, and creating a volatile dynamic. By encouraging good communication, members can forge a solid foundation for building a peaceful home, and finally bringing peace to family members in long run.

The Four Ways to Establish Peace through Family Communication

Love is the great commandment, it is the bond that unites families. It thus ought to be at the center of all in the family. To build deep and loving family relationships seems simple. Contradictorily, it can be difficult when family members rarely interact and spend time with one another. It is, therefore, crucial that parents establish routine communication with family members. This approach could encourage members to express their needs, feelings, love, and admiration in order to satisfy their own needs. This includes decision making and problem solving. It is not only a relationship, but also an atmosphere that creates good understanding and peaceful relationships among family members. Effective communication is always found in a strong and healthy family. The Muslims in the south have long tried to build peace in family. They have done to develop good lines of family communication to ensure that all members get along and be closer, and also develop trust and support among them. In this article, the four ways for building peace in family, based on the author's previous study (Benharoon, 2012) will be discussed.

a. Creating time for talking

Having communication among family members is essential to having a happy family. Parents' communication is an important skill to effective family communication. This is particularly true when a critical situation is involved. In situation of southern conflict, children need parents' guidance and support. When families feel involved with a problem, parents can offer advice, share problems, and listen to their children to increase understanding to resolve problems together. This is an effective way to ensure that problems get solved, ideas get heard, and feelings are expressed. This will finally create trust and love among family members. Thus it is important for parents to make time for talking and teaching their children how to live peacefully in the situation just like the ongoing conflict in the south. Making time to communicate is the key for harmony at home and vital aspect of building strong and close relationships among family members. It is, therefore, extremely significant for families to make time to interact frequently with members. This creates and keeps strong family ties.

Having meals together with families is simple way to spend quality time that Muslim parents in the south have managed to talk about anything simple, from topics to important and/or serious issues. It is the great opportunity for parents to teach children knowledge that links to everyday life and any skills to improve family relationships. Spending time and engaging each family member at the table at least 30 minutes or an hour a day is the best time to get along with one another. Parents should ask children questions about what they learned at school or how they feel about the current southern unrest to get children's voice and perception. This is an open and meaningful communication daily. Bailey (2009) specify that families today spend less time eating meals together. Family members have more scheduled time and less time to talk and enjoy one other. Everyday meal time is thus a quality time to spend together, to share a meal, and to interact among family members. All can get a sense of being valued when having a regular meal together.

Halaqah an Arabic word, means a gathering in a circle where people sit and come to learn more about Islam and Islamic ways, is the other means that Muslim families in the southern part of Thailand have built to make peace tangible at home. Falconer (2010) explains halaqah as a principal form of schooling during the time of the Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings of God be upon him), and after his death, during the time of his companions, and continued as an important function of Islamic teaching and learning as the faith spread geographically in the centuries that followed. In the Muslim-dominated provinces of Thailand, Halaqah provides a unique opportunity to connect with children to learn more about one another, and to have open and honest conversations on different matters. Children feel comfortable opening up to their parents, and feel supported, valued and loved. Parents themselves take this special time to talk with children to make them feel safe, healthy and happy. Supportively, Peterson and Green (2009) point out that an environment with strong affective communication allows each family member to openly express their emotions in a positive and appropriate way.

Engaging in family activities during weekend is one way to spend times with family members. Spending times with family is important to

building and maintaining relationships with one another. It provides family members with feeling of love, support, and productive life. Being close to family is not difficult to achieve; it can be closer if family members are able to commit to family time for talking. Each family member should have an opportunity to speak, constantly engage, and feel valued. Time together with all of family is the best way to ensure a happier family. This proves that the more time members spend together, the better chance they have of sharing quality experiences.

b. Being active listeners

Effective family communication involves proper timing and both talking and listening. When children have a problem, parents' efforts to listen often result. Listening is one of the most important skills parents should have in order to improve positive relationships through fostering understanding and strengthening cooperation. By becoming a good listener, parents will improve, then, ability to influence and to persuade children. They will also avoid conflicts and misunderstandings among family members. These are all necessary factors to successful family relationships, which will eventually bring a strong and healthy family in Muslim communities in the south.

Generally, most parents want their children to feel free to talk to them. It helps if parents are able to actively and patiently pay attention to what children are communicating. Becoming a good listener is not so easy. It is essential for parents to practice active listening. According to Robertson (2005), active listening is a specific communication skill which involves giving free and undivided attention to the speaker. Active listening is a difficult discipline; it requires intense concentration and attention to everything the person is conveying, both verbally and nonverbally. It requires the listener to empty themselves of personal concerns, distractions and preconceptions.

Being active listeners in family, parents do not only make an effort to listen to what is being said but also try to understand the message. More importantly, this enables children to know that parents are interested in understanding the message conveyed. This also makes them feel

important while they are talking. Parents should listen to children in the way they like to be listened to. As a result, problems can be solved and even prevented when parents take the time to use active listening. It not only facilitates family communication but also helps parents to learn new information and to give them insights of children thoughts and behaviors. This in turn makes it easier to deal with them. Parents who are good listeners are often the best advisors because they have taken time to understand what children truly need. Paying attention to children very carefully enables parents to pick up non-verbal languages; facial expressions, gestures and other body languages. McWhinney (1989) states that parents can learn to be a better listener, but learning is not like learning a skill that is added to what we know. It is a peeling away of things that interfere with listening, preoccupations, fear, of how they might respond to what they hear. To improve better family relationships, both parents and children should learn to actively listen. Active listening will improve all aspects of family life in general and family communication in particular.

c. Paying attention to non-verbal messages

In addition to listening carefully to what is being said, effective communicators also pay special attention to the non-verbal behaviors of other family members (Peterson and Green, 2009). Non-verbal behaviors are of central importance to the expression of emotions (Bjerregaard, 2010). These non-verbal messages are, for instance, tone of voice cues, the use of space, facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and other variables, occur simultaneously with verbal communication. The non-verbal cues help regulate the flow of conversation, facilitate turntaking, provide feedback, and convey subtle meanings (Plumb, 2013). Some parents are unaware of these more subtle processes because they are paying close attention to the words spoken than those unspoken. Most people rarely take notice of non-verbal behaviors. However, they tend to pay attention to non-verbal messages when they are inconsistent with one another or with the words being spoken. For example, if, with an angry tone, someone says something, it is most likely that the tone is noticed. Generally, people tend to believe non-verbal messages rather than verbal ones.

Parents' ability to understand and use non-verbal communication can be a powerful tool that will help them connect with their children, express what they really mean, and build better family relationships. Body language is a vital form of family communication. When interacting with children, all non-verbal behaviors; the gestures they make, the way they sit, how fast or how loud they talk, how close they stand, how much eye contact they make, these send strong messages to parents. The body movements are primarily used to reflect emotions and to support the verbal message. It is obvious to understand that non-verbal messages play a great role in family communication.

By contrast, the way parents listen, look, move, and interact tell children whether or not parents care and how well they are listening. Those non-verbal behaviors signal and cues communicate their interest, trust, and desire for connection. They make quite an impact on the quality of family relationships, facilitating parents to accurately read children's mind and emotions. Sometimes body language does not match what is being said, and having an understanding of how to read it can be very helpful in determining what children really want or need.

The Muslims are expected to be good and respect to their parents, particularly their mother because she bears hardships in raising children. To deeply understand how children really feel, parents have to pay special attention to children's body language.

Successful non-verbal communication in family depends on emotional awareness and an understanding of the cues sent and received. This requires parents' full concentration and attention. Parents need to stay focused on moment-to-moment experience in order to fully understand what is going on in children's lives. This is a powerful means to get through children's feelings and needs. It also makes an important impact on family relationships.

d. Greeting family members with the Islamic way of greeting

Islam covers every aspect of life; it even teaches the Muslims the best way to greet one another. The Islamic greeting; "Assalamu Alaikum

“Wa Rahmatullah”, refers to peace and God’s mercy be upon you. The response to this is “Wa Alaikum Assalam”, which means “may His peace also be upon you.” This is a normal form of greeting mostly used in Muslim community all over the world. In fact, it is more than just a greeting, it has much deeper meanings. Salaam is a blessing that Almighty God Himself send down for his followers, so the Muslims should use it to get rewards from Almighty God (Mezrigui, 2015). The Islamic greeting is not only a greeting; it is also a prayer or supplication. In addition, it is a good social behavior and proprieties of friendship in Islamic framings. More significantly, the very practice of Islam is meant to promote peace and justice in the world.

Islam attaches the great importance to peace. According to Japakiya (2008), Islam is the religion that promotes peace and understanding among people of all faiths. It strongly prohibits all forms of violence and aggression against all people regardless of their faith or race.

To communicate with family members, it is good to start with the Islamic greeting, which is the basic and fundamental element of religion. It is an easy and good Islamic manner to practice. This is a Muslim custom that distinguishes the Muslims from other people. It holds a high position in Islam and is one of the defining criteria of belief.

The Muslims are expected to guide family members to Islamic knowledge and to implement Islam in all aspect of life. It is not just duty but expectation rewards for raising righteous ummah (Islamic people). Giving “salaam” to any family members as a means to attain peaceful relationships among its members. Parents should try to apply it and to encourage children at their early age to exercise and to make a peaceful environment in family, so that children can benefit from it. Salaam also helps family members to get closer to each other and also a source of removing arrogance. This is the way Muslim parents have long been created a culture of peace in family in the south. Making this small effort to greet one another with peace and blessings improves better relationships and foster understanding, which will finally bring peace to family.

Conclusion

Good communication among family members could establish good lines of family communication that lead to build peace in Muslim communities in Thailand's south. It is possible through effective family communication. It is also a significant channel for parents to guide children towards proper Islamic principles and avoiding being susceptible to movement and violence acts in the ongoing conflict situation in the south of Thailand.

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