



## Cultural Identity Negotiation as a Form of Conflict Management: A Study of Intercultural Communication Strategies in Batak-Chinese Marriage

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### **Abstract**

This research explores communication strategies using cultural identity negotiation in Batak-Chinese marriages in Indonesia. Identity negotiation theory guides this article deeper into intercultural communication strategies. This article uses a qualitative approach model to analyze deeper the cultural identity negotiations and what cultural identity factors impact conflict communication in harmonious domestic life, especially in intercultural marriages for Batak-Chinese couples in Jakarta, Indonesia. This research indicates an opportunity for couples who hold intercultural marriages to create a harmonious domestic life, prioritizing negotiations over their respective cultural identities as conflict management.

**Keywords:** *Intercultural Communication Strategy; Cultural Identity; Identity Negotiation; Conflict Management*

### **Introduction**

Indonesia is a developing country in the form of an archipelago. The number of islands in Indonesia (including large and small islands) stated in Law no. 6 of 1996 concerning Indonesian Waters is 17,508. There is undeniable ethnic, religious, and cultural diversity with many islands in Indonesia. This cultural diversity also causes the potential for intercultural marriages to occur. Intercultural marriages also cannot be avoided from potential conflicts involving ethnicity, race, and religion in married life itself.

It can be said that intercultural marriage couples have their strengths besides the quality characteristics to maintain a relationship despite cultural differences. According to Heller and Wood (2000) (Lee, Balkin, & Fernandez, 2017, p. 164), being an intercultural couple can further enhance mutual understanding and intimacy; because partners can be more open to discussing differences than exist assuming equality and agreement on a problem.

Negotiation of cultural identity, in this case, can be used as a form of conflict communication for couples with intercultural marriages. In intercultural marriages, couples have dynamics and challenges (Renalds, 2011, p. 1). Effective communication in intercultural marriages does not just happen but must be worked on. Therefore, it is necessary to have a communication strategy in intercultural marriages that

is open and honest with each other to create a harmonious domestic life. In this article, the author focuses on Batak and Chinese intercultural marriage couples in Jakarta, Indonesia.

### ***Methodology***

This article used a qualitative descriptive research method with a constructivism paradigm. Qualitative research aims to explore the construction of reality. Starting from the constructivist paradigm, the researcher views that the phenomenon of communication is the meanings that are constructed and reconstructed by the individual communicators. Therefore, qualitative research aims to explore and understand the constructions and meanings in interactions and communication relations in natural settings (Kriyantono, 2020).

Still, according to Kriyantono (2020), the qualitative descriptive research method is a strategy to describe data in a systematic, factual, and accurate manner to explore the depth or meaning of the data more deeply. The technique was also used to explain the phenomenon of the communication process that occurs in Batak-Chinese intercultural marriages in depth.

Meanwhile, to collect data used in-depth interview techniques. In-depth interviews are conducted flexibly and openly, not strictly structured, and not in a formal atmosphere (Nugrahani, 2014). In-depth interviews were conducted to find out communication strategies, how to reach mutual agreement and resolve conflicts, and how to explore the culture between Batak-Chinese couples in marriage to live in harmony. The interview was conducted repeatedly on the same informant, with open-ended questions about facts from events or activities and opinions. Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with three sources who are intercultural marriage couples. The three couples in this study were all Batak-Chinese intercultural marriage couples who lived in Jakarta, Indonesia.

### ***Result and Discussion***

The richness of Indonesian culture can be seen from the diversity of cultures that are spread throughout the archipelago. At the same time, this cultural diversity is the identity of the Indonesian nation as a great nation. This diversity also triggers the potential for intercultural marriages in Indonesia. This cultural phenomenon has always been a complex part of history (McFadden & Moore, 2001, p. 264). Changes and developments in global demographic patterns allow cultures outside Indonesia to be carried by migrants who eventually settle. This pattern gives birth to the significant possibility of intercultural relationships.

Conflicts in marriage often occur, especially in marriages with different cultural backgrounds. Based on the latest data obtained from lokadata.id in 2020, the most significant factor causing divorce in Indonesia is continuous disputes and fights, which reached 60.57%. Conflicts that arise in a marriage can also be caused by differences in cultural backgrounds, leading to differences in principle.

Naturally, people's views, in terms of knowing, living, and then getting married and interacting with other people, will be shaped directly and indirectly by various cultural influences (Moore, 2001). This research will discuss the negotiation of cultural identity as a form of communication strategy in conflict management efforts in intercultural married life, especially for Batak-Chinese couples.

#### **1. Cultural Identity Theory**

Cultural identity refers to the cultural background, such as the particular country or location in which a person grew up. It can be said that cultural identity is a warning road to one's own identity. The definition of identification points to memory, to everything that happened before. Given the interpretation

of identity, cultural identity can be placed where there is a collective memory of our homeland and family and personal memory, as the term cultural roots has already indicated (Chen, 2010).

Cultural identity is a process of self-identification related to a sense of belonging to a group that reassesses itself (Srikandi, Pawito, & Rahmanto, 2021). A person can be judged to represent a particular culture which is seen through behavioral, communicative, psychological, and sociological aspects. This assessment consists of all the values, meanings, customs, and beliefs that can be used to relate to the world. In terms of people's judgments about whether they or other people belong to a cultural group can also be influenced by several factors such as physical appearance, ancestral origin, and personal activities such as dressing, talking, or celebrating certain events. In addition, historical events, political conditions, situations, and conditions for interaction and public discourse, also affect cultural identity (Srikandi, Pawito, & Rahmanto, 2021).

Toomey's theory in (Griffin, 2015) explains how a person maintains an identity according to their respective culture. This cultural identity becomes an important variable that can influence a person's managing conflict. This theory also helps explain cultural differences in responding to each conflict.

## **2. Identity Negotiation Theory**

Identity negotiation theory defines managing the meaning of shared identity to achieve the desired identity (Srikandi, Pawito, & Rahmanto, 2021). Achieving common goals is part of the identity negotiation process. This process also requires communication of competency criteria (achievement of goals through appropriate interactions), such as accuracy and effectiveness. This identity negotiation process can be successful if the communicator and the communicator have created a feeling of mutual understanding and affirmative respect.

Cultural identity refers to the cultural background, for example, a country or a place where a person was born and raised. In contrast to cultural identity, intercultural identity does not depend on a particular culture to help a person discover their identity; and the process of negotiating identity means remembering what we have been through and implies that we must reinvent ourselves. Being or creating our new selves does not require us to rely exclusively on our pre-existing cultural identities (Chen, 2010). It is possible to recreate or reinvent ourselves with the help of every culture we come across through the negotiation process.

## **3. Intercultural Communication Theory**

Communication is an activity carried out continuously by humans that cannot be avoided and cannot be rejected (Samovar, 2010). While culture refers to the nature of certain social groups consisting of values, beliefs, ways of behaving, and ways of communicating, each member can develop their language, art, law, way of thinking, and beliefs (Devito, 2011). Intercultural communication can be interpreted as communication activities that occur between communication participants who have different cultural backgrounds (Mahagangga, 2017).

Two or more people can do intercultural communication with different cultural backgrounds. This cultural diversity causes not a few people to get married with these different cultural backgrounds. In married life, individualism and collectivism must still carry over in making choices and decisions. So that in the process, it can invite conflicts that are rooted in these cultural differences.

## **4. Conflict Management Theory**

The word conflict is taken from the Latin verb "configure," which means to hit each other. If interpreted sociologically, conflict is a social process that occurs between two or more people (groups), where one party attempts to get rid of the other party by destroying or making him helpless (Muspawi,

2014). Human life has diversity consisting of differences in gender, ethnicity, nation, religion, and belief, social and economic strata, legal, political and cultural systems, and life purpose. And in the history of humankind, these differences are the trigger for conflict.

What is meant by conflict management is a series of actions and reactions that occur between actors and outsiders in a conflict (Tjabolo, 2017). Conflict management also includes a process-oriented approach that leads to a form of communication (including behavior) from actors and outsiders and how they influence interests and interpretations.

Conflict management does not always mean avoiding, reducing, or ending conflict (Rahim, 2001, p. 76). Conflict management theory also involves designing an effective strategy used to minimize conflict dysfunction and increase the constructive function of conflict to increase learning in this case that can be brought into married life.

Conflict is also an interactive state, so it does not rule out the possibility of conflict between individuals. Although it is known that a person often interacts with himself, it is clear that a person must also interact with other people. Conflict can occur when one or two social entities are involved in conditions such as: (1) Obligated to engage in activities that are not under their interests or needs; (2) Holding behavioral preferences, whose satisfaction measure is not following the implementation of other people's preferences; (3) Want some of the desired shared resources which are limited in number so that everyone's wishes can't be fully fulfilled; (4) Having values, attitudes, goals, and skills that stand out in directing one's behavior but are considered exclusive of the values, attitudes, goals, and skills possessed by others; (5) Have a partially exclusive behavioral preference regarding joint action; and (6) interdependence in the implementation of specific activities and functions (Rahim, 2001).

## **5. Intercultural Communication Strategy in Batak-Chinese Marriage**

Intercultural marriage occurs between two individuals with different cultural backgrounds and nationalities. This intercultural marriage can occur due to technological developments so that even individuals who have cultural, religious, or racial differences can establish a communication process and interact.

Romano (2008) states that several factors can encourage intercultural marriages, including individuals who change residence, seek knowledge, work, and travel abroad. Another factor, as mentioned above, is the opportunity for individuals to take advantage of the internet network to communicate until they meet.

In an intercultural marriage, appropriate communication strategies are needed for conflict management. Communication in intercultural marriages is carried out by couples (two people) from different cultural backgrounds. This research focuses on couples with a wife from Batak cultural background and husbands with a Chinese cultural background.

An acculturation strategy model from Berry presents four strategies that an immigrant can choose when facing a new tradition or culture. The choice of the strategy also depends on a person's desire to maintain their original culture or heritage and the longing to adopt the dominant culture (Berry, 2003, 2006) (Croucher, Sommier, & Rahmani, 2015, p. 75). The four strategies are (1) assimilation, (2) marginalization, (3) integration, and (4) separation.

Assimilation is a condition when a newcomer reduces the importance of their genuine culture and then tries to identify the recent culture. Separation is a condition when newcomers retain their authentic culture and avoid interaction with the new one. Furthermore, marginalization is when newcomers show

little interest in one of the existing cultures. The last is integration, where a newcomer will be interested in maintaining their original culture and learning a new culture.

Based on the results of interviews with the first couple, Febri and Santoso, it can be seen that the assimilation process plays a dominant role in their intercultural marriage communication strategy. Both said they gave in to each other before and during a conflict. Usually, after a conflict, they will continue with negotiations or discussions to discuss the conflict and their differences in views. Furthermore, it was said that they were committed to making changes or adjustments to the conditions that had been previously negotiated (Febri, personal communication, February 9, 2022).

Further to the interview with the second couple, Christin and Fenrie, conflicts often occur because of cultural differences, such as standard customary rules in certain cultures. For example, traditional Batak weddings usually take a long time, so Fenrie, who incidentally is not used to it, shows his displeasure and chooses not to attend similar events so that conflicts arise. Usually, as a conflict management effort, Christin will take a more significant portion to give in and negotiate and then try more to follow her husband's culture. Still, according to Christin, cultural conflicts like what happened in their household have the opportunity to spread to extended families (Christin, personal communication, February 9, 2022). This situation is due to formal events with traditional events; the whole extended family automatically participates. Fenrie's reluctance to attend traditional Batak events puts Christin in a difficult position amid his extended family. But again, according to Christin, she will sit with his extended family and conduct discussions and negotiations where this method is commonly used in Batak customs.

The third resource couple, Catherine and Johnny, conveyed the same condition. Conflicts that arise due to differences in attitudes caused by different cultural backgrounds are addressed more openly (Catherine, personal communication, January 13, 2022). They also chose the path of discussion by upholding the principle of high honesty so that each party could know the truth about the existing shortcomings and then make adjustments to each other. They are also committed to mutual respect and respect for differences in cultural backgrounds and focus on not making these differences an obstacle in their domestic life.

## ***Conclusion***

Communication is a human need to interact with other humans. This condition is related to the fact that humans are social creatures carried out by exchanging messages through communication in the social process. In the process, interactive communication occurs in both physical and social contexts. This situation reflects how communication is established through interaction to create a pattern of interaction that, in its development, becomes a culture.

Culture and communication are two contexts that cannot be separated, where culture is the basis of communication. Culture reflects what and how a person interprets a message and interprets message so that the more diverse cultures there are, the more the practice of communication will develop (Hadawiyah, 2016).

Culture in the context of intercultural communication has a significant influence on the practice of human communication on the experience of socializing. Humans tend to communicate according to the culture, which is the dominant environment in their lives. This intercultural communication will affect how messages are received, message filtering, and how to receive them (Wahyuni et al., 2019).

The existence of cultural differences, especially in married life, has the potential to cause a conflict. Background and experience in communicating according to their respective cultures can influence their mindset and decision-making.

In order to achieve effective communication between two cultures that have differences, a strategy is needed to create a harmonious relationship in intercultural communication in the marital life of different cultures (Putri, 2016). The results of interviews conducted by researchers with three sources found that negotiating and giving in in the sense of being willing to learn to accept differences in each other's cultural backgrounds is one of the communication strategies. It is also the most appropriate form of conflict management for intercultural marriages. Based on the research conducted, it can be concluded that the process of negotiating cultural identity is an important variable that can influence a person in managing conflict.

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