

ETHNIC IDENTITY OF YOUNG MALAYSIAN ADOLESCENTS IN SARAWAK

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ABSTRACT

The study examined the ethnic identity of young Malaysian adolescents living in Sarawak from the aspects of their identification with their own ethnic group and their tolerance of ethnic diversity. The ethnic groups focused on were the Malay, Chinese and Indigenous groups of Sarawak. The development of ethnic identity of the adolescents was measured by means of Phinney's (1992) multi group ethnic identity measure. The data for the study were obtained from 1181 participants aged 13 to 17 in three urban and three rural localities in Sarawak. The results showed positive ethnic identity development for the group of adolescents under study, with frequent reports of affective behavior towards their own ethnic group. However, this was not backed by up an equally strong display of ethnic behavior such as using the ethnic language, practicing the life style of the ethnic group and interaction with members of the same ethnic group. A comparison by ethnic group revealed that the Indigenous participants had the strongest affiliation with their ethnic group, followed by the Malay participants, and the lowest was shown by the Chinese participants. The results suggest that the close proximity in social space for the adolescent Malaysians generates the conditions for them to construct notions of an ethnic identity that is hinged on the distinctiveness of their own ethnic group and interlaced with culture elements of other ethnic groups.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Ethnic Diversity, Malay, Chinese, Indigenous

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti identiti etnik remaja Malaysia yang tinggal di Sarawak dari aspek pengenalan mereka dengan kumpulan etnik sendiri dan toleransi mereka terhadap kepelbagaian etnik. Kumpulan etnik yang diberi tumpuan dalam kajian ini ialah Melayu, Cina dan Peribumi Sarawak. Pembangunan identiti etnik remaja diukur dengan soal selidik Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure yang diasaskan oleh Phinney (1992). Data untuk kajian ini diperolehi daripada 1181 peserta yang berumur 13 hingga 17 tahun di tiga buah sekolah kawasan bandar dan tiga buah sekolah luar bandar di Sarawak. Hasil kajian menunjukkan pembangunan identiti etnik yang positif bagi golongan remaja yang dikaji, terutamanya dari segi perasaan afektif terhadap kumpulan

etnik mereka sendiri. Walau bagaimanapun, tingkah laku etnik mereka tidak mencapai tahap setinggi perasaan afektif mereka terhadap kumpulan etnik sendiri. Ini termasuk penggunaan bahasa etnik, amalan gaya hidup kumpulan etnik dan interaksi dengan anggota kumpulan etnik yang sama. Perbandingan dari segi kumpulan etnik menunjukkan bahawa remaja Peribumi Sarawak mempunyai hubungan yang paling rapat dengan kumpulan etnik mereka, diikuti oleh remaja Melayu, dan yang paling rendah telah ditunjukkan oleh remaja Cina. Kajian ini mencadangkan bahawa jarak ruang sosial yang kecil bagi remaja Malaysia berupaya menjana situasi bagi mereka untuk membangunkan identiti etnik yang diengselkan pada keistimewaan kumpulan etnik mereka di samping berjaln dengan unsur-unsur budaya kumpulan etnik yang lain.

Kata Kunci: *Identiti Etnik, Kepelbagaian Etnik, Melayu, Cina, Peribumi Sarawak*

INTRODUCTION

Ethnic identity is a salient social identity in multiethnic communities. Social identity is “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group” (Tajfel, 1978). In multiethnic communities, ethnic membership is among the more prominent social identities particularly where there is intergroup tension and it may be accentuated by the official practice of categorizing people along ethnic lines. Malaysia has been described as one of the countries with clear ingroup-outgroup divisions (Clammer, 1982).

Common markers of ethnic identity include language, cuisine, dress and physical features. Some studies have shown that maintaining the ethnic language is important in fostering a positive ethnic identity (Mah, 2005; You, 2005) while other studies have also shown lifestyle and language use are more important markers of ethnic group membership (Kang, 2004). The relevance of these ethnic markers depends on the notions of ethnic identity held by the members of the speech community. In the study of ethnic identity, the language dimension is integral (Fishman, 1972). Fishman (1977) conceptualized the three dimensions of ethnicity in which language has different roles. First, in the paternity dimension of the language-ethnicity link, language “is not even merely an ethnic symbol in and of itself. It is flesh of the flesh and blood of the blood” (p. 19). Second, in the patrimony dimension, language is learned behavior used to express ethnic group membership. Third, from the phenomenological perspective, anything can become symbolic of ethnicity such as language, cuisine, dress, and physical features. In short,

Language is the recorder of paternity, the expressor of patrimony and the carrier of phenomenology. Any vehicle carrying such precious freight must come to be viewed as equally precious, as part of the freight, indeed, as precious in and of itself. (Fishman, 1997, p. 25)

One way or another, language conveys ethnic identity. Language is a vital aspect of any social group, but particularly an ethnic group's identity (Giles & Johnson, 1981). As such, ethnicity is a highly salient factor in language behavior.

The ethnic identity of young people is in a flux. Research in ethnic identity development has indicated a developmental pattern of stages. Tse (1998) describes the pattern as consisting of four main stages: ethnic unawareness, ethnic ambivalence/evasion, ethnic emergence, and ethnic identity incorporation. Using this ethnic identity development model, Tse (1999) found that adolescents have fluid ethnic identities. Adolescence is a crucial stage in ethnic identity development as this is the stage when they can be influenced. The emergence of ethnic identity of adolescents needs to be studied to obtain a better understanding of ethnic membership and tolerance towards ethnic diversity in the context of a plural society, particularly for the formulation or implementation of social policies.

In the Malaysian setting, the expression of ethnic behavior has been studied as a proxy of ethnic identity. In such studies, extensive use of the ethnic language has often been considered as a display of strong ethnic identity (e.g., Campbell & Jiee, 2010; Omar, 1991; Ting & Pua, 2010). In a study on Bidayuh living in Kuching, Sarawak, Campbell and Jiee (2010) found that language does play a role in determining the ethnic identity of a Bidayuh as they feel closer to the culture when they can speak and understand the language. Similarly, Ting and Pua (2010) drew a conclusion on the strong Hokkien identity of Hokkien speakers in their mid-twenties based on the pride they have in the Hokkien language and their liking for the use of Hokkien in their daily lives. However, there are fewer studies that examine ethnic identity directly. Direct investigation of the ethnic identity would shed light on how notions of ethnic identity is evolving in the midst of social changes which bring diverse ethnic groups into close proximity in social space.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study examined the ethnic identity of young Malaysian adolescents living in Sarawak. The specific aspects studied were their ethnic identity in relation to their ethnic group and their tolerance of other ethnic groups. The ethnic groups focused on were the Malay, Chinese and Indigenous groups of Sarawak.

METHOD OF THE STUDY

Participants

The survey was conducted on 1,188 school students aged 13 to 17 in six schools located in the Malaysian state of Sarawak. Three of the schools were in urban locations in Kuching, Sibiu, Miri and the other three schools were in the rural locations in neighbouring towns (Semariang, Durin, Bario). The ethnic composition of the sample is as follows: 47.8% Indigenous, 29.1% Chinese, 22.5% Malay and 0.6% others. The ethnic composition is reflective of the state population which comprises 48% indigenous groups, 25.9% Chinese, 22.3% Malay and 3.8% others (Department of Statistics Malaysia, Sarawak, 2011). A larger proportion of the participants were Iban (323 or 56.87%), with smaller numbers of Kelabit, Penan, Melanau, Kenyah, Kayan, Bidayuh and Saban. The Murut, Berawan, Bisayah and Kiput made up less than 2% of the participants.

For the analysis of data, questionnaires from participants in the Others category were omitted, leaving 1,181 participants. Based on this sample, 595 were female and 586 were male. At the time of the study, the participants were in Form One to Form Five. Almost all the participants (97.9%) had Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of education in secondary school. Only 1% and 1.1% had Mandarin Chinese and English as the language of instruction respectively. For primary school education, almost one-third of the participants went to Chinese primary school (30.3%) but most of the participants had their primary school education in Bahasa Malaysia (68.7%). The choice of medium of education in primary school is similar to that for pre-school: 27.0% Mandarin Chinese and 59.9% Bahasa Malaysia. There were 5.4% who had their pre-school education in English. The educational background of the participants indicates that they are conversant in Bahasa Malaysia.

The participants were mainly from the lower socio-economic status as shown by the parents' combined monthly income and educational level. A total of 72.3% of the participants had parents whose combined income was in this bracket. Another 15.9% of the respondents had parents who brought home between RM2000 to RM4000 per month but only 11.7% earned more than RM4000 per month. The parental monthly income tallied with their educational background. Most of the participants' parents had only Form 3 and Form 5 qualifications (one-third and one-quarter respectively). In fact, almost 20% of the participants' parents left school after Primary Six. This level of education limited their income earning capacity.

INSTRUMENT

The 61-item questionnaire used in the survey examined both language use and ethnic identity but only the latter is reported in this paper. The questionnaire also elicited demographic variables from the participants for contextualization of the results. The demographic variables elicited were ethnic group, age, gender, medium of education (kindergarten, primary, secondary), and parents' occupation, educational background and income.

The participants' ethnic identity was measured using Phinney's (1992) multi group ethnic identity measure which was formulated with the notion that adolescents were in the process of identity search. In Phinney's multi group ethnic identity measure, a 4-point Likert-type scale was used, with 1 indicating a weak presence and 4 indicating a strong presence of the variable. The subscales in Phinney's 20-item measure are as follows: Affirmation and Belonging (5 items); Ethnic Identity Achievement (7 items); Ethnic Behaviors (2 items); and Other-group Orientation (6 items). An additional four items on Ethnic Behaviors were included to capture the factors that are important in the local context. The Cronbach's Alpha for the questionnaire was 0.765 indicating reliability of the Bahasa Malaysia version of the multi group ethnic identity measure when used in the Malaysian context.

Data Collection Procedures

Permission was sought from the principals of secondary schools identified as research sites and from the education department at the federal and state levels. Upon receiving the official permission for the study, the data collection began with an explanation of the study to the principals of the schools concerned. This was done by the six research assistants engaged for this study. A copy of the questionnaire was given to the principals for this purpose. Following this, the research assistants liaised with teachers to identify classes of students who would fill in the questionnaire after school hours.

The students were mostly selected from the non-examination classes as the Malaysian Ministry of Education does not encourage studies to be conducted on Form Three students preparing for the *Peperiksaan Menengah Rendah* (Lower Secondary Examination) and Form Five students preparing for *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (Malaysian Certificate of Education, Malaysian equivalent of "O" level). A total of about 200 students were targeted in each of the six schools. To ensure a higher return rate, students were asked to give back the questionnaire as soon as they had filled it in instead of taking it home to return another day. Students who returned questionnaires were given a token of appreciation.

Data Analysis Procedures

Ethnic identification of the participants was according to what they had indicated in the questionnaire. In the event of exogamous marriages which involved two ethnic groups (e.g., Iban and Bidayuh or Iban and Chinese), the participants usually identified themselves by their father's ethnic group. There were some instances of the participants writing down the ethnic groups of both their father and mother. This is an area for further investigation but in the present study, they were assigned the ethnic group of their father in the context of the prevailing patriarchal society.

For the multi group ethnic identity measure, the mean score for the 24 items was obtained by reversing negative items, summing across items and obtaining the mean, following Phinney (1990). The mean score for the three ethnic groups was also computed for comparison. Then mean scores for each subscale was calculated for each group: Affirmation and Belonging; Ethnic Identity Achievement, Ethnic Behavior, and Other-group Orientation. Tolerance or acceptance of other ethnic groups was indicated by the mean score for the Other-group orientation whereas the mean score for the other three subscales indicate the strength of their ethnic identification. The strength of the ethnic identification or orientation was interpreted on a scale of 1 (weak presence) to 4 (strong presence), the mid-point being 2.5.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Ethnic identity of Malaysian adolescents in Sarawak

Using Phinney's (1992) multigroup ethnic measure, the results showed that the adolescent participants were positive in their ethnic identity (Table 1). Analysis of the constructs making up the ethnic identity showed that the mean score per participant per item for affective behaviour (3.47) is higher than other group orientation (3.08). The mean scores for ethnic behaviour (2.89) and ethnic identity achievement (2.88) are lower but they are still above the mid-point of 2.5 (range of 1 to 4).

Table 1: Mean Score Per Participant Per Item For Ethnic Identity Constructs

Ethnic identity constructs	Number of items	Range of total scores	Range of mean scores	Mean score per participant per item
Ethnic behaviour	6	8-24	1.33-4.00	2.89

Ethnic identity achievement	7	9-28	1.29-4.00	2.88
Other group orientation	6	8-24	1.33-4.00	3.08
Affective behaviour	5	6-20	1.20-4.00	3.48
Overall 24	24	6-28	1.75-3.75	3.06

The participants have strong ties to their ethnic group as indicated by the positive affective behavior towards the ethnic group (mean score of 3.48). The affective behaviors include being pleased at being a member of the ethnic group and having great pride in the ethnic group, achievements of the ethnic group as well as the ethnic background. This translates to close rapport with members of the ethnic group and a strong sense of belonging.

Despite with the highly positive affective behavior towards the ethnic group, reports of the display of ethnic behavior are not as high (2.89 in a range of 1 to 4). In this study, the ethnic behaviors include use of the ethnic language to show shared ethnic membership, practice of way of life that is reflective of the ethnic group and active participation in social activities that involve members of the ethnic group. The adolescent participants also reported frequent contact with older family members during family gatherings and festivities which help them to keep in touch with the values of the family and the ethnic group at large. The closeness with members of the ethnic group is also manifested in the form of feeling at ease in the presence of members of the same ethnic group rather than people from other ethnic groups. However, the mean score which is close to the mid-point suggests that outward show of ethnic behavior is reserved and conceptualizations of ethnic group membership may be changing among the adolescent participants.

Another construct of ethnic identity investigated was ethnic identity achievement as adolescents' notions of self identity are in a state of flux. The mean score of 2.88 which is close to the mid-point suggests an early state in the ethnic identity achievement. Generally the adolescent participants spent some time getting to know their ethnic group in the aspects of history, tradition and cultural practices and thinking about how their life is influenced by their ethnic group membership but the time invested in finding out about their ethnic background is rudimentary. The adolescent participants also have an

understanding of what it means to be a member of their ethnic group and how to relate to other ethnic groups in light of their ethnic group membership. However, at a more abstract level, they may not be sure of the role of the ethnic group in their life. The results suggest that the adolescent participants are still in the process of ethnic identity search and although they have chosen the ethnic identity they wished to be aligned with, the commitment was not as definite as it could be.

The results show clearly that there is a high level of tolerance towards ethnic diversity as indicated by the mean score of 3.08 for other group orientation. The adolescent participants liked to get to know other ethnic groups and often spent time with people from other ethnic groups. They also interact often with people from other ethnic groups in daily and social activities. The issue of not wanting to mix with other ethnic groups hardly arose. The schools they attend have a multiracial student and teacher population. The community outside of the school is ethnically diverse as well. Having grown up with ethnic diversity, the adolescent participants were conditioned to not only tolerate ethnic diversity but to embrace it as part of their lives. In the context of the multiethnic plural society, the results point to assimilative tendencies in the younger generation.

However, as the three main ethnic groups in Sarawak are distinct in their cultures and historical background, there is a need to examine whether their identity constructs vary with ethnic group. In the next section, the strength of ethnic identification and level of tolerance towards ethnic diversity are reported for the Malay, Chinese and Indigenous participants in the study.

2. Comparison Of Ethnic Identity Constructs Of The Malay, Chinese And Indigenous Participants

A comparison by ethnic group shows that the mean score for the identity constructs was the highest for the Indigenous participants, followed by the Malay participants and the lowest was for the Chinese participants (Table 2). However, the difference in the mean score per participant per item was not great and the mean score for the whole group of participants is close to that of the Malay participants (overall mean of 3.06 compared to 3.05 for the Malay participants). Tukey's test showed that the mean per participant per item for all the three ethnic groups were significantly different ($P < 0.0005$).

Table 2: Identification of Malay, Chinese and Indigenous Participants With Own Ethnic Group

Ethnic identity constructs	Chinese	Malay	Indigenous	Overall
Ethnic behaviour	2.82	2.90	3.17	2.89
Ethnic identity achievement	2.75	2.82	2.99	2.88
Other group orientation	2.84	3.05	3.24	3.08
Affective behaviour	3.30	3.54	3.57	3.48
Overall mean per participant per item	2.903±0.908a	3.048±0.922b	3.156±0.928c	

*Means in the same row with the same letters are not significantly different at 5% level.

The results show that the affiliation of the Chinese participants to their ethnic group was weaker than that of the Indigenous and Malay participants. This does not translate to a concomitant stronger orientation towards other groups as the mean score for this was also the lowest among the three groups. For the Indigenous participants, the emotional ties to their group are strong and their ethnic group identity is very salient to them. They are also more likely to be highly involved or interested in their ethnic or cultural heritage and customs. On a general note, the results suggest that ethnicity is important in the lives of the adolescents under study but this does not subtract from their openness and acceptance of ethnic diversity as their way of life.

One of the noteworthy findings of this study is that reports of affective behavior exceed overt expressions of ethnic behavior. Although people take pride in their ethnic group and their membership in the group, they do not necessary display the distinctive markers of the ethnic group. This is consistent with findings from studies which use language behavior as a proxy for ethnic identity. For example, Ting (2006) found that while some Foochow parents express regret that their children are not using the ethnic language, they do not take the essential step of transmitting the language to the next generation (see also Ting & Chang, 2008; Ting & Hung, 2008).

Similarly, David (2006) concluded from her study that although the Sindhi Indians' shift away from the ethnic language does not mean that they do not identify themselves as Sindhis. These findings show that the younger generation does not see a need to use language to express their ethnic group membership and therefore they do not hold Fishman's patrimony dimension of ethnicity. The findings point to the prevalence of Fishman's (1977) phenomenological perspective of ethnicity in which any symbol of ethnicity suffice which may include cuisine, dress, physical features and family background. This is an aspect of ethnic identity which needs further exploration.

Another finding that is of interest is that strong identification with the ethnic group can co-exist with positive orientation towards other ethnic groups. The co-existence of two affiliations that are assumed to be opposing has been found to be possible in studies on language attitudes. Baker's (1992) notion of additive notion of bilingualism provides for the co-existence of two languages with perhaps a differentiation of functions, in contrast to the subtractive notion whereby an increase in the importance of one leads to a decrease in the importance of the other language. In the present study, the Malaysian adolescents were found to be positive towards their ethnic group and other ethnic groups at the same time. The finding suggests that the ethnic identity search of the adolescent participants were taking them towards a notion of ethnic identity that is hinged on the distinctiveness of their own ethnic group and interlaced with cultural elements of other ethnic groups.

CONCLUSION

The study on the ethnic identity of adolescent Malaysians in the state of Sarawak showed the presence of rather strong ethnic identification co-existing with positive orientation towards other ethnic groups. It is clear that ethnic group identification does not impede development of congenial feelings towards other ethnic groups and acceptance of ethnic diversity as a way of life. Based on Phinney's (1992) multiethnic identity measure, the ethnic identity of the three ethnic groups are significantly different. The ethnic identity of the Indigenous adolescents was the strongest, followed by the Malay adolescents, and the Chinese adolescents had the weakest ethnic identity search and commitment. The findings cannot be explained by existing frameworks that hypothesize that ethnic identity search would be higher among minority than majority group participants (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990) and further investigations are needed to understand the socio-psychological makeup of the ethnic groups and the socio

cultural and political setting that influence the development of ethnic identity. Nevertheless, the snapshot of the adolescents' views on ethnicity suggests that the notion of unity in diversity may be achievable in multicultural settings.

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