Ethnic Identity and Boundaries Construction among Malaysian Undergraduates in Public Universities

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to provide insights into the ethnic identity formation and its metamorphosis into ethnic boundaries among undergraduates in Malaysian public universities. Previous studies and observations by Sanusi Osman, Emile Yeoh, Mansor Mohd Noor and other researchers have confirmed the occurrence of ethnic polarization in Malaysian public universities’ campus. It has also been discovered that the intensity of ethnic polarization is particularly high among Malay and Chinese undergraduates. Obviously, these phenomena indicate the perpetuation of ethnic boundaries among them.

Proponents of the macro approach such as Robert Miles argues that the ethnic boundaries are a consequence of disequilibrium in the society economic and political structure. Ethnic identity is seen as a form of a “distorted view” of oneself that is created to assist the capitalist to gain power and wealth. However, as opined by Michael Banton, these proponents have disregarded the fact that ethnic identity is constructed by individuals from their everyday experiences. Banton views ethnic identity as an outcome of rational choice made by individuals to associate themselves with certain groupings to face competition. Banton’s anascopic (micro) approach differs from the macro approach in the sense that it views ethnic identity as formed by individuals and not merely an assigned identity to fulfil the wishes of the capitalists. Their everyday interaction experiences with their family and peers; as discussed by Jean Phinney and Amy Kyratzis have provided them the meaning of ethnic identity. Hence, the boundaries are an outcome of ethnic identity expression that allows individuals to associate themselves with certain ethnic group. Their membership assists them to face competition from individuals of other groups. Clifford Geertz provided another view on the purpose of individual ethnic identification. Through his “primordial” proposition, he argued that individuals’ sentimental attachment to blood ties, belief, language and other ethnic grouping factors have caused them to relate themselves to certain ethnic identity. Therefore, as opposed to Banton’s rational choice, Geertz proposed that a person’s ethnic identity is the outcome of his association to his sense of belongings to a particular group.
In the case of the Malay and Chinese undergraduates, their family and peers ethnic socialization experiences have provided them the meaning of identity to face the competition from other ethnic groups. It could also be a form of primordial ethnic identity association. Consequently their ethnic identity is expressed in the form of ethnic boundaries. In order to provide insights for this proposition, this study engages the grounded theory approach. Data were collected by conducting eight focus group discussions in four Malaysian public universities.

Results from this study show the undergraduates constructed their ethnic identity through their families and peers socialization experiences. Their interpretations of their experiences have caused them to be aware and proud of their ethnic culture and heritage. They have also developed an awareness of the challenges their ethnic groups are facing. These consequences of ethnic socialization experiences have caused the undergraduates to position their ethnic origin as the fundamental element in their identity conceptualization. They feel attached to their ethnic identity and they find their identity assisted them to face the challenges of living in a plural society. Inadvertently the conceptualization has caused them to construct ethnic boundaries.

These findings reaffirm Banton’s argument that ethnic identity is built by individuals from their everyday experiences and should not be viewed as an outcome of structural disequilibrium. Nevertheless, ethnic identity formation is not merely a rational choice to form groups to face competition from other groups too. The socialization experiences have developed a sense of ethnic loyalty that eventually caused the formation of ethnic boundaries.

Key words: Ethnic identity, ethnic socialization, ethnic boundary.