

## **Socialization of Ethnic Identity and Its Consequence in the Form of Polarization among Youth in Malaysia**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The construction of ethnic identity has many consequences on ethnic relation. In the Malaysian youth context, the formation of ethnic identity through socialization has caused ethnic polarization. Researches proved that majority of Malaysian youths studying in public universities see ethnic as an important criteria in selecting roommate, assignment partner and even where to sit in the lecture hall. In view of the above circumstances, this paper intends to analyze the role of socialization in the forming of ethnic identity and its relationship with ethnic polarization among these youths. The intensity of ethnic polarization among them will be discussed by elaborating the findings of past researches related to the phenomenon. The role of nature in socialization will also be analyzed to ascertain the function nature plays in developing ethnic identity and ethnic polarization. This paper also discusses the role of nurture and the dialectic relationship of structural and action forces in creating ethnic identity which consequently may cause ethnic polarization.*

**Keywords:** *Ethnic Identity, Socialization, Ethnic Polarization, Ethnic Relation, Ethnocentrism*

### **ABSTRAK**

*Proses pembentukan identiti etnik mempengaruhi hubungan etnik. Dalam konteks hubungan etnik di kalangan belia yang menuntut di universiti awam Malaysia, pembentukan identiti etnik telah menyebabkan berlakunya polarisasi. Kajian-kajian menunjukkan belia tersebut memilih rakan sebilik, rakan tugas dan teman untuk duduk bersama ketika kuliah dengan berpandukan faktor etnik. Bagi memahami permasalahan ini, kertas kerja ini menganalisis peranan sosialisasi dalam pembentukan identiti sosial dan kaitannya dengan polarisasi kaum di kalangan belia di universiti. Tahap intensiti polarisasi dibincangkan dengan mendalami kajian-kajian lepas yang mengkaji fenomena polarisasi kaum di kalangan penuntut universiti awam. Selain itu, peranan biologi dalam pembentukan identiti akan juga dianalisis. Hubungan dialektik antara peranan struktur sosial (structural) dan tindakan individu (action) dalam pembentukan identiti etnik juga dihuraikan bagi menerangkan bagaimana perkaitan antara mereka boleh menghasilkan polarisasi etnik di kalangan belia universiti awam Malaysia.*

**Kata Kunci:** *Identiti Etnik, Sosialisasi, Polarisasi Etnik, Hubungan Etnik, Etnosentrism*

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnicities are social products built through construction either from an observer perspective or from an actor perspective (Banton, 1977: 156-172). The concept of ethnicity is used to distinguish people and to identify and hence forth forms the identity. As noted by many scholars (Banton, 1977; Eriksen, 1996; Brass, 1991), identities based on ethnicity are matters of perception, i.e. how others and a person identify himself or herself. While identifying, individuals typify and build perception which then influence how they interact with each other.

In the context of ethnicity, individuals typify people who do not share their criterion of as strangers and certainly such perception will dictate the type of relationship which will form thereafter. Samovar and Porter (2004) suggested that individuals from different cultural background will seek similarities with the objective of reducing uncertainties when communicating. In the end, individuals may choose to reduce or even withdraws from communicating with people from other races. Ethnic background will form polar which attract individuals from similar ethnic background to congregate and pool together. Thus race or ethnic relations are very much affected when individuals see each other as strangers. By doing so, they are constructing relationships with strangers.

The idea of “stranger” as discussed above is developed through identity which is how others identify a person and how a person perceives others. Therefore, ethnic background plays a pivotal role in laying the foundation of identity. Ethnicity has always been, or since the emergence of modern society, acknowledged as a major aspect of identity. When an individual is constructing his or her identity, the individual is also concurrently constructing his or her social space which in the case of Malaysia is manifested in the form of ethnic polarization (Sanusi Osman, 1989; Fatimah Daud, 2006). Ethnic identity somehow determines who a person is and also provides the person a guideline to interact in a plural setting. The outcomes of a research conducted by Fatimah Daud (2006) on undergraduates in five public universities in Malaysia show how the undergraduates were reluctant to mix with other ethnic groups and were more comfortable when were with the individuals of similar ethnic background.

This paper intends to explore how socialization as an agent for cultural transmission, constructs identities This discussion will be followed by an evaluation on the impact of nature and nurture on the development of ethnic identity before the authors zoom into the role of socialization in constructing identity. At the end of this paper, the roles of structural and action forces in ensuring individuals to be socialized into the developing their ethnic identity is discussed. This is to ascertain how socialization contributed to the development of ethnic identity which naturally caused ethnic polarization among the youths.

## INTENSITY OF ETHNIC POLARIZATION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES

Discourses on the ethnic polarization among undergraduates in Malaysia are not new. The plurality of Malaysian society which caused the phenomenon of ethnic polarization has become an important issue and concern for many Malaysians, especially policy

makers and academic scholars. Many are concerned about the intensity of ethnic polarization which is clearly observable in the higher education institutions of this country. The institutions housed Malaysian youths from diverse ethnic background. These youths meet within the compound of their campuses but the meetings do not necessarily indicate they are mixing well. Such phenomenon stirs anxiety. Naturally the anxiety arises when one assumes the phenomenon reflects the reality of Malaysian day to day life. As such, studies needed to be done to investigate the nature of this phenomenon. Questions such as to what extent the undergraduates are ethnically polarized should be thoroughly looked into to gauge its intensity. The intensity of ethnic polarization among undergraduates will indicate the severity of the problem and its form. Are these youths so ethnically polarized until they stop all forms of interaction among them or are they selective in choosing the areas where they would like to be with someone who hails from the same ethnic background?

Scholars like Mansor Mohd Noor who together with Abdul Rahman Abdul Aziz, Mohd. Izani Mohd. Zain and Umu Atiyah Mohd. Zakuan (2006) and Fatimah Daud (2006) had accomplished many studies on the intensity of polarization among undergraduates in Malaysian public universities. Unlike many other studies which did not clearly specify and identify how the undergraduates are ethnically polarized, their studies focused and provided much elaboration on the two areas. Their findings help in finding out how intense ethnic polarization was in Malaysian public universities.

Mansor Mohd Noor and associates' (2006: 295) study was conducted in the Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). In their conclusion, the ethnic relation among the undergraduates of UUM was relatively positive. The study discovered that the undergraduates were approachable by other ethnic students especially in formal learning setting. They were also able to interact and accept those who came from different ethnic background. However, in certain situation such as in daily interaction, the undergraduates chose to interact with those who are from their own ethnic group. For example, 75.5% of the Muslim Bumiputera respondents preferred to converse with other undergraduates from the same background. Meanwhile, 60.5% of Chinese undergraduates had similar preference. In concluding the interaction section, they believed that ethnicity would play a huge role in determining respondents' choices on the matters related to who to stay with, friendship, assignment group members and other related matters.

Fatimah Daud (2006: 111-128) conducted another study on similar matter in five public universities in Malaysia. The outcome of her study proves that the interaction between the undergraduates is not positive. Majority of the Malay and Chinese respondents prefer not to have roommates from other ethnic groups. They were also reluctant to share lecture notes with and offer help to course mates and university mates from other ethnic groups. Fatimah (2006: 126) concluded that the ethnic polarization phenomenon among Malaysian undergraduates was quite serious. Inter-ethnic interaction between the undergraduates was still low due to ethnic polarization when the study was conducted.

Both researches proved the interaction level between the undergraduates was low and this could be proven by their unwillingness to accept roommates from other ethnic groups. Although they were living together and had not much problem in co-existing, they were not interacting. In other words, they had no problem with each other at the

superficial level but this condition did not translate into the fact that they were interacting. Their preference in matters related to choosing roommates and other aspects of daily life showed ethnic polarization among them was intense.

What could have caused the youths to be polarized according to ethnicity? The above researches discussed the intensity and the form of ethnic polarization among Malaysia undergraduates but did not really elaborate on the cause(s) of the phenomenon. However, both researches reported how the undergraduates perceived each other as members of either their in-group or out-group. They were more receptive of members of their in-group, i.e. members of their own ethnic group. Thus, ethnic identity has direct role in the formation of ethnic polarization. This means the processes of ethnic identity formation an individual gone through via socialization will have implication on ethnic polarization.

### THE ROLE OF NATURE IN ETHNIC POLARIZATION

The idea that ethnic identity is inherited biologically is probably developed through the process of racialization in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. In these two centuries the quest to understand universe through science had caused the development of phenotype where human beings were classified according to their physical features. In tandem with this process, political motives such as the urge to control others developed. Western powers in particular had used race or phenotype as a tool to control people colonized by them. People from a particular race was then classified and linked to certain superior or inferior social features.

For instance, the 19<sup>th</sup> century scholars such as James Hunt believed that people of Negro descent can only be humanized by Europeans (Banton, 1977: 52). At more or less the same time, Darwinism developed and the thought that human should be divided into species became popular. The 19<sup>th</sup> century zoologist Ernst Haeckel was one of the proponents of Social Darwinism when he brought up the idea that racial differences were fundamental and people of different race will occupy different position in the evolution of human being.

Haeckel identified the lower race such as the Negro as race nearer to the animal creation and incapable of higher mental development (Banton, 1977: 99). Such propositions have created an impression that racial identity is related to the biology of a person. A white may be seen as a person who are more intelligent than a black and should deserve certain privilege. In return, this proposition will affect the formation of identity. The proposition is a form of cohesion constructed in the West to view others. Their position as the master of many nations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had assisted in the spread of the idea that identity could be developed through skin color and other physical features.

While the Western colonialists should be blamed for formalizing race through their research and power, it would not be fair to put the blame solely on their shoulders. Racial identity through physical appearance was used by others in categorizing people. The Chinese called the whites as white ghost, foreign devils, barbarian devils, red-haired barbarians and blue-eyed barbarians. Chinese were also known to categorize out-groups as barbarian as they themselves as the truly civilized people (Dikotter, 1999: 152). Similarly, the Arabs had once upon in time used Africans as slave. This means how an

observer observes others are very much influenced by physical appearance. Race and ethnic identity are to certain extent developed through physical or biological features at least from the observer perspective.

However the role of nature in race and ethnic identity are superficial as the meaning of biological features are socially constructed and interpreted. Paul R. Brass (1996) explained that objective distinctions such as color will only start to carry meanings when several groups of people are involved in an interaction. In other words, color will not carry any meaning in a mono race or ethnic interaction. Thus, biological feature has been used as symbols in a multi race or ethnic interaction. Features such as color are thought to be representational and the meaning is construed through perception which a group has on others. Biology alone will not be able to generate identity. It has to be defined and the meanings are then attached to the biological features for them to embroider the task of being part of identity. Identification through biological features is also complicated due to the fact that individuals do not occupy one identity. Stuart Hall (1996: 163) explained that all individuals occupy different identity due to various reasons, i.e. hybridization, cut and mix and recombination. In relation to this, it is now clear that nature plays quite a limited role in constructed race or ethnic identity.

Hitherto, if ethnic identity is contributing to polarization, the role of nature or to be more specific human biology in causing polarization should also be quite limited. The physical traits carry no meaning without interpretation. Ethnic polarization among the undergraduates is then not caused by the physical traits an undergraduate carries. Nature is not playing the causal role but more of a distinguishing factor which is exploited for categorization purposes. However, in the Malaysian context, the fact that human physical traits can be helpful in the categorization process may not be true. For instance, the Bumiputera of Sabah and Sarawak are very much alike the Malay. In researches conducted by Mansor Mohd Noor together with his associates (2006) and Fatimah Daud (2006), the interactions between respondents of the two ethnic groups were also quite limited.

## THE ROLE OF SOCIALIZATION IN ETHNIC POLARIZATION

Since nature will not dictate the identity a person occupies in term of ethnicities, some other process will or else ethnicity will not be a phenomenon as it is today. The other or the more dominant process in creating race and ethnic identity would be a force which involves group dynamics. The force would be able to coerce its members to conform and later internalize the identity the group is trying to create. Such conformity and internalization are important to ensure social order. As described by Talcott Parson, these two elements form the core of social consensus which allows social equilibrium to be achieved (Cuff, Sharrock, & Francis, 1998: 95). To achieve conformity and also internalization, socialization will ensure members of a particular society learn and develop what it takes to be an accepted member of society.

Through Parsonian perspective, racial and ethnic identity are constructed by socialization. Individuals learn from society and at the same time the learning is reinforced when the learning is internalized. Race and ethnic identity are then developed

through two processes which are learning and accepting. Individuals are informed who they are and the learning are then internalize.

While Parson provided a macro view of the role of socialization, Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead contributed to the micro view of how socialization develops identity. Cooley through his looking glass self theory explained that self is developed when people interact. The interaction provides a mirror which reflects how an individual is perceived by others. By using others' view, self is then constructed (Renzetti & Curran, 2000: 112). The concept of self however develops overtime. It is through numerous interactions, the concept of self strengthen. Cooley's explanation was further developed by Mead. Mead elaborated on how the concept of self which consists of the "I" and "me" developed through interaction in which individuals take roles. In other words, the self is constructed by interacting with others. Mead laid out in several stages how self developed through socialization.

The first stage is what Mead defined as the imitation stage. At this stage, children from birth till three years old learn by imitating others. At this stage, children are not able to differentiate the individuals around them but they will imitate actions of those who are closest to them. When children reach the age of three and six, they will enter the play stage where they will learn from particular others. They see the world from the perspective of those who are significant to them, i.e. family members. When children enter school they will also enter the game stage and at this stage they learn about the generalized others. They learn from the generalized others which are the people around them in a larger context.

Cooley and Mead had provided some enlightenment on how self is created via socialization. How an individual sees himself is very much dependent on how others see them. At the same time, how an individual perceives the world or others is also developed through interaction with others. Cooley and Mead's explanation has clearly summarized the role of interaction in the development of identity. Socialization helps in forming identity by ensuring social reproduction of individual who appreciate a more or less common beliefs, values and norms.

As highlighted by Mead, individuals learn from significant others and later generalized others. The significant others teach consciously or unconsciously the culture which they have been practicing. Cultural components such as language, beliefs, values and norms practiced by the significant others will be internalized to the children. Similarly, the generalized others (if they are from similar cultural background) will also be teaching the same culture taught by the significant others. When children imitate them, the children will learn how to be themselves by exemplifying others. Consequently, social reproduction of individuals belonging to a specific cultural group will become a reality. The sense of belonging and loyalty are then constructed, and at the end of the day, individuals will see people from those who share their concept of self as a part of their in-group. Individuals conform to the values and norms of their race or ethnic group, an outcome of socialization. Conformity according to Kelman (1999) requires compliance, identification and internalization. Through socialization, individuals conform to their ethnic or race grouping. The forms of conformity which they have ascribed are then internalized and form the identity.

With the presence of other races and ethnicities, individuals are also socialized to view others as out-groups. Parrillo (2008: 86) believes that socialization teaches members of a particular ethnicity to view others negatively. Children normally internalize and seldom question the teaching of their parents. Thus, elements which degrade the position of others such as prejudice and discrimination are also internalized. Prejudice and discrimination could be the outcome of positive ethnocentrism, an effort to boost integration and patriotism among group members. Negative perception about out-groups is transmitted. These perceptions will also be transmitted in the event when there is a competition with others.

This means the development of ethnic identity through socialization will contribute to ethnic polarization. Ethnic groups are formed by members who consciously or unconsciously accept the identity internalize in them through socialization. The acceptance has two effects. It strengthens the ethnic group and at the same time disintegrates its members from other groups. Thus, the socialization of ethnic identity could play a huge role in ethnic polarization among youths in Malaysia. Malaysians are socialized to be members of a particular ethnic group. To be a member of a particular ethnic group, the youths will learn to distinguish others by seeing them as strangers while accepting individuals from his own ethnic group as familiar faces. Through the researches discussed earlier, it is obvious that the respondents were ethnically selective in choosing assignment partners, roommates to even who to sit next to. The inability to accept others could well be associated to the fact that they see others as strangers while their ability to accept those who are from their own ethnic group is caused by the perception that they are from the same background and there should not be any problem with them.

#### ETHNIC POLARIZATION: A CONSEQUENCE OF THE DIALECTIC PROCESS TO FORM ETHNIC IDENTITY

Critiques on socialization have described socialization as simplistic and does not take into consideration the dynamics of action. For example, Mills (1970: 32-44) had criticized Parson's Grand Theory as a theory which overlooked the role of individuals. However, as discussed above, socialization is not a one way process. It is a process which requires the social cohesion for integration and conformity as described by Parson. At the same time, individuals are also actively taking part in the process both as learner and teacher. Cooley and Mead had clearly defined how individuals acquire their identity through learning from the others. Individuals are actively constructing their identity. While the society needs integration and conformity, individuals require an identity which they can hold on to. Ethnic group in Fredrick Barth's terms is a categorical ascription where actors use ethnic identities to categorize themselves and others for the purposes of interaction. Hence, through socialization social organizations such as ethnic groups are able to socially reproduce new members. At the same time, socialization by the groups is able to provide an identity needed by individuals for them to act and react. In this sense, socialization has performed a dialectic function (Barth, 1996: 78).

The dialectical functions performed by socialization have produced ethnic polarization. The ethnic group would like to preserve its existence and through agents

such as family, education, media and peers, new members are coaxed to internalize the identity which the group would like them to carry. At the same time, individuals are also consciously participating in the process of socialization and ethnic identity formation. The ethnic polarization phenomenon in Malaysian public universities is one clear example of how individuals consciously reject others under the pretext that others are not from their own ethnic group.

## CONCLUSION

Ethnicity is a social constructed concept. Therefore, ethnic identities are also socially constructed. To accept nature as the determinant of ethnic identities is definitely a flaw. Physical features such as skin color, the color of hair and even the size of body should not be a guide of racial and ethnic identities, or in some manner, explain the social features of a particular group of people. However, due to political functions, i.e. the need to instill ethnocentrism for integration or maybe out of convenience, physical features are used to determine ethnic identity. Perhaps due to these reasons, ethnic groups are defined by anthropologists as a largely biologically self-perpetuating group (Barth, 1996: 75).

Ethnic identity is internalized through the process of socialization. Inevitably, individuals need identity and ethnic groups involve in integration. Socialization manages to satisfy both by providing an access to individuals to learn their identity and at the same time allow the ethnic group's coercive force to shape individuals into its members. All these processes are vital for maintaining social order. While doing so, socialization has allowed one group of people to develop prejudice and stereotype on another group which may in the end affects interethnic relationships. Individuals are coerced into ethnic groups by forming identities which are recognized by themselves and also others as different. Fortunately or unfortunately, in the larger context, ethnicity may be a source of disunity rather than unity as in the case of Malaysian youths studying in the public universities of Malaysia.

The ethnic polarization phenomenon in Malaysian public universities is an outcome of ethnic identity formation of the various races in Malaysia. The youths are socialized to distinguish their in-group and our-group by using ethnicity as the pole. Ethnicity unites and then disunites. Perhaps this phenomenon is an inevitable outcome of the plurality of Malaysia. Youths in Malaysia must be able to see this phenomenon as a product of their community choice. They should also acknowledge that they had directly and indirectly constructed the phenomenon. Summarily, ethnic polarization among youths in Malaysia is not super imposed but rather a product of their own choice.

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