An analysis of social cohesion through interaction: a preliminary study in penang, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses about the preliminary study of the social cohesion level among ethnics in Penang. The purpose of this study is to explore the extent of social cohesion that exists among the Malays, Chinese and Indians, through their daily interactions. A total of 90 respondents were surveyed in this study. The study found that the level of social cohesion between these three ethnic groups; Malays, Chinese and Indians are less satisfactory. The Chinese respondents have full daily interaction (100 percent) with other Malays but only 83 percent of Indian respondents and 60 percent of Malay respondents have daily interaction with other Chinese. However, for the location of the interaction, all three ethnic groups studied recorded the highest number of daily interactions in their workplace. More than 30 percent of respondents found among the Indians and Chinese had never interacted with other ethnic groups in school. Overall, the findings showed an alarming level of social cohesion because more than 20 percent of Indians have bad relationship with other Chinese and Malays and 49 percent of the Chinese have very bad relationship with other Indians and Malays.

Introduction

In general, Malaysia is located in the heart of Southeast Asia and popularly known as a multiracial and multicultural country. The population of Malaysia consists of many ethnic groups. Although the Malays, Chinese and Indians were the dominant ethnics in Malaysia, but there are still other ethnics like the indigenous people who also enliven Malaysia (Razaleigh et al., 2012). The diversity makes Malaysia one of the unique places on earth, and the combination of many factors developed into a strong sharing and understanding of common culture among all ethnic groups. This is very interesting because in this country every person regardless of their poor understanding of each other's culture and barriers in religion and language is nonchalantly interacting with each other in their daily lives.

However, this is the historical proof that multi-racial countries like Malaysia also faced considerable challenges in managing matters in social cohesion. The race riot of May 13, 1969, for instance, is one of the tragedies that had disrupted the unity of Malaysia (or Malaysians). Therefore, the race riot should not happen again and should become the biggest lesson for all Malaysians in order to improve social cohesion between all races. The social distance between ethnic groups that can create ethnic boundaries should be set aside (Najeemah, 2006).

Thus, it is pivotal for all Malaysian regardless of their race to understand the true meaning of "social cohesion." Social cohesion cannot just cease on paper alone but should be practiced in daily life. Malaysians must realize that the concept of social cohesion will never erase their traditional practices such as language and religion. Conversely, social cohesion is connectedness between each ethnic group (O'Reilly & Roberts 1977). Social cohesion between communities will lead to harmony and the well-being of Malaysia towards 2020.

The concept of social cohesion

Cohesion can be viewed in terms of a social phenomenon driven by a deep desire for unity with the result that affects every member of the community to achieve unity (Zaheruddin, 2012). Some of the researchers such as Shamsul Amri Baharuddin & Anis Yusal (2012) argue that within 42 years, Malaysia has already achieved social cohesion, which is a prerequisite to the unity that we want. This social cohesion has been a pillar to the concept of equilibrium, which was mentioned by the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato 'Seri Najib Abdul Razak, a moderate public key figure of Malaysia (Shamsul Amri Baharuddin & Yourself Anis, 2012).

In a broader context, social cohesion can be understood as community characteristics related to the relationship between society and the individual, groups, organizations and border units (McCracken 1998). According to Kawachi & Berkman (2000), social cohesion can happen when a group of people feel interrelated, share resources, and provide moral support for each other. Emile Durkheim is the first sociologist who applied the concept of social cohesion. According to Fenger (2012), there are four dimensions of social cohesion that has been highlighted by the previous scholars namely: 1. The economic dimensions of social cohesion; 2. The cultural dimensions of social cohesion; 3. The social dimensions of social cohesion and 4. The political dimensions of social cohesion.

In the economic dimension, the sustainability of social cohesion is considered very vital because the dissatisfaction and political unrest can be a threat to economic and social development. The cultural dimension refers to the focus of the

partnership between the members and the adoption of a collective sense of belonging. While the social dimension of social cohesion also means the need for an inclusive of all public communities. Similarly, the political dimension of social cohesion emphasizes the importance of political involvement among all parties of a country.

Review of literature

It is very clear that the practice of "social cohesion" is not something new in Malaysia. A considerable amount of literature has been published on social cohesion issues, usually known as integration or social interaction between ethnics in Malaysia. Najeemah (2006), on her analysis about the patterns of social interaction between students of various ethnic groups in 15 secondary schools in Kedah and Penang has found that students more prefer to interact with persons of the same ethnic group with them. Students tended to talk with other students of the same ethnicity, for example Malay students with Malays. But fights and disagreements often occurred in intra-ethnic not inter-ethnic.

In contrast, Ahmad Zaki & Zuriati Lama (2011) who conducted a study on the quality of social interactions that exist between Muslims and Buddhists in Kampung Tendong, Kelantan found that the social interactions among these two groups are modest (67.83 percent). The study also showed that the level of religious understanding between the two groups is low (34.34 percent), but the level of understanding of their own group as Muslims and Muslims is high (82.95 percent). Overall, this study shows that social interaction between Muslim and Buddhist communities in Kelantan is still low and should be increased from time to time.

A recent study by Yasmin & Najeemah (2012) on the students of SK, SJKCs and SJKT found that social distance and ethnic boundaries are practically extensive among the students. Students still do not want to perform their social activities with friends from different ethnicities. However, students from the SJKT stated that teachers play an indispensable role in nurturing positive values in their interaction with students from other ethnic groups. Mohd Rizal & Thay (2012) also conducted a study on Bachelor of Technology in Education (Living Skills) students from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia and found the relationship between various ethnic groups in daily life only at the level of satisfaction. The students revealed that their preference of choosing friends to eat with is their own ethnic group. Overall, 56.8 percent of the students prefer joking with friends who have the same ethnic and religion, and 75.4 percent like to discuss their problem with their same ethnicity friends.

Although most studies in the field of social cohesion have only focused on the issue of social cohesion in schools and the higher learning institutions, but it is clearly demonstrated that the social cohesion among the ethnics in Malaysia are utterly at a low level. Our society certainly prefers to socialize and interact among their ethnic group rather than other ethnics. However, the study of Kamsiah & Abdullah (2010) in the neighboring country, Singapore found different results. From their study, they indicated that the acceptance of the Malay community towards the Chinese and the Chinese towards the Malays are at a good level. For instance, both Malays and Chinese communities of Singapore are comfortable to invite other people into their ceremony and can get along with each other easily.

However, the study conducted by Revida Erika (2006) in Medan, Indonesia shows the same situation as in Malaysia where the interactions of the indigenous Indonesian peoples with the Chinese are still at a low level due to psychological and sociological factors. Negative prejudices still exists among the indigenous Indonesian people toward the Chinese people and the indigenous Indonesian people still consider the Chinese as dishonest and cunning traders.

Nowadays, it is hard to deny the fact that countries with various ethnicity faced a major challenge with social cohesion. This problem not only exists among Asian countries but also among Western countries like the United Kingdom. Therefore, the government plays an important role in promoting the social cohesion agenda to the community as in the study of Gooby (2012) who found that the United Kingdom government has been promoting the "big society" concept in order to enhance the level of interaction among society.

Intergroup contact theory

In general, Intergroup Contact Theory is appropriate in the ethnic relations' context. According to Allport (1954), this theory justifies that the interaction between different ethnic groups may provide benefits in reducing the level of prejudices and potential conflict between groups. In the context of this study, the interaction between the Malays, Chinese and Indians is seen as essential in fostering a social cohesion harmony among them. Even in the communication aspect, social interaction between one group and another is essential in order to allow them to know each other without being prejudiced. This is in parallel to the Malay proverb *"tak kenal maka tak cinta"* which literally translates into something unknown is something unloved - demands all ethnics in Malaysia to know each other through social interaction and the communication process.

Previous researchers who have studied the interaction between ethnic groups in Malaysia also agreed with the "Intergroup Contact Theory" proposed by Allport (1954). Najeemah (2006) on her study about the interaction patterns among secondary school students in Malaysia for instance found that the interaction between the students of various ethnic groups can absolutely strengthen the relationship between them. It means daily interaction between the Malays and Chinese can enhance a good relationship and wipe out prejudices among them.

Although some researchers believe that interaction between ethnics can help improve social relations between them as proposed in the "Intergroup Contact Theory", yet there were also researchers who are skeptical about this statement. Ezhar Tamam et al. (2011) for example in the study of inter-ethnic interaction among university students in Malaysia found that interaction with other ethnics are not enough to make them feel comfortable. It simply means that the interaction per se does not guarantee that social cohesion will positively exist between ethnic groups. There are other factors that should be taken into account such as the intensity of communication between the various communities may differ.

Research Objectives

This is a preliminary study to explore the extent to which social interaction that exists between the three ethnic groups in Penang namely Malays, Indians and Chinese. At the same time, through this study, the level of interaction between the three ethnic groups can also be evaluated whether the level is good or bad. This study also aims to identify the interaction location among these three ethnic groups whether at school, workplace, governmental office or business area. Relationships and

perceptions between these three ethnic groups toward other ethnics also will be discussed in this study.

Findings

Level of Interaction among Ethnics

According to Table 1, the Chinese are the most socially inter-active ethnic group respondents as compared with other ethnic group respondents with 100 percent interaction on a daily basis. This is followed by the Indians respondents with 83 percent interaction and Malays respondents, of which 60 percent have daily interaction with other ethnic groups. However, 8 percent of the Malays are the only ethnic group respondents that has never had any interaction with other ethnic groups.

However, the majority of the Malay respondents (30 percent) are eating out together with other ethnic groups once a month. Yet, 50 percent of them visit friends/acquaintances of other ethnic groups on a daily basis. The majority (35 percent) of Malay respondents will only receive visitors from other ethnics once in a few months. Similarly, 34 percent of Malays never mix with other ethnic groups.

In contrast, the Chinese is the main ethnic group respondents that generally likes to eat out with other ethnic groups every once a week (60 percent). In addition, 43 percent of Chinese is also the majority ethnic group respondents that generally received visits from other ethnic groups on a daily basis. A total of 31 percent of the Chinese respondents visits other ethnic groups once a week. But for the ethnic Chinese, 34 percent of them never socializes with Malays and Indians in association activities.

Finally, the Indian are the only ethnic group respondents that has a balanced amount of respondents mixing together with other ethnic groups. 45 to 50 percent of the Indian respondents are eating out, visiting, receiving visitors and mingle with the Malays and Chinese in association activities, once a week.

Table 2 shows the significant similarities between the location of interaction among the Malay, Chinese and Indian respondents on a daily basis. All three ethnic groups recorded the highest number of daily interactions in the workplace. The Chinese respondents recorded the highest number of interactions in the workplace with a total of 95 percent on a daily basis. This is followed by the Malay respondents with 72 percent interaction with other ethnic groups at the workplace on a daily basis. For the Indians, only 61 percent of the respondents interact with other ethnic groups in the workplace on a daily basis.

In addition, Table 2 also shows a unique figure with a huge number of Chinese respondents (51 percent) and Indian respondents (33 percent) that have never interacted with other ethnic groups in school. Similarly, 27 percent of Malay respondents also never interact with other ethnic groups in the government offices.

Relationship and Perception among Ethnic Groups in Malaysia

Table 3 shows that the Malay respondents are the only ethnic groups that have a very good relationship with other ethnic groups (60 percent) and good (40 percent). But for the Chinese respondents, 49 percent of them have extremely not good relationship with the other ethnic groups. Only 11 percent and 36 percent of them have a very good and good relationship with other ethnic groups. For the Indian respondents, the majority (29 percent) of them have good relationships with other ethnic groups. 20 percent felt that their relationship with other

ethnic groups is not good and the other six percent have a very good relationship with other ethnics.

By contrast, the Malay respondents are the majority (42 percent) among the other ethnics that have a very good perception towards their bretherens. However, for the Chinese, the majority of the respondents (49 percent) have an extremely not good perception towards other ethnics. For the Indian respondents, the majority (29 percent) has a good perception towards other ethnics

Discussion

In general, the aim of this study was to assess the interaction level among Malays, Chinese and Indians in Penang. The findings from this study have clearly supported previous research findings like Najeemah (2006), who stated that the interaction between the ethnic groups in Malaysia is still at an unsatisfactory level. The Malays have less daily interaction with other ethnic groups as compared to the Chinese and Indians. The problem of imbalances in ethnic relations is happening due to several factors as mentioned by Mohd Ridhuan Tee (2010). Mohd Ridhuan suggested that the socio-political basis of every race is racist oriented. History, education, the media, political parties and non-governmental organizations are very strong factors in influencing each race in Malaysia. This is why every ethnic group prefers to interact only with their own kind. This phenomenon is certainly influenced by cultural factors such as language and religion that makes people more comfortable to interact with people who have the same background with them. For instance, the Malays are comfortable with the Malays and the Chinese are comfortable with the Chinese. By rights, the different language or religion cannot be an excuse for Malaysia to be fragmented because all religion has put great emphasis on social cohesion. Islam for example teaches its followers to always keep intact the unity as mentioned clearly in Surah al-Hujurat 49:13 as follow:

O mankind, indeed we have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted.

In addition, for the location of the interaction, all three ethnic group respondents in this study recorded the highest number of daily interactions in the workplace. It is in line with the "Intergroup Contact Theory" which considers the interaction as a situational variable (Allport, 1954). It means that the interaction is utterly dependent on the situation or circumstances. In the Malaysian context, it is impossible for all Malaysians to not interact in the workplace because this location is a focal point that is visited every day by all the ethnic groups in Malaysia. Even in Malaysia, most of the jobs are offered to workers without considering their ethnic background. In the government sector, for example, the three ethnic groups have the opportunity to work with the government without any bias and prejudice. This means that all ethnic groups have the opportunity to meet with other ethnic groups in the workplace easily and frequently.

However, if we observed the interaction pattern in school, all three ethnic groups, Malays, Chinese and Indians have a moderate level of interaction. More than 30 percent of Chinese and Indians had never interacted with other ethnic groups in school.

Table 1: Evaluation of the Level of Interaction Between Ethnics

	Types of activities	Everyday			Once a week			Once a month			Once in a few months			Never		
		M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I
1	Social interaction with other ethnics	55%	100%	83%	15%	-	25%	23%	-	13%	4%	-	-	8%	-	-
2	Eat out	26%	13%	32%	18%	60%	45%	30%	14%	-	18%	-	39%	14%	-	-
3	Visit	50%	13%	25%	-	31%	56%	30%	18%	-	41%	26%	23%	10%	10%	33%
4	Accept visitor	21%	43%	33%	11%	-	45%	25%	31%	-	35%	13%	12%	10%	13%	33%
5	Interact – Individual / Association	12%	27%	33%	12%	26%	45%	16%	10%	-	31%	13%	-	22%	34%	11%

Instruction:
M = Malays
C = Chinese
I = Indians

Table 2: Evaluation of the Interaction Location among Ethnics

	Location	Everyday			Once a week			Once a month			Once in a few months			Never		
		M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I	M	C	I
1	School	35%	-	-	8%	10%	-	20%	13%	-	20%	10%	33%	16%	51%	33%
2	Workplace	72%	95%	61%	7%	10%	11%	7%	-	-	17%	-	23%	10%	-	11%
3	Government office	30%	10%	-	10%	18%	23%	27%	39%	33%	14%	-	39%	27%	-	11%
4	Business area	15%	26%	39%	23%	36%	23%	12%	-	33%	10%	-	-	10%	10%	-

Instruction:
M = Malays
C = Chinese
I = Indians

Table 3: Relationship and Perception among Ethnic Groups in Malaysia

Ethnic	Relationship with other ethnics				Perception towards other ethnics			
	Very good	Good	Not good	Extremely not good	Very good	Good	Not good	Extremely not good
Malays	60%	40%	-	-	42%	22%	36%	-
Chinese	11%	36%	-	49%	11%	36%	-	49%
Indian	6%	29%	20%	-	6%	29%	20%	-

This occurs due to the existence of vernacular schools which has resulted in the Malays, Chinese and Indians being segmented according to the vernacular school system, and their relationship is falling apart (Meir Khairul Azrin, 2011). The Chinese and Indians are studying in their respective vernacular schools which are usually filled by their own ethnic groups only. Yasmin & Najeemah (2012) in their study on the SK, SJKCs and SJKT schools also found that social distance and ethnic boundaries is extensive among students in all three schools.

The vernacular school's challenges towards social cohesion are not a new issue as it has been debated by the earlier scholars. As enshrined in the 1957 Education Ordinance in Section 3 of the ordinance, the retention of other language medium schools is allowed. The existences of vernacular schools have given the equal opportunities to the three major ethnics in Malaysia to use their mother tongue as the main medium of language in schools even though the Malay language was adopted as the Malaysian national language. Therefore, proactive steps must be taken to meet the challenges of these vernacular schools. For example, by strengthening and enhancing the use of the national language in Chinese and Indians schools as well as offering Chinese and Indians language subjects in Malays schools.

At the meantime, the results of this study also show an alarming situation when a large number (49 percent) of the Chinese respondents stated that they have a not good relationship with the other ethnic groups. Similarly, 20 percent of Indians respondents also feel that they are not in a good relationship with other ethnic groups. Both ethnic respondents' perceptions towards other ethnic group are also in line with their relationship towards the others. This characteristic shows clearly how low the value of social cohesion among ethnic groups in Malaysia even after Malaysia achieved its 55 years of independence. With Malaysia's maturity age, comparatively, social cohesion among all ethnic group should be at a mature and excellent level. However, the opposite situation is occurring. Therefore, it is very important for all ethnic groups to eliminate their prejudices toward other ethnic groups. Healey (2009) stated that inter-ethnic prejudice usually occurs when one ethnic group have a negative view towards other ethnic groups. Such prejudice will only harm the social cohesion among all ethnic groups and become the biggest obstacle in order for Malaysia to achieve a developed nation status by 2020.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this preliminary study has provided a clear picture of the poor social cohesion among Malays, Chinese and Indians in Malaysia. Relationships and perceptions of the three ethnic towards other ethnics also need to be improved for a more harmonious and prosperous Malaysia in the future. As a multiracial country composed of various ethnic groups, it is very important for each of Malaysians to understand the true meaning of "social cohesion" and put it into practice in their daily life. Social cohesion can only be achieved if all parties are aware of these roles and more efforts on inter-ethnic integration should steadily be enhanced toward achieving social harmony and a more prosperous Malaysia. If social cohesion cannot be achieved, then the harmony of the Malaysian people will also be hard to accomplish. What is more apparent is that if ethnic conflict persists, events such the May 13th incident, the Hindraf demonstrations and other black incidents will be repeated. Therefore, a study of the factors that can contribute to the strengthening of social cohesion among ethnics should be conducted in the future, so that social cohesion among all ethnic groups in Malaysia can be further improved.

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