Reflections about Researching Interethnic Studies in Multiethnic Kuala Lumpur

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Article Information

Abstract

This article presents the challenges faced by researchers in conducting an interethnic study in Kuala Lumpur. The available various frameworks applied in interethnic studies across various contexts indicate that interethnic studies are not challenge-free. The data derived from the sociological research on B40 urban women across three major ethnic groups in Malaysia: Malay, Chinese, and Indian. Based on the analyses originated from the researchers' reflection and observation notes, several challenges, inclusive of overcoming language barrier, employing different research approaches, and dealing with gatekeepers, emerged throughout the fieldwork. The research provided some challenges faced by researchers in performing an interethnic study in the context of B40 urban women in Kuala Lumpur. These challenges are presented to assist future researchers who are interested in interethnic studies. Despite the available limitations, the research provide additional information to enhance ethnic relations and promote cohesion between and among groups. In particular, the research seeks to enrich the knowledge of research methodology involving interethnic studies, a field that would impact in a culturally diverse land, such as Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

The term "ethnic" refers to sub-groups within a larger or dominant national or cultural group. It is a population subgroup which is universal and unique to human societies. Each ethnic sub-group sometimes has specific mores (norms of behavior) that are linked to their socio-cultural and ecological circumstances. To ensure the continuity of ethnicity, each ethnic sub-group sets boundaries that may function to protect it from erosion by interethnic interactions. This fact requires rigorous research on interethnic interactions.

Interethnic studies refer to studies that are centred on the perspective of an ethnic group (Sleeter, 2011). Such studies are important to identify the best possible and most suitable strategy in developing and managing a nation (Draper and Selway, 2019), that has a multiethnic demographic composition. It also provides an understanding to have a good grasp of different groups' interests, so that the solutions provided are effective and focus-based (Maximova *et al.*, 2016). It is vital in helping to create, accelerate, manage, and guide changes in different contexts either in micro, intermediate, or macro levels (Pestushko, 2016), apart from helping to bridge differences that already exist in experiences and perspectives (Craig-Henderson and Lewis, 2015; Sleeter, 2011).

Today, the existence of various ethnic sub-groups is obvious in Malaysia (Kauthar, 2018; Ramlee *et al.*, 2009). Malaysia exemplifies a diverse country with the features of a "salad bowl" and "melting pot"

population. It is a "salad bowl" because the Malays, Chinese, and Indians, being the major ethnic sub-groups of the Malaysian cultural group, still adhere to each specific religious and cultural traditions. At the same time, they are also the ingredients of a "melting pot", having intermingled interactions with each other to constitute as a Malaysian cultural group.

This article aims to present the challenges faced by the researchers in conducting an interethnic study in Kuala Lumpur, specifically among B40 urban women across three ethnic groups, namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian. This study seeks to enrich the knowledge of research methodological challenges involving interethnic studies; a field that would provide better understanding in a culturally diverse land, such as Malaysia.

RESEARCHING INTERETHNIC STUDIES

"Going native" is famously attached to ethnographers who lose their sense of being researchers and wrap themselves up in the worldview of the people they are studying (Bryman, 2004). The reason is clear; that is, to explore and obtain as much detailed information about the aspects under study. Even though this current study does not apply an ethnographic study, some of its principles are applied. Being true to its forte, ethnographic study gives a detailed account of the targeted community being studied (Geertz, 1973). In this study, the insiders' perspective of "folk narrations" (emic) and outsiders' perspective or "analytic observations" (etic) are used. Not only are cultural aspects studied, but as the trend today, contemporary ethnographers also look at what may be considered ordinary or mundane to those living within a community.

Ethnic diversity has always gained attention, regardless whether it is has academic-source content or public-based opinions. From the nation-state perspective, tackling ethnic issues is a core national aspect to promote cohesion between and among groups. Sociologists and other social researchers have discussed criticisms on the manner in which diversity is advocated (Brooks *et al.*, 2018; Hoopman *et al.*, 2009; Ware *et al.*, 2015). There is a need to engage deeply in the rhetoric of ethnic-diversity (Schueths, 2015; Clark *et al.*, 2015) particularly in the conduct of social research. In this case, there is an urgent need for a better understanding of the methodological issues in conducting research within the interethnic studies (Okazaki and Sue, 2016).

Many recent interethnic studies related to women's social experiences and opportunities discusses the methodological considerations across gender, race/ethnicity and culture (Madisa *et al.*, 2015), focusing on questions around reflexion, identity and difference (Maximova *et al.*, 2016). Although research studies cite a specific-based location, it is argued here that there is no hindrance in disseminating the lessons learned to other populations and locations as the emerging methodological issues are a universal nature. As such, even though conducting research within the diversity of cultural differences in Malaysia (Mohamad, 2009) may reflect a context-dependable manner, the methodological process allows for convergence elements across populations and locations, thus relatable.

In Malaysia, Ramlee *et al.*, (2009) conducted an interethnic study focusing on the framework of racial integration involving the campus social climate specifically among undergraduates at selected Malaysian University. The survey involving 1,043 respondents revealed that accommodation, acculturation, assimilation and amalgamation were four main constructs for racial integration. Another study was done by Abu Bakar *et al.*, (2018) to explore the similarities of cultural characteristics among ethnic groups in Malaysia. Using a phenomenological approach, it was revealed that community embeddedness, survival culture, conformity culture and respect culture were four categories which could exemplify the interethnic relations in Malaysia.

It should be noted here that interethnic studies are not free from challenges or critiques. Amir et al. (2017) worked on developing module for ethnic interaction in the context of Malaysian secondary students. They emphasized that the challenges arose from the "habitus of the ethnic group" themselves. This research outcome is consistent with the findings elsewhere whereby other researchers faced difficulties in penetrating people of different ethnic groups due to perception towards other group (Elfartas *et al.*, 2019), the idea of essentialism which led to social bias (Diesendruck and Menahem, 2015), conflict in citizenship rights (Han and Moore, 2017), as well as expressive fears in public discourses regarding interference in social cohesion or domination (Pratsinakis *et al.*, 2016).

Craig-Henderson and Lewis (2015) presented this matter by discussing methodological issues and challenges associated with studies involving interethnic relationships and marriage. They also narrowed this topic further in terms of research design, sampling constraints, self-classification labels versus other labels, comfort in discussing or disclosing what may be perceived to be a sensitive issue, as well as the in-group or out-group status of the researcher. Kauthar (2018), on the other hand, discussed this matter in another perspective, specifically in terms of epistemological and ontological challenges faced by insider-researchers in Malaysian ethnicity studies using the Extended Case Method (ECM). However, this study only focuses on two ethnic groups; that are Malay and Chinese while excluding the Indian.

MEMOIRE ABOUT INTERETHNIC-CONTENT RESEARCHING ENDEAVOURS

The current study aims to present the challenges faced by researcher in conducting an interethnic study in Klang Valley, specifically on B40 urban women across three ethnic groups namely Malay, Chinese and Indian. It strives for developing the knowledge of research methodology involving interethnic studies in Malaysia; a

multiethnic and culturally diverse country. The data for this article was obtained from the two-year ethnographic research project. It was based on the researchers' personal reflections and field notes using the principle of "analytic observations" (etic).

The research group consists of two main field researchers and two research assistants. The main field researchers are Malay females, aged between the mid-20s and 40s, with Bahasa Melayu and English fluency. The younger researcher has a flair in Mandarin, too. The two research assistants are Malay and Indian, who can communicate in Mandarin/Cantonese and Tamil, respectively. The participants were Malay, Chinese, and Indian females, who are categorized under B40 urban women and live in *Projek Perumahan Rakyat Termiskin* (PPRT) residential areas in Kuala Lumpur. PPRT is residential clusters for economically-challenged people in Kuala Lumpur. The B40 or the "bottom 40 per cent" is the socioeconomic category that identifies an accumulated monthly household income of the population. Based on Khazanah Research Institute (2018), the B40 group are those whose monthly household income is RM3,855 and below (USD921 and below, based on currency exchange on October 4, 2019).

The study was derived from the researchers' experiences in conducting a mixed quantitative-qualitative approach of interview, survey, and participant observation among the multiethnic groups in Kuala Lumpur. Based on these methods and responses obtained during the fieldwork, an analysis of the challenges is observed. In particular, this article describes the researchers' challenges in researching interethnic research content deriving from their research encounters.

The research findings have their worthy values, if the research methodology that valid and reliable. For that matter, it is pertinent to point out some related methodological aspects that configured the article's discussions.

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

The main objective of this study was to gain understanding of social entrepreneurship level of awareness and intention among B40 urban women across three different ethnics namely Malay, Chinese, and Indian, at the selected PPRT residential clusters. This includes examining the differences on the levels of social entrepreneurial awareness and social entrepreneurial intention; investigating the relationship between social entrepreneurial awareness and social entrepreneurial intention; and developing the ethnic profiles of the B40 Malay, Indian, and Chinese women in selected PPRT residential areas in Kuala Lumpur, based on their social entrepreneurial awareness and social entrepreneurial intention.

Population, Sampling and Targeted Participants

This study involved B40 urban women at selected PPRTs in Kuala Lumpur, one of the most populated areas in Peninsular Malaysia, which comprises Kuala Lumpur and its surrounding areas. Based on the data obtained from DBKL, three PPRTs were identified and chosen, as each has a high ethnic concentration of Malays, Chinese, and Indians, respectively. The three chosen PPRTs are PPR Bandar Tun Razak, which has 6406 Malays (1249 Malay households), PPR Seri Pantai which has 1680 Indians (280 Indian households), and PPR Salak Selatan which has 1974 Chinese (474 Chinese households).

The participants fulfilled all criteria set in this study including (a) women, (b) Malaysian, (c) income level of less than RM3,860, and (d) lives in PPRT, either in Bandar Tun Razak (for Malays), Seri Pantai (for Indians), or Salak Selatan (for Chinese). These targeted women were approached through the organization(i.e. *Persatuan Penduduk*), depending on the level of access obtained from DBKL as the authority and the organisation's leader. Prior to data collection, several preparations were made, inclusive of obtaining ethical procedures, gaining official permission from the gatekeeper, preparing the survey materials, and conducting a pilot study.

PPRT refers to a housing programme that was established under the supervision of *Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur* (DBKL) for the most financially challenged population in Malaysia. There are approximately 70 public housing in Kuala Lumpur, inclusive of PPRT, *Rumah Kos Rendah* (RKR), *Rumah Kos Sederhana Rendah* (RKSR), *Rumah Jual* (RJ), *Perumahan Awam* (PA), and *Unit Bujang* (UB). Amongst these public housings, PPRT was chosen in this study, as its target group is the B40 community. This is indicated by the low rental charge of RM124 per month (Ministry of Housing and Local Government, n.d.).

Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the International Islamic University Malaysia. For the data collection, an official permission was given by DBKL, an authority that keeps the residential data of Kuala Lumpur. The permission was obtained by sending emails and letters of request to DBKL, and performing weekly follow-up on them through email and phone calls. It took two months for this phase due to bureaucracy in the agency. The materials include consent forms, debriefing sheets, and surveys. Consent forms and debriefing sheets are "described in ethical codes and regulations for human subject's research" with a purpose to give information in an understandable layman's terms to potential participants, for them to make the voluntary decision in participating or not participating in the study and to ensure that they are clear of the research (Nijhawan *et al*., 2013). The consent forms were given to the participants prior to the survey, while the debriefing sheets were given after the study was conducted.

The interview process took seven months, starting from August 2018 to February 2019, which were mostly performed on Fridays and weekends, depending on the schedule discussed and compromised with the organization's representatives.

RESEARCHING CHALLENGES FOR INTERETHNIC RESEARCH

Race and ethnicity are complex, sensitive, and controversial themes in scientific discourse and in public policy (Bielby, et al., 2003). Views on racial and ethnic classification system might be used to be politicized, which in turn is avoided by social researchers. Within the same tone, the participants were also disinterested in getting involved in this kind of research, to avoid providing "too much". As such, conducting research on participants of different ethnic groups was not easy. The researchers and their assistants had to face several challenges, which required ad-hoc solutions. These solutions were only possible with the availability of the research grant. The analysis revealed various challenges in conducting interethnic study among B40 urban women in Kuala Lumpur. The challenges could be explained into several themes: Sample and sampling; Gatekeeper; Absenteeism; Mores; Illiteracy; and Language.

Sample and Sampling

Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL), as the rightful authority, was unable to provide an accurate data on the population of women from the representative of the community organization at all selected PPRTs. The situations of data unavailability created a tremendous problem for sampling procedures. Since this research was specifically aimed for women as the research participants, the researchers had to continuously visit and contact DBKL's officer-in-charge for his assistance. This ordeal consumed much of the researching phase.

However arduous the ordeal was, the researchers kept on following the sampling procedures to ensure the validity of the data. The researchers obtained an assurance that the data in which DBKL had provided was accurate at the time of research.

Gatekeeper

Another challenge faced by the researchers was dealing with the multi-layered gatekeepers. This research obtained permission from Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL), being an official authority for the PPRTs. At its initial stages, the researchers had a series of communications with DBKL's in-charge officer of the respective residential areas. Through the officer, the meeting arrangement was made with the head of community in the residential areas, who later assisted in reaching out to the participants.

Another approach that was used to deal with this matter was through "snowballing". In certain cases, saying "I am a friend of or I got your number from [this and that person]" would result in positive responses, as it indicated that the researchers were not absolute intruders, though they were still outsiders. This aligns with Craig-Henderson and Lewis' (2015) discussion that having good social networks with the gatekeepers facilitated the interview sessions and processes.

For this research, it is interesting to note that these gatekeepers, particularly the head of community, pointed out several concerns of the community members prior to them volunteering to participate in the research. These concerns include fluency in language and permission from the head of household, particularly husbands or older children. Even at the preliminary stage, getting access to the Chinese gatekeepers proved to be atypical than the Indians and Malays. Their gatekeepers were mostly men who are protective of their womenfolk. This was transpired among the Chinese ethnic group.

The Chinese participants were "quieter" and "most challenging" than other ethnic groups. Not only did the language barrier exist, but they were also quite reserved in granting approval as well as responding to the questions. In many cases, the researchers received a simple "no" to be interviewed, with justifications, such as "let me ask my husband first" (where they were non-contactable later) or "my husband or son disapproved". Even when they had already given their consent to be interviewed, the Chinese female participants were accompanied by their men, either their husband or their son. They did not interrupt the session, however.

Besides providing assurance on the language used, the researchers were also required to assure not just the participants but also their head of household (in most cases, their husbands) that their confidentiality is the utmost priority, and that the research has received ethical approval. This was done through providing them consent forms, debriefing sheets, information sheets as well as showing them official letters on ethical and permission approval. Such concerns and reluctance were due to the presence of survey scams, according to several participants.

Participants' Absenteeism

An official invitation to set a meeting was sent out through their community's headman, in which the invitations were accepted. However, on the agreed day itself, some of them did not turn up due to various reasons, such as forgetting about the appointment, being unavailable, and being busy. These cases of absenteeism from the scheduled appointments mostly happened at PPRT Bandar Tun Razak (Malays) and Seri Pantai (Indians).

Rescheduling of the appointments had delayed the data collection process. The researchers had to accept the situations and set another date, which was decided by the participants. For PPRT Bandar Tun Razak

(Malays), the date was set when they had their "Family Day" event. The community's headman through his female committees arranged the sessions, so that it would not intercede with the women's activities. These women who were also the potential participants were involved in various activities from sporting to cooking to doing decorations. In a way, the researchers had to commit around the activity's schedules.

For PPRT Seri Pantai (Indians), the initial appointed schedule received low responses that forced the researchers to reschedule to other dates. Again, by further assistance of the community's headman through his female committees, the researchers managed to meet almost 50 Indian women. The researchers found that getting the "right" female committee was really helpful. The participants enthusiastically waited for the researchers to arrive. Even though the hall in which the session was supposed to be held was locked due to miscommunication, the session continued at the road sides, under the bus stop and by the drains. None of their males joined or disturbed the sessions.

Preserved Mores

The communication approach used played a significant role during the fieldwork. The researchers found out that each ethnic group has their own preferred communication approach due to certain preserved mores. For the Malays, the participants would tend to give genuine answers when the researcher spoke in a casual manner or literally translate using a dialect style known as '*membawang*'. This is reflected not just in a verbal manner but also in non-verbal ones, such as hand gestures and facial expressions. The participants also used sarcasm or '*kiasan*' in conveying sensitive issues. For instance, they would refer to their alliances as '*orang kita*' (referring to their own ethnic group) and non-alliances as '*orang sana*' (referring to the other ethnic groups) without explicitly specifying any groups. This was rather challenging for the researcher as the sarcasm may be applicable to a specific context in the community and not within the knowledge of the researcher. To overcome this, the researcher would ask follow-up questions and ask for clarifications.

In contrast to the *'kiasan'*-preferred Malays, the Indian participants were more open and straightforward in sharing their ideas and information. They will explicitly say and specify the names, even in discussing sensitive issues, such as political views and tensions in the community. However, they also expected the researcher to understand and be familiar with their specific conditions. For instance, they would describe the issues in the neighborhood and specify the names of people involved, followed by "You know him/her (referring to their neighbor), right?". This was a challenge for the researcher as she lacked the insights and is unfamiliar with the people and issues in the community. To overcome this, the researcher would respond by smiling without giving a specific yes or no response or by politely asking the participant if they could proceed with the interview or survey.

In contrast to the 'open-book' Indians, the Chinese participants were found to be more reserved. Their responses were less personal and straightforward, and they did not mention or specify groups. They also portrayed great interest in the topic discussed, even though it was noticeable that they were more concerned with the researchers' identity as a Malay, compared to the Indian participants. To overcome this, the researchers recruited interpreters who are fluent in Mandarin, as it is believed that "the proficiency of an interviewer's use of language can be used as an extension into a respondent's world" (Kauthar, 2018). This created a friendly atmosphere, enabling both researchers and participants to engage in the discussion. However, this was only helpful for certain individuals and cases, considering the interpreters are only proficient in Mandarin. Thus, this created a hurdle to engage with those who spoke other dialects. This indicates that taking into account the local context is both essential and crucial for this kind of research, especially considering the multiethnic composition of the population and the history of interethnic conflicts in the region, as mentioned by Adisa *et al*. (2015).

Illiterate Participants

During the interview session, the participants were assured of the service of interpreters, upon request. Although this helped encourage members of the community to participate, it did not manage to cater to all members as some of them were illiterate. In such situations, the interpreters became ad-hoc research assistants, who were helping the researchers and their assistants. The presence of illiterate participants was obvious, particularly those from PPRT Seri Pantai.

Due to the need to read through and interpret the questions thoroughly to them, the times spent for data collection were extremely long. Instead of taking only 10 minutes, the session had become almost 30 minutes per participant.

Language

In terms of language, this research provided a questionnaire survey of four different languages that were in Malay, English, Tamil, and Mandarin. The researchers were around during the sessions. At most times, the sessions had become a structured interview that required direct assistance from the researchers.

The researchers found that their identity as a Malay provided advantages in conducting the interviews and distributing the surveys among the Malay participants. Good rapport was easily built due to the sense of language and cultural commonness perceived by the participants. This is similar to the experience of Kauthar (2018) who stated that being in the same ethnic group of the participants eased the interview sessions. She also

revealed that her status as a researcher does not beget participants' empathy, but rather, it is her identity as Malay that does (ibid, 2018). However, it should be noted here that despite sharing the same language, the terms and level of language used play a role in determining the level of engagement and the flow of the conversation either during the interview or survey. For instance, it was noticeable that the participants were more likely to engage in the conversation when the researcher used personal prefixes, such as '*makcik*' and '*akak*', compared to formal ones such as '*Cik*' and '*Puan*'.

This similar case also occurred when dealing with Indian participants. When the researchers addressed the participants as '*Puan*', 'Mrs.' or 'Miss', the participants would react by saying, "just call me, Aunty" or "No need *Puan la*. Just call me [name]". However, there were also Indian participants who prefer to be addressed as 'Mrs' or '*Puan*' as they claimed that they "feel more respected", opposing those who view such prefixes as a means of creating a sense of gap. The researchers also found that the Indian participants took a longer time to respond as they possibly thought in Tamil first before conveying it in Malay, English, or Manglish (a mix of Malay and English). This was noticeable based on the frequent utterance of Tamil terms and the pattern of sentence structure. For instance, they would say, *"Sini itu macam banyak susah punya orang"* (literal translation: Here like many people poor), rather than, *"Ada ramai orang susah di sini"* (translation: There are many poor people here). Despite of this obstacle, their responses were still understandable and comprehensible.

This different pattern of language used (i.e. formal versus casual prefix) was also noticeable when dealing with Chinese participants. The researchers found that the younger Chinese participants preferred to be addressed just by using their names, while the older ones preferred to be addressed as '*aunty*' or '*mam*'. The younger participants also preferred the interview or survey to be conducted in English, Malay, or Manglish. On the other hand, the older ones preferred Mandarin or other dialects. This indicates that the preferred and suitable style of language used during an interview or survey does not only depend on the ethnic groups and cultural factors, but also age and generational cohorts.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In total, only 10 Chinese participants were involved in the research, in comparison to 40 Malays and 41 Indians. All participation was voluntary, with their responses kept confidential and identities remaining anonymous. The researchers had done their very best to achieve that number of participations. Due to time limitations for the completion of an academic thesis, the researchers had to be satisfied with the outcome.

Nevertheless, based on the above discussion, several challenges are identified in conducting an interethnic study inclusive of but not limited to getting the willing samples, dealing with gatekeepers, handling absenteeism, employing different communication approaches, managing illiterate participants, and overcoming language barriers. This study only provides a glimpse of the challenges in conducting interethnic studies in a specific context based on the researchers' reflections and field notes. Thus, it does not provide empirical evidence of any direct correlational or causal relationship of the case. Since this study emphasized only on the B40 urban women in Kuala Lumpur, the results cannot be extrapolated to other contexts, considering that the challenges vary across contexts. For future research, it is suggested to extend and further investigate other aspects, population, and measures of change related to challenges in performing interethnic studies.

CONCLUSION

This article provides brief reflections on the challenging aspects in researching interethnic study from the personal accounts of the researchers. Being one of the most sensitive social issues, interethnic study holds various challenging experiences for researchers. Having into contacts with the participants of different ethnic groups in itself is challenging due to cultural and normative differences. Moreover, the researchers themselves came unprepared to anticipate the challenges ahead of them due to insufficiency of literature that elaborates the issues in depth.

Most researching challenges were originated from the researchers' efforts to tackle new areas of research; that is within the context of B40 urban women in Kuala Lumpur. In summary, these challenges were due to three fundamental aspects: 1) contextualizing women's social entrepreneurship in a research; 2) engaging women as research participants; and 3) encompassing ethnic differences with unique normative and customary practices.

Concept contextualization is unquestionably a real challenge in a research. From the laypersons' point of views, women's social entrepreneurship was rather new concepts which baffled most people in Malaysia; what's more for women participants. In fact, the concept was not thoroughly discussed yet in the academe. When all is said and done, though this research may not be substantial enough, it is sufficient to add new supply of literature materials for the use of future researchers.

Engaging women as the only research participants hold a challenge too for researchers. From the Malaysian context, a patriarchal family structure is still relevant and functioning. It was not easy to hold long, in depth interviews with most Malaysia women, particularly those coming from low economic background and having less academic qualification. Not only official permissions were requited, unofficial approvals from the head of the family, particularly husbands/spouses, were also needed. Even we we they joined the interview, they brought with them the whole family members, especially their young ones.

Finally, the interethnic-content inclusion is a factual researching challenge for many social researchers. Encompassing ethnic differences with unique normative and customary practices were never easy. In this particular research, the Malay and Indian were quite open in giving their inputs, yet the Chinese was exceptionally cautious in providing their opinions. At this juncture, the researchers were unable to determine their participatory variances. Perhaps, this is another challenging part which is wide open to be investigated by future researchers.

These challenges are presented to assist future researchers who are interested in interethnic studies either in performing empirical research or developing new framework or tools. Such contribution acts as essential catalysts in understanding ethnic relations and promoting cohesion inter- and intra-groups. In conclusion, interethnic studies remain relevant as we are living as a social being in a highly-diverse world. In a nutshell, interethnic studies continue to be significant, as we are becoming more diverse than before

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