

Identity and Intercultural Competence: Probing Student Experiences in Malaysian Campuses

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a Malaysian perspective on identity and intercultural competence. We examine how ethnically diverse students in Malaysian campuses make sense of their identities and intercultural competence. Using communication theory of identity as the underlying theoretical framework, we explore their discourse on identity and intercultural competence based on their experiences with cultural others. We collect data from in-depth interviews with selected participants. The study reveals two themes: the affiliation nature of identity and the dynamic nature of identity. The analysis contributes to enriching current understanding of intercultural competence that takes into account identity and intercultural experiences in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Intercultural competence, identity, culture, in-depth interviews, diversity*

INTRODUCTION

Building positive relations among cultures and breaking down walls of prejudice has become an important goal for societies in the twenty-first century. This goal means that it is necessary for individuals to develop intercultural competence. Much has been written about intercultural competence in literatures. However, we consider Deardorff's (2004, 2006) study to be useful for a foundational understanding of this construct. Based on her study, intercultural competence is defined as 'the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills, and attitudes' (Deardorff, 2004, p. 194). While Deardorff's (2004, 2006) work has been useful, we feel there is much need to develop a deep understanding of intercultural competence through research works, particularly in Malaysia, alongside other factors including knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Since Kim (2009) asserted that identity factor has become crucial to deepen our understanding of intercultural competence, we seek to explore the notion of identity and intercultural competence as it is situated within the Malaysian setting. We raised these questions: Living in the context of where we are surrounded by people with multicultural/multi-ethnic identities in Malaysia, how do we see ourselves as cultured individuals? What is required to achieve an appropriate and effective interaction that celebrates cultural identities?

Maintaining a harmonious society is indeed a 'never ending story' for Malaysia since it requires continuous effort (Evans et al., 2010; Shamsul, 1995, 2005, 2014). Hence, it is crucial to

educate younger generations for a multicultural world; nowhere such role must be taken other than higher learning institutions. Zhao and Wildemeersch (2008) pointed out the important role of higher education:

Higher education is not only about transmitting knowledge, skills, and social values to students; it should provide opportunities for individuals to come into the world, to know who they are and where they stand, to have a better sense of whom others are and how to respond to them (p. 55).

Accordingly, it has become a crucial agenda for Malaysia to educate university students to be interculturally competent (Malaysian Education Blueprint, 2015; Tamam, 2013). Despite such crucial agenda, Tamam (2015) noted that research on intercultural competence in Malaysia still remained to be underdeveloped. For this reason, our paper discusses student identity and intercultural competence among local undergraduates in Malaysian universities. Specifically, taking Hecht et al's (1993) communication theory of identity, we investigate how students make sense of their cultural identity and intercultural competence.

SELF-OTHER RELATIONS: CONCEPTUALIZING CULTURAL IDENTITY AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

The notion of identity centralizes the concept of self - a sense of who we are and who others think we are (Harun, 2007; Martin & Nakayama, 2013). Culture is central to our sense of self because it is influential in the majority of our interaction with others (Martin & Nakayama, 2013; Hecht & Choi, 2012). Since culture provides a sense of certainties, meanings and expectations of behaviours, the interpretation of our interaction with others is very much filtered by our cultural standpoints (Hecht & Choi, 2012; Kim, 2009; Martin & Nakayama, 2013). We form cultural identities through a process in which we learn the beliefs, values, norms, and social practices of our cultures and identify with that culture as part of our self-concept (Collier, 2006; Lustig & Koester, 2006).

In examining cultural identity factor, communication theory of identity tends to be more useful because it provides the means for explaining aspects of identity that can only be captured through communication orientation (Baldwin & Hecht, 2003; Hecht, Collier & Ribeau, 1993; Hecht & Choi, 2012). Hecht, Collier and Ribeau (1993, p.160) based their theory on the assumption that culture "is socially and historically emergent, co-created and maintained as a function of identity, and constituted as a system of interdependent patterns of conduct and interpretation". Based on this assumption, the theory places the centrality of identity to the study of culture and the centrality of communication to both identity and culture. In an attempt to articulate a communication approach to identity, Hecht et al. (1993) integrated the divergent perspectives (sociological, anthropological and psychological approaches) on identity and extended identity beyond the individual and societal constructions to the interaction by adding a relational dimension and a communicative emphasis. Accordingly, Hecht et al. proposed the basic premise of this theory that rests on the assumption that "identity is inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages are exchanged. These messages are symbolic linkages between and among people that, at least in part, are enactments of identity" (p. 161).

In addition, the theory builds upon important concepts that include core symbols, prescriptions, codes, conversations, and community that set the bases for explicating communication perspectives on identity. The core symbols have become a way of understanding how societies orient themselves around their concept of identity. Identity prescribes modes of conduct that tells individuals what they should be doing. In this regard, Hecht et al. (1993) remarked that successful enactment of identity indicates competence on individual level and relationally, it can be said that competent conversation confirms the identities of communication participants. Identity is a code for being because it provides the means for understanding self, interactions, relationships, and society and it is enacted as a way of doing conversations. The notion of community reflects the function of cultural communication that provides shared identity as it is derived from communal membership. Hecht and associates further attested that the notion of community is fundamental to identity. Based on these important concepts (core symbols, codes, prescriptions, conversations, and communities), Hecht and associates explicated that identity can be examined at four levels which include personal, enacted, relational, and communal levels. These four levels define the "location" or the "layer" of identity and provide a more comprehensive view of identity that integrate community, communication, social relationships, and self-concepts (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Hecht et al. (1993) claimed that these frames are part of the lived experience of social actors and thus, they are useful to researchers as a means for interpreting ways people conceptualize their own identity. Baldwin and Hecht (2003) posited that the four frames or levels of identity are the central feature of this theory which distinguishes it from other theories.

Specifically, the personal level accentuates an individual's self-perception of his or her identity that signifies the avowal aspect of identity (Collier, 2006; Hecht & Choi, 2012). This personal layer is a characteristic of an individual's self-concept that provides an understanding of the individual's feelings about self and how the individual defines herself or himself in general as well as within particular situations (Hecht et al., 1993). The relational level takes an individual's perception of others' communicated views of the individual's identity. This level indicates that identity is co-created between self and relevant others. This level indicates the ascribed aspect of identity. The enacted level reveals identity as it is expressed in communication while the communal level is the group's conception of identity. The communal level of identity is very much internalized as group members share common features, histories, and collective memories that serve as their bonding factors. This communal level of identity may be expressed in cultural stereotypes or cultural codes that define the social construction of individuals at the group level. Hecht and Choi (2012) maintained that the four levels may overlap and interpenetrate with one another to explain identity. Accordingly, the levels should not be treated in isolation from one another since the four levels make up the composite whole of identity. However, for the purpose of analysis, Hecht and Choi claimed that the levels are often defined and analysed separately. Yet, the analysis can be enriched if each level is considered in relation with the other levels.

Given that we aim to explore how students make sense of identity and intercultural competence, we consider the personal frame of identity to be more useful. Deardorff (2009) asserted that intercultural interaction is very much determined by people's perceived

membership to a cultural group and the extent to which it affects their interaction. Thus, the personal frame of identity speaks volume on how individuals' view themselves as cultured beings and how such view influences their interaction with others. Meanwhile, McDaniel et al. (2012) proposed that our experiences in a cultural group guide our sense making on the proper ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. We internalize and externalize the "unwritten" societal rules that guide our expectations on appropriate and effective communication. Collier (2006) maintained that interaction within our cultural group may be relatively satisfying since it consists of people who hold similar cultural expectations. However, when we engage in interaction with culturally different others, it is likely that we experience some uncertainties due to differing expectations. We concur that although individuals may experience different expectations, the individuals are not passive social actors. Rather, they are active social actors who seek to understand what is going on in their interaction (Bird & Osland, 2005). We further concur that identity serves as a useful framework that enables people to seek for understanding of not only their cultural standpoints about good communication, but also other cultural standpoints. Such understanding in turn, prompt people to learn about what it means to be interculturally competent persons.

STUDENT IDENTITY AND INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: THE CASE OF MALAYSIAN CAMPUS

As a country situated within the South East Asian region, Malaysian campuses offer an interesting exploration on identity and intercultural competence. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society with a population of slightly more than 31 million people comprising three major ethnic groups namely the ethnic Bumiputera/Malays (68.6%), Chinese (23.4%), and Indians (7.0%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2017). Although the major ethnic groups share many general characteristics as Malaysians, specific ethnic value characteristics exist (Asma & Pederson, 2004; Cheah, Yusof & Ahmad, 2014). For instance, while the Malays accentuate their identity to Islam and Malay cultural world, the Chinese derive their values from Confucian philosophy (Cheah, Yusof & Ahmad, 2014; Shamsul, 1999). Such differences give significant influence on the social practices of each ethnic group (Asma & Pederson, 2004).

Despite the fact that Malaysia claims to be a state constituting multiethnic groups (Shamsul, 2014), an examination of literature indicates that most, if not all, of the current intercultural competence research in Malaysia tend to interrogate sojourners' adjustment into the general Malaysian culture to develop intercultural competence (e.g., Aida Hafitah & Maimunah, 2007; Mustafa & Illias, 2013; Zuria et al., 2010). Given that Malaysian higher education aims to produce competent graduates in year 2015-2025 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2015), it is high time for higher institutions in Malaysia to be aware of intercultural competence of local students. Thus, we raised this question: How do we probe intercultural competence of our local students in our campuses? Looking into current development of increasing education cooperation and mobility in Malaysian higher education (Singh, 2012), it is possible that our local students do not only experience interaction among themselves who are ethnically diverse, but also with those from the Asian countries and Africa in the campuses. For this reason, we concur that it is imperative to approach intercultural competence by considering local student experiences with cultural others (Malaysians/non-Malaysians). We believe such an

approach of experience helps to offer a more holistic perspective of identity and intercultural competence. The following research question guides the inquiry of this study:

RQ1: How do students describe their identity?

RQ2: How do students make sense of their competence with cultural others?

METHODOLOGY

The study involved three public universities in Northern Malaysia. We used in-depth interviews involving participants who are Malaysians and doing undergraduate programmes. In order to ensure appropriate representation of the Malaysian population, our participants included representatives from three major ethnic groups in Malaysia (Malay, Chinese, and Indian). The study utilized purposive sampling in identifying potential respondents. We established two important criteria for choosing our participant. First, participants must be undergraduate students who have been in the campus for at least two semesters. The criterion includes a reasonable duration of experience within the campus which suggests that students would have developed social networks with cultural others. Second, the students must be able to provide actual situations and narrate each encounter with cultural others as is. We identified the participants with the assistance of instructors from each university resulting in thirteen participants being interviewed (Table 1)

Table 1: In-Depth Interview Participants

Participant	Ethnicity	Program of study	Semester	Gender
1 (P1)	Chinese	Communication	7	Female
2 (P2)	Indian	Communication	7	Female
3 (P3)	Malay	Communication	7	Male
4 (P4)	Malay	Communication	3	Male
5 (P5)	Malay	Communication	2	Female
6 (P6)	Indian	Management studies	7	Female
7 (P7)	Chinese	Finance	7	Female
8 (P8)	Malay	Chemistry	7	Male
9 (P9)	Malay	Multimedia	6	Male
10 (P10)	Malay	Multimedia	6	Male
11 (P11)	Malay	New Media Communication	2	Female
12 (P12)	Chinese	New Media Communication	2	Female
13 (P13)	Indian	New Media Communication	2	Male

We utilized in-depth interviews in the study and used open-ended protocols in the interviews to elicit as much information as possible from the participants (Patton, 2002). We interviewed each participant for approximately thirty to forty minutes and asked questions that elicit the details of their experiences. We used English as the primary language for the in-depth interviews with participants. However, some participants prefer to speak in Malay language (the official language of Malaysia). As such, we proceeded with the preferred language in their interviews.

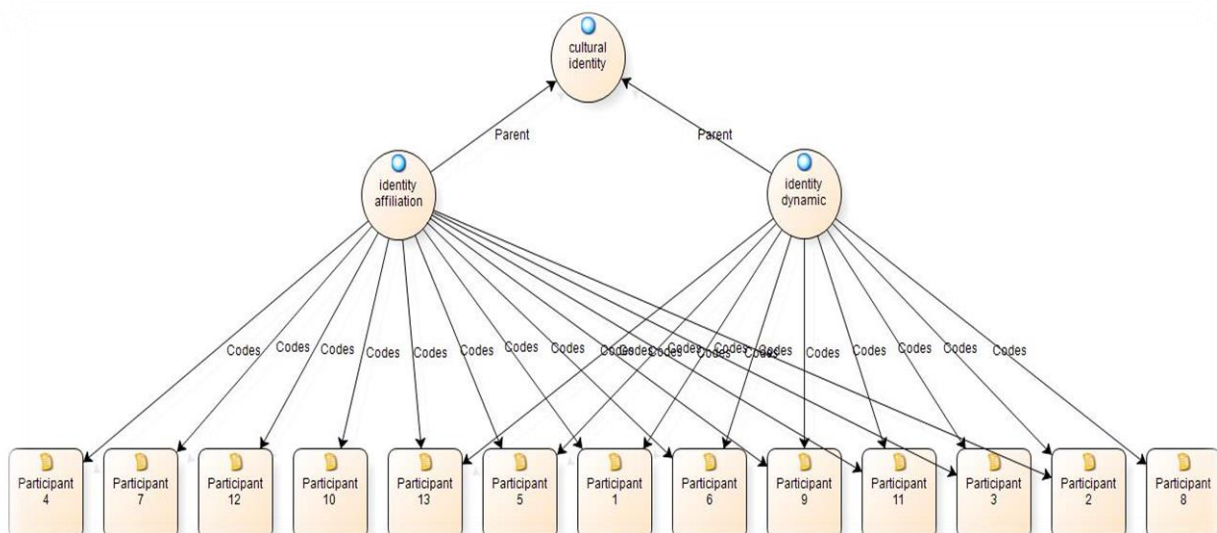
We constructed the interview questions based on the personal layer of identity as Hecht et al. (1993) proposed. Taking this layer, we focused our questions on how participants say who they are, how such self-definition influences their interaction with cultural others and how they view intercultural competence. We first asked participants to provide some understanding of their cultural backgrounds. Then, we asked participants to recount situations with cultural others that provide them with some insights on the cultural differences and similarities; and what they found as helpful in achieving competent communication.

We used a software analysis (Nvivo 10) to aid data management. We transcribed each interview verbatim. We retained each participant's statements as much as possible to preserve their point of view. However, when there are glaring errors in the statements, editing was done in order to make their statements more comprehensible. Themes were coded by applying the 'semantic thematic analysis' technique proposed by Janis (1965). The unit of analysis that we observed was sequence of sentences or a complete dialogue related to feelings, attitudes and reactions of the participants' perspective.

RESULTS

The data analysis showed two themes that illuminate participants' perspectives (Figure 1). The themes include: (i) the affiliation nature of identity and (ii) the dynamic nature of identity

Figure 1: Themes of intercultural competence



Theme 1: The Affiliation Nature of Identity

We began our inquiry by exploring how the participants chose to describe selves as cultured individuals. For instance, we probed how an individual sees or 'labels' himself or herself as Malay; what it means to be a Malay from the participant's standpoint? What is entailed with being a Malay? In view of this, the participants described their sense of belonging to a particular cultural group by affiliating their identities with the sociological markers that characterize and demarcate ethnic/cultural groups. Such identity markers include, among others, religion, clothing, cultural rules, values, food, traditions, and cultural practices. For example:

For Indians... we have our traditional ways especially traditional food. We still eat traditional food even though we have western food. We also follow Hindu tradition in doing our functions or events such as weddings (P2).

In my Indian tradition, I cannot cut my finger nails at night...for a pregnant woman...we have to do celebration ceremony when she gets into seven month of pregnancy. The woman is not allowed to leave home for thirty days after she has given birth (P12).

While other participants associate their cultural identities with a specific cultural group, Participant 5 identifies herself as "mixed" given that her mother is a Chinese and her father has ethnic heritage of Indian-Chinese-Portuguese cultures. Such mixture of multi-ethnic identities of this participant provides a unique perspective of how she views herself and how she engages with cultural others:

My mom is Chinese, like purely Chinese and for my dad's side is I would really say, like "rojak" (mixed). My dad is a mixture of Indian and Chinese as well and little bit of Portuguese blood. So, yes, it's really mix over there at my dad's side. But race wise, he is technically Indian. I have friends from all kinds of races because I'm mixed as well. I can say I don't like to associate myself on race alone even in class... I would just sit with anyone I want to, it doesn't really matter.

Participant 11 comes from Sabah, one of two Malaysian states on the Island of Borneo. The state is known for its notable ethnic diversity. Interestingly, she discussed differences between people in Sabah and Peninsular Malaysians. In addition to seeing herself as "Sabahan", she also identifies her specific ethnicity as Malay and considers religion (Islam) as more important in explaining her identity:

R: As a person coming from Sabah, do you think Sabahans have their own identity? Or do you have a Malaysian identity?

P11: Actually it is the same. If for Sabahans...how to say this... (Laughter)...our language sounds harsh for people in Peninsular Malaysia but actually it is not. I find it here students use the word 'bodoh' (stupid) and it is considered normal but in Sabah, it is considered rude. If someone say 'bodoh', we do not make friends with the person but here it is common. So I have to get used to it but when I go back to Sabah, I have to be aware.

R: So you are used to it?

P11: I am used to it. Every day I hear it from my friends (laughter)

R: So language is seen as different? You mentioned that when Peninsular people meet Sabahans, they tend to think that Sabahans talk harshly.

P11: Yes.

R: Do you want people to see yourself as a Bugese? Or Malay? Or Muslim? How do you prefer to be identified?

A: (As a) Muslim...

R: Why?

A: Because Islam is much better... it is a faith that goes beyond people of diverse cultures. If Malay... It is specific to an ethnic group.

We probed further to understand the manner in which identity affiliation influences student interaction with cultural others. Interestingly, such affiliation to the sociological markers seems to work as an important source for participants to understand “the do’s and don’ts” of cultural others. Such understanding is very important for respecting differences when interacting. Consider the following experience by Participant 6 (an Indian Malaysian) :

R: Can you tell me something about Chinese culture or Malay culture that you are aware of?

P6: Well, there’s plenty. For Malays, I learned about their religion. Their background of religions like the names because I know in my culture every name has a meaning. It’s the same with the Malay culture as well. So I know, like certain names means lights, joy...there’s too many. I learned about why they have.... something like they cannot do, cannot touch, those are some of the things that I learnt. The same goes with Chinese as well... like the colors

R: For you, like the Chinese or Malay, what aspect of culture do you think is very important for you? Is it the food, values, or religions?

P6: What really catches my attention? If it’s about different culture, I think what really catches my attention the most is their practices. The principles and practices like, for example, like Malay cannot go near the dogs, like Indians we cannot eat the beef. So those practices... I’m always curious to know why it is being done that way. So that “why” questions, of the practices... catches my attention the most.

R: Do you believe that it is important to understand cultural differences?

P6: Yes. It is important. Taking into consideration our country itself. We have a lot of different cultures, so we need to be able to understand if it is not assembled, at least try to understand the culture of others. So that, we can show our respect here being a heterogeneous country. It’s very important to know the differences.

R: Do you have Chinese friends, Malay friends, ...Sabahan, Sarawakian friends? When you interact with them, what are the important aspects of culture do you think you must always be aware of?

P6: I think, it should be the do’s and don’ts. Because sometimes... we might give them something that they shouldn’t accept, like when it comes to gifts. Some culture... they don’t take handkerchief as gifts. So, the do’s and don’ts. Because for them it could be

very important thing, it could be "a big no" for them... giving it to them, maybe like a sign of bad luck. Ya, so the do's and don'ts.

Participant 5 gave a unique perspective of how her multi-ethnic identity helps her to gain understanding about cultural others. Specifically, she retold how much she has learned about "different kinds of things" by assisting Japanese exchange students. Interestingly, she also shared how the others have also come to understand her identity:

P5: I think my background helps a lot as well this kind of program (buddy program) because we socialize with so many people. It really opens our mind to different kinds of things. New things. We do not only learn new things, we understand new things as well so I think it's really good for someone like an individual especially us because we are really young and we need to grow and not only mature but just be understanding and understand people more. I think understanding is really important.

R: Do you think your Japanese exchange student also understands who you are, or they just don't care about it?

P5: They do ask questions, sometimes they asked "oh, you're mix. What language do you speak at home?" Even in Japan they consider themselves as Japanese, they will not say "like I'm Chinese or Indian". Even in Indonesia. When we say "what are you?" they will answer "oh I'm Indonesian". But we like "no... no...no. What are you"? and they like "oh I'm Chinese-Indonesian". It's really different you know. Even though we see in all Asian countries, we think that we pretty similar but actually we are quite different.

While the first theme describes participants' sense of belonging to a particular cultural group and what they learned about cultural others, the second theme portrays the dynamic aspect of participants' identity in relation to cultural others. Within such consciousness, there is some form of intricacy in understanding this particular aspect of identity. The following section explains this dynamic aspect of identity.

Theme 2: The Dynamic Nature of Identity

For some participants, their affiliation to the sociological markers of a cultural group (such as language) does not only work in their self-identification, it also works as an important connecting factor with cultural others. For example, in the case of participant 2 who is a Chinese Malaysian, she reflected that she could relate easier with her friend of Chinese descent from Indonesia because they share similar native language and racial identities. Consider her experience:

R: Do you interact with non-Malaysians in this campus?

P2: Yes but that with Chinese from Indonesia. We share the same culture since we are Chinese.

R: How do you get to know her?

P2: We know each other through classes.

R: What makes you feel interested to communicate with her?

P2: The first one is because her English is very fluent and I try to learn some English from her. The second one is she is also a Chinese, so it's easy for us to connect with each other.

R: Do you think you share many similarities with her in terms of culture?

P2: Language, sometimes we speak Mandarin. We discussed about the food here, how we miss our food.

R: What are the things that you usually share with her?

P2: Since we do assignment together, we discussed a lot of things. Other than that, we also share information on travel.

R: Throughout your friendship, do you face any challenges in communicate with her?

P2: No, because we are from the same race (Chinese), just from the different country. There is no problem in language also, since both of us speaking Mandarin.

Other participants mentioned that sharing similarities with cultural others (such as in the language they speak or religion they profess) enables them to connect easily. Nonetheless, differences do not negate their interests to interact with cultural others. Rather, participants see themselves as individuals who can always learn to adapt to cultural differences. For example, Participant 1 expressed that he can easily relate with others who hold similar religious beliefs. Additionally, he also views himself as an "easy going" person who is also able to "blend in" with those who hold different religious beliefs:

R: How do you feel when you interact with your Uzbekistan friend? Do you feel like there's not much barrier or there are some things that you have to go through?

P1: Ok. This Uzbekistan guy, he's a Muslim so there is not much of barrier because we understand each other

R: What if that person holds different religion? Do you think you can connect with that person?

P1: I don't care at all...it doesn't matter to me. In my previous experience in Indonesia, I live in a house, with four rooms, so one of the room was occupied by Tajikistan guy...he is also a Muslim and the other two rooms were occupied by Dutch guys and both of them are atheist. We do lot of things together including clubbing...but I don't actually really like it..i'm just like when they ask me to go, I keep avoiding them. There was one day that I tell them that I don't have anything to do that night, so they asked me to go to the club, so I'm just like go with it, but I don't enjoy it at all. I just like try to blend in.

Participant 2 remarked that she likes to gain cultural knowledge from cultural others and sees herself as a person who is adaptive to cultural differences. Interestingly, she focused such adaptive behaviour within her experiences with the non-Malaysian students.

R: Do you have interest to communicate with people from other cultures?

P2: Yes with Indonesians because last time in front of my room are Indonesians. Normally I will be in their room. They are always very friendly and I like to know about their culture and then they share lots of information.

R: The Indonesians, are they Muslims?

P2: Not all of them.

R: How do you feel when you interact with people from different culture?

P2: For me it's quite okay. I never find any problem communicating with them, other races also, because in my perception, I can adapt in any situation, I can communicate with anyone even though they are from different culture.

Participant 6 felt that Malaysians, in general, are able to be adaptive to cultural others due to the multicultural nature of Malaysian society. She reflected on such thoughts with reference to her experience being outside Malaysia:

R: Why do you make friends with non-Malaysians?

P6: Ahhh... Because I want to learn how they do things and how different they are from Malaysians. Because we are used to be in an environment that we can understand each other because we are born since young we are educate to be among different people so when goes to another country, I always want to see how they react to people who are not one of them.

R: Do you think that people from others culture especially non-Malaysians, do you think them sort of like accepting you?

P6: Ahaa .. Not all.

R: What makes you say that?

P6: Aaaa... What can I say. They are very much not welcoming to the foreign people, like, because if you are foreigner, "I don't want to approach you" kind of thing they have. And another reason is that from my experiences is what I asked my friends is that I always asked why they don't want to talk, why they don't dare to look at me when they speak, is because they don't know how to communicate with us. So, for them when it comes to culture, the language becomes the barrier.

R: Language?

P6: Yes. Their language become a very big barriers when they talk

R: You're telling me that this is your experience at South Korea?

R: Yes. Because that is more valid answer that giving my own opinion but even, but if it's like, the exchange students here, they seems to be more welcoming towards the culture here because they are foreigners and they are the one that looks forwards to learning it. So they are here prepared for differences culture but when it's me going to their culture it has to me prepared to accept their culture.

R: I see. So it means that, you know, when you are in the community where you are the minority most likely you are trying to understand theirs but not the other way around.

DISCUSSION

This study is conducted to answer these two questions: (i) how do students describe their cultural identity and (ii) how do students make sense of intercultural competence? This study found two important themes: the affiliation nature of identity and the dynamic nature of identity.

The first theme “the affiliation nature of identity” offers an understanding of how participants came to view that they are as cultured individuals and how they make sense of intercultural competence. Based on the findings, participants’ identification seems to be primarily based on the sociological markers (such as language, religion and traditions) that generally characterize and distinguish one cultural group from another. The finding indicates that, although our primary interest in the study is to explore the personal frame of identity, the participants’ responses seem to weave together with the communal frame of identity. This finding suggests the interpenetration between the personal and communal frame of identity in which it shows the significance of cultural socialization that shapes an important part of the participants’ identity. The literature proposed that through socialization with relevant others such as family and friends within the ethnic group that individual exist; individuals learn to be a cultural member by speaking the language, learning beliefs and values, and performing cultural norms of the group (Byram, 1997; Hecht et al., 1993; Hecht et al., 2003; Martin & Nakayama, 2013; Harun, 2007). The cultural socialization that the individuals experience in turn influences their consciousness of the group to which they feel a sense of belonging (Hecht et. al, 1993; Martin & Nakayama, 2012; Harun, 2007).

The finding on the affiliation nature of identity does not only portray how participants come to understand their own cultural beliefs, values, and views; but also how they understand cultural differences. This insight is very much attained through participants’ ability to observe and analyse their own behaviours vis-à-vis cultural others that has heightened their knowledge. Interestingly, the finding also indicates how participants gained understanding about the identity of others who are non-Malaysians and their own identity as multi-ethnic Malaysians. This can be particularly observed in the case of participant 5, in which she pointed out her awareness about differences in the similarity among Asians, particularly Malaysians. The finding of this provides a deeper insight into the element of cultural knowledge which has been cited as a crucial component for intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). Deardorff posited that cultural knowledge requires an individual to have cultural self-awareness of his or her own and other cultures. This awareness moves beyond the surface knowledge of culture (such as food and greetings) and requires an individual to gain deep cultural knowledge to understand other worldviews (Deardorff, 2006). This finding indicates that cultural self-awareness is a process that progresses through participants’ ability to learn about self and the others. Such experience provides valuable lessons that move participants into having an informed understanding about cultural differences.

The second theme “the dynamic nature of identity” offers an understanding about the dynamic aspect of identity. As Hecht et al. (1993) proposed that the emergence of identity depends upon with whom one interacts and how one identifies each other, the second theme indicates the emergence of identity in participants’ experience with cultural others. It shows that participants’ identity is not only based in a ‘given’ manner as constructed through the social markers of cultural groups, rather, it must also consider how participants define and re-define their identity in relation to the others with whom they interact. For example, as the finding indicates, participant 2 felt she could connect with the other person who shares similar language and racial identity with her despite having a different national identity. Such perception points to interesting insights about the personal frame of identity that highlights in what way people perceive “differences” between selves and the others; and how such

perception influences their interaction. In view of this, the perception of cultural differences is not an either-or dimension but vary with respect to degree of cultural distance that presents some strangeness and/or familiarity in a given interaction (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003; Sarbaugh, 1988). Gudykunst and Kim (2003) proposed that when intercultural participants felt there is a presence of high cultural familiarity, the level of cultural distance is low and communication seems to proceed with minimal effort. Conversely, when there is low cultural familiarity, cultural distance tends to expand and communication requires greater efforts.

Although shared identities in the line of language or religion seems to work as an important factor for participants to find connection with cultural others, participants felt they are also able to find ways to work through differences. In view of this, the dynamic nature of identity also shows how participants viewed themselves as changing entities who can adapt to cultural differences. This finding supports the literature in which adaptation is the core of competence (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Nonetheless, the literature raised the key question that, if adaptation is crucial, it is unclear as to what extent intercultural participants should adapt to one another (Deardorff, 2009). Spitzberg and Changnon (2009, p.35) further attested that “if both are adapting, it seems possible that both parties become chameleons without a clear target pattern to which to adapt”. This study indicates that participants see themselves as adaptive to cultural others. Interestingly, this awareness is very much focused on their experiences with non-Malaysians. This finding points to an interesting insight. While other research highlights unidirectional on the need for competency that centres on foreigner’s adaptation (e.g, Dalib, Harun & Yusof, 2017; Mohamad Saleh & Husin, 2017; Zuria et al., 2010), the participants in our study seems to be adaptive to the non-Malaysians. Perhaps, such adaptability comes from diversity experience in Malaysia as Chen and Kho (2017) wrote:

Malaysia was said to be one of the country [sic] with the most diverse society. The dominantly Malay Muslim country is shared with other ethnicity and religion, such as the Buddhist Chinese, the Hindu Indians and Indigenous people. On top of that, the geographical differences and state boundaries created a very different culture between the people of West Malaysia and East Malaysia (p. 395).

We believe that the existence of social harmony amongst the many ethnic identities in the Malaysian society, coupled with efforts made by the government for national integration (Shamsul, 2005, 2008; Chen & Ko, 2017) have led to useful “breeding ground” for participants to develop adaptive behaviours towards others.

In essence, this study offers a deep understanding on intercultural competence in the light of participants’ personal frame of identity. This personal frame draws attention on the critical importance of identity consciousness as an important factor for intercultural competence. As participants, understand who they are as cultured individuals, they become aware of their cultural rules, practices, beliefs and tradition. As participants try to see things through the eyes of cultural others who hold different cultural identities, their perspective is added into participants’ own personal repertoire. Additionally, the meaning of being cultured individuals is not only based in a ‘given’ manner which is constructed through the sociological markers, it is also viewed in a dynamic sense, suggesting the idea that identity is being redefined and reconstructed in the course of participants’ interaction with cultural others. Taking this

nature of identity, the study contributes to a new way of understanding intercultural competence in the Malaysian context. Theoretically speaking, the conception of intercultural competence must take into account how participants self-position their identities in relation to cultural others. Such self-positioning of identities speaks volume on how participants identify intercultural exchanges and how they work out ways to deal with cultural differences.

CONCLUSION

The finding of this study contributes to further theorizing of identity and intercultural competence that considers Malaysian perspective. The perspective would be very useful for developing student competency in Malaysian higher education institutions. We hope our study does not only help students to function effectively and appropriately in the increasingly Malaysian multicultural society. Rather, it can also be applied to higher education institutions in other places that aim for development of competency among students.

This study considers students' reflections on their experiences. Thus, it does not observe actual intercultural interactions. Future researchers may observe actual situations to understand, for example, how the dynamic nature of identity works when people from different cultures interact with one another. Findings from such research would be beneficial into delineating specific factors that contribute to competency in actual situations. Future study could also look into the role of multiple identities in influencing individuals to react in various situations. It may provide guidelines in understanding how individuals manage identities in the face of cultural differences. Additionally, it is interesting to look into how an individual manages intercultural interactions through a longitudinal study. Profiling the so called 'successful' intercultural interactions through such study would be helpful for student development. The new findings could contribute to rich understanding of intercultural competence which can be applied locally and globally.

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