Race-related diversity experiences in lifelong learning: impacts on undergraduates’ intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital

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Abstract

In this self-administered questionnaire survey the author determines the level of race-related diversity experiences and tests the hypotheses that there is a significant difference in the level of intercultural sensitivity and level of interracial bridging social capital across the different levels of race-related diversity experiences among undergraduates. The responses of 430 randomly selected students from three Malaysian race groups were analyzed. The results reveal a significant differential level of race-related diversity experiences across racial groups under study and support the hypothesized significant main effects for race-related diversity experiences on intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital among the students in all the three racial groups. A policy of race-related diversity engagement and inclusion should be firmly institutionalized at all levels of student activities to enhance intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital among the students.

Keywords: Race, diversity, lifelong learning, intercultural sensitivity, interracial bridging social capital, undergraduates

1. Introduction

The demand by increasingly diverse communities and workplaces for technically and culturally competent graduates has forced universities to reexamine students’ learning and experiences during their tertiary education. As the student body in most universities in Malaysia is becoming more diverse, and given the recent emphasis on graduate attributes, the impact of students’ engagement in race-related diversity, viewed as a form of lifelong learning, is worth studying. Research in western countries on university students’ experiences in diverse teaching environments suggests that they learn through curricular and co-curricular diversity and interaction with culturally dissimilar peers (Engberg, 2007). Interaction across races and discussion on race-related issues are fundamental for students’ growth (Bowman, 2011). Despite the substantive literature suggesting that students’ experiences with diversity impact positively on their learning and educational outcomes, little is known about the effect of race-related diversity on undergraduates in Malaysian universities. In order to fill this gap, the present study examines the influence of race-related diversity experiences (defined as engagement in informal interactional diversity and classroom diversity) on intercultural sensitivity (defined as the ability to develop positive emotions toward an understanding and appreciation of cultural differences that promote appropriate and effective intercultural behavior) and interracial bridging social capital (defined as social capital that allows individuals to draw on resources from peers that are racially different) among undergraduates at a multicultural public university in Malaysia.

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1.1. Theoretical perspective

Cross-race interaction and socialization (informal interaction diversity) and exposure to other cultures, as well as issues related to race relations in classroom (classroom diversity) are important elements of how students experience diversity, and which directly impact on their educational experiences (Bowman 2011). This is consistent with Mayhew, Grunwald, and Dey’s (2005) Input-Environment-Output (I-E-O) framework for examining students’ educational experiences and outcomes. A theoretical explanation of the impact of interactional and classroom diversity on students’ socio-cognitive growth is that a culturally diverse learning environment provides the type of complex social structures that stimulate the development of active thinking (Gurin & Nagda, 2006) and challenge students to refine their thinking and be mindful of the negative stereotypes (Avery & Thomas, 2004; Engberg, 2007; Denson & Chang, 2009). This and other literatures suggest race-related diversity experiences and intercultural sensitivity should be positively related. Intercultural sensitivity is particularly important in Malaysia because Malaysians are collectivist where respect and concerns on others during communication is highly stressed and valued (Tamam, 2010). Furthermore, in line with social theory perspective, interpersonal cross-race ties resulting from interaction and socialization can have positive effects because they constitute a form of social capital (Goddard, 2003). Racial diversity creates, through social ties, richer and more complex social and learning environments. Furthermore, cross-race ties enable students to use group identities as resources for intercultural understanding and collaboration (Gurin & Nagda, 2006). The weak ties that connect individuals to social worlds and resources that exist outside their inner circles are referred to as interracial bridging social capital.

1.2. Research context

Intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital, viewed as outcome of race-related diversity experiences, have received little attention in research. The aforementioned arguments and the relevant studies provide the basis to examine the level of race-related diversity experiences and whether the latter have a positive impact on intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital among undergraduates at a multicultural university. Support of the hypothesized effects of race-related diversity experiences on intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital provides additional evidence for the value of promoting extensive engagements in race-related lifelong learning activities among the students. As past studies have found, students from different races define and respond to diversity differently (Brunner 2006); it important to consider the effect on race. The university under study is one of the premier multicultural public research universities in Malaysia. All undergraduates are required to pass compulsory courses related to culture and race relations. A large majority of local undergraduate students of all races live in residential colleges.

2. Method

2.1. Sampling and data collection procedure

A total of 193 Malay, 165 Chinese, and 72 Indian students completed the self-administered questionnaires. They were randomly drawn from a list of undergraduate students living at the residential colleges on the university campus. There were more female respondents (67.0%) than male respondents (33.0%). The respondents were also varied in terms of the number of semesters they had been in the university. This ranged from two to eight semesters (M = 4.18, SD = 1.72). The sample represents all levels of undergraduate students – first-, second-, third-, and fourth-year students, 28.5%, 35.1%, 30.8%, and 5.6%, respectively.

2.2. Measures

Respondents answered six questions regarding race-related diversity experiences: “How much opportunity did you have to interact with peers of different racial groups in classes?” – response options ranging from ‘very much’, ‘much’, to ‘some-not much’, ‘little or none’ – “How frequently do you interact with peers from different racial groups on this campus?” and “How frequently do you socialize with peers of different racial groups on this campus?” – both with response options of ‘every day’, ‘3-5 days per week’, ‘1-2 days per week’, ‘once every week’, ‘less often or never’ – “How much exposure have you had in classes relating to information/activities devoted to the
understanding of peers from different racial backgrounds?” – with response options of ‘very much’, ‘much’, ‘some-
not much’, ‘little or none’. They were also asked to indicate whether they had taken a course in the university, which
had affected their views on racial relations and multiculturalism, and whether they had participated in the activities
of associations and societies with mixed-race student membership. A composite score was computed as an index of
race-related diversity experiences. A higher mean score on the index means greater race-related diversity
experiences.

Intercultural sensitivity was measured with twenty 5-
point Likert items from Chen and Starosta’s (2000)
tercultural sensitivity scale. The respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement (strongly disagree to
strongly agree) to the items of the scale. The items were related to individuals’ feelings and behavior about
interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. A higher mean composite score indicates a higher
intercultural sensitivity. The alpha reliability of the scale is 0.87.

Interracial bridging social capital was measured with a six-item scale. The respondents were asked to indicate
their degree of agreement on a 5-point scale (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree) to the items. The items
assessed the extent to which students were integrated in the multiracial environment and were able to mobilize
support and assistance from racially dissimilar peers. A higher mean composite score indicates a higher level of
interracial bridging social capital. The alpha reliability of the scale is 0.90.

3. Results

The level of race-related diversity experiences is not encouraging. As shown in Table 1, the mean scores for the
three samples are slightly above the theoretical mid score. The Malay ($M = 13.92$, $SD = 3.26$) was quite comparable
with the Chinese ($M = 14.36$, $SD = 3.43$); the Indian sample ($M = 15.86$, $SD = 2.93$) had a significantly higher mean
suggesting that the Indian respondents experienced greater race-related diversity than the Malay and the Chinese
[$F(2, 427) = 9.216$, $p = .000$]. The Malay and the Chinese samples did not differ significantly.

Table 2 presents the results of a two-way ANOVA on intercultural sensitivity according to the level of race-
related diversity experienced by race. The intercultural sensitivity scores ranged from 50 to 100 with a mean of
75.47 ($SD = 10.17$) for the overall sample. The level is moderate for the three samples as the means are around the
theoretical mid-point score. There was a statistically significant main effect for level of race-related diversity
experiences on the level of intercultural sensitivity [$F(2, 430) = 17.790$, $p = 0.000$]. Therefore, the hypothesized
main effect of race-related diversity experiences on intercultural sensitivity was supported. The effect size was
moderate (partial eta square = 0.08). The main effect of race on intercultural sensitivity was also significant [$F(2,
425) = 6.259$, $p = 0.002$], suggesting a significant difference in intercultural sensitivity across the three ethnic
groups. However, there was no significant interaction effect.

The results on the influence of level of race-related diversity experience on the level of interracial bridging social
capital by race are shown in Table 3. Overall, the level of interracial bridging social capital is also fair. The mean
scores are slightly above the theoretical mid-point of 18.0. There was a statistically significant main effect for level
of race-related diversity experiences [$F(2, 430) = 21.158$, $p = 0.000$] on the level of interracial bridging social
capital. Therefore, the hypothesized main effect of race-related diversity experiences on interracial bridging social
capital was supported. The main effect for race was also significant [$F(2, 430) = 13.140$, $p = 0.000$]; however, no
significant interaction effect was observed. The effect size for diversity engagement was moderate (partial eta square
= .09) and small for race (partial eta square = .05).
Table 1. Means, SDs and ranges of race-related diversity experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race-related diversity experiences</th>
<th>Malay n= 193</th>
<th>Chinese n = 106</th>
<th>Indian n= 53</th>
<th>All n= 440</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean SD (Range)</td>
<td>13.92a 3.26 (5-20)</td>
<td>14.36b 3.43 (5-20)</td>
<td>15.86b 2.93 (5-20)</td>
<td>14.40 3.34 (5-20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Higher means refer to a higher level of race-related diversity experiences; different superscripts are statistically significant at $p = 0.05$.

Table 2. Mean and SDs of intercultural sensitivity by level of race-related diversity experiences by race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race-related diversity experiences level</th>
<th>Malay n= 193</th>
<th>Chinese n = 165</th>
<th>Indian n= 72</th>
<th>All n= 430</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low n= 160</td>
<td>73.37 (9.09)</td>
<td>69.90 (8.08)</td>
<td>74.07 (11.25)</td>
<td>72.16a (9.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate n= 141</td>
<td>74.98 (8.43)</td>
<td>74.79 (9.46)</td>
<td>76.15 (11.49)</td>
<td>75.06b (9.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High n= 129</td>
<td>79.38 (10.74)</td>
<td>78.67 (9.34)</td>
<td>81.36 (12.11)</td>
<td>80.02c (10.76)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All n= 430</td>
<td>75.41a (9.58)</td>
<td>73.99a (9.55)</td>
<td>79.02b (12.17)</td>
<td>75.47 (10.17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher means refer to a higher level of intercultural sensitivity; different superscripts are statistically significant at $p = 0.05$.

Table 3. Mean and SDs of interracial bridging social capital by level of race-related diversity experience by race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race-related diversity experiences level</th>
<th>Malay n= 193</th>
<th>Chinese n = 165</th>
<th>Indian n= 72</th>
<th>All n= 430</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low n= 160</td>
<td>18.73 (4.27)</td>
<td>18.02 (4.54)</td>
<td>21.64 (3.29)</td>
<td>18.71a (4.38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate n= 141</td>
<td>20.82 (3.32)</td>
<td>21.06 (3.45)</td>
<td>23.30 (2.71)</td>
<td>21.27b (3.47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High n= 129</td>
<td>22.47 (4.16)</td>
<td>21.65 (3.11)</td>
<td>24.52 (3.65)</td>
<td>22.81c (3.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All n= 430</td>
<td>20.31a (4.24)</td>
<td>20.09a (4.18)</td>
<td>23.62b (3.49)</td>
<td>20.78 (4.28)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Higher means refer to a higher level of interracial bridging social capital; different superscripts are statistically significant at $p = 0.05$.

4. Discussion

This study examines the influence of race-related diversity experiences on intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital of Malay, Chinese, and Indian Malaysian undergraduate students at a multicultural public university. The finding shows that the level of race-related diversity experiences among the students is fair and certainly needs to be further improved upon given the known educational benefits of diversity engagement. A disappointing finding is the presence of differential levels of race-related diversity engagement across the racial groups. The Indian students, the minority of the student population, had a higher level of race-related diversity engagement compared with Malay and Chinese students. It seems the Chinese and the Malay students, in particular, are not capitalizing fully on the diversity opportunities presented by the multiracial and multicultural university environment.

The hypotheses predicting a significant main effect of race-related diversity experiences on intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital are supported. Those who had a higher level of race-related diversity experiences are more likely to have a higher level of intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital than those in the moderate and low level groups; while those in the low level group are more likely to have low levels of intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital. The differential level of race-related diversity experiences across racial groups found in this study not only corroborates past studies on the influence of race (e.g. Denson and Chang, 2009; Tamam, 2011) but, more importantly, underscores the issue of the existence of racial gaps in learning and educational experiences. The findings, which are in line with the literature on social engagement influences on the personal and social competency of students (e.g. Gurin & Nagda 2006), specify the race-related diversity engagement which could directly enhance intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital. This emphasizes the theoretical and practical significance of students’ engagement in race-related diversity activities.
All in all, the present study has demonstrated that the level of intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital among students at a multicultural public university in Malaysia is impacted by the level of race-related diversity engagement in students’ lifelong learning on campus. Furthermore, there is a differential level of race-related diversity experiences among the students, with minority Indian students reporting a higher level of race-related diversity experiences. Given past findings on the educational benefits of race-related diversity engagement for students regardless of racial groups, the practical implications are that academics and student development affairs administrators must make greater efforts to incorporate race-related diversity materials in their instructions and students development programs. It is imperative to include policies of inclusion in students’ educational engagement, and that this must be firmly institutionalized and supported in order to enhance race-related diversity engagement and to avoid the problem of continual disparity in terms of important educational experience and outcomes across racial groups.

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References


