INTERMARRIAGE: SOCIAL ATTITUDES, CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

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Abstract

Intermarriages are on the rise in our society today. As the boundaries across the continents are now easily explored and travelled, it seems to be very common to find marriages that incorporate two or maybe more culture and tradition in their household. The terms intermarriage is commonly defined as marriage couple who has different culture, ethnic, language or maybe religion background.

This paper aims to identify the social attitudes of the children from parents that have different cultural background and the challenges and benefits that they face in their daily lives. The research was conducted by interviewing 6 male and female students of Politeknik Kuching Sarawak using semi structured questions. From the feedback obtained from the interview, the researcher was able to gather, transcribe and analyse the data. The social attitudes of mixed parentage children presented in this paper include higher tolerance and understanding of both cultures, less prejudice, and more open and accepting. In general, Malaysia and to be specific, PKS proved to be a suitable place to conduct this research, because of the various ethnic backgrounds present here. The conclusion that we arrived at indicated that the mixed parentage children appeared to have better relations with their surrounding and they positively viewed themselves as privileged by being multiethnic regardless of gender.

Introduction

Signing a marriage certificate is not as simple as it seems. Marriage does not serve only as a legal procedure for the newlyweds; it is also a new path in creating new relationship with a whole new army of strangers. This may not seem as a hard task to handle if both couple are having the same culture and tradition, but to others, it is a big leap of faith. These days, intermarriage is a common thing that happens everywhere.
Set aside the unity of the culturally blended couple, we shall attempt to tackle the issues faced by their children.

**Theoretical framework**

Socialisation theory of children sees children as passive recipients of adult teaching and cultures but this has been challenged by the theoretical study of childhood that perceives children as active participants in interactive processes and as an agent in the construction of its own and others identities (James, 1986). As the world becomes borderless, some may say these children may not face any challenges despite being multiethnic. This notion is proved to be flawed as different cultures may be confusing for the children as both sides of parents are trying to instil their own culture that have different or conflicting values on different issues. Things or certain actions that are considered to be of high virtue may not be of any importance at all to other cultures. This kind of misunderstanding may be seen as pure miscommunication but to some, it might be disrespectful.

These multiethnic children as they reach adolescence may develop difficulties in assimilating the values, norms or roles of both of their parent’s culture (Berry, 1980). This proved to be a challenge when the children are very much forced to learn both cultures that are greatly contradicting in most of the social and behavioural context. Frustrated, these children will try to reject the culture of both parents and instead assimilate into the culture of their surroundings. The rejection may be viewed by their parents as being rebellious or plain rude behaviour. Poor communication between parents and children will worsen the situation as both sides will start to blame each other. Besides having to cope with both cultures, these children also need to adapt themselves to the value of their surroundings (Farver, 2007).
Acculturation happens when the multiethnic children are raised in a setting that is different from either the mother’s or father’s culture (Berry, 1980). There had been some research which implied that this might result in cultural conflict as the children’s perspectives might differ than that of their parents, thus affecting the children to have negative ethnic identity due to their assimilation with their surroundings (Quinones-Mayo & Dempsey, 2005).

There had been a lot of debates on the negative and positive aspects of being multi-ethnic. Previous researchers have suggested a few negative effects including insecurity, anxiety, depression, frustration and anger (Piskacek, Valdamir and Golub, 1973). Living in a multiethnic family setting may expose these children to rejections by their families and the society. Silent tension, depression and even anger outbursts may develop as they are expected to commit to more than one culture. Confused and unsure of the correct choice to make, these children may have greater stress and feel that they are being alienated. This will involuntarily lead to lower self-esteem due to the attitudes of people around them (Stephen & Stephan, 1991).

Then again, not all will face these negative aspects of being multiethnic. Prior researchers have linked the relationship between biculturalism and bilingualism. Findings indicated that multiethnic children are more cognitively flexible and less assertive than that of single ethnic children (Lambert, 1977). Studies relate this to the fact that multiethnic children come across an extensive range of norms, values and behaviours in their lives. These children cannot afford to be too defensive against their parents' culture as they have to respect them. They learn to interact more effectively to other people around them as they have experienced conflicting value (if any) in their upbringing.
Methodology

Subjects

This study was conducted in Polytechnic Kuching Sarawak. The participants of this study were 6 students, 3 female and 3 male students. The age range is of 18-21 years old and they were chosen to represent the multi-ethnic community in Malaysia.

Data collection and analysis

The data were collected by having interview sessions with the participants’ for clear and authentic data. All conversations between the researchers and every one of them have been recorded in order to be analysed. The questions for the interview were structured and the participants are given time to read through the questions before hand. Also, our goal for doing this discourse analysis is to get the real socialisation behaviour of the participants in their daily life. When the recorded interviews or discourse analysis were transcribed, it was ready for analysis (Refer to Appendix 1- 6).

All of the questions for the interview are designed and derived from a few scales. Question 1, 3 and 5 are devised to identify the participants’ intergroup similarity. Question 2 and 6 are designed to perceive the students’ intergroup anxiety. Question 4 and 7, on the other hand, are to observe their attitudes about the benefits or disadvantages of being multi-ethnic and Question 8 is to ask of the challenges that they met in their daily life. By using these specially designed questions, the researchers were trying to draw connection between the background of the participants and their attitudes.
Findings and Discussion

The analysis for this study consists of three sets of questions for all 6 students. As mentioned in the methodology, we have divided our findings into three sections, which are, intergroup similarity, intergroup anxiety, ethnic identity and challenges.

Intergroup similarity

The intergroup similarity questions are adapted from Stephen & Stephen (1989) that aim to identify the personality traits, beliefs, and customs of the mix parentage participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Q1 (Attachment)</th>
<th>Q3 (Identification)</th>
<th>Q5 (Acceptance &amp; Understanding)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (M)</td>
<td>Father (Malay)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (F)</td>
<td>Father (Melanau)</td>
<td>Melanau</td>
<td>Negative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (M)</td>
<td>Father (Dusun)</td>
<td>Dusun</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (M)</td>
<td>Mother (Betawi)</td>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (F)</td>
<td>Father (Dusun)</td>
<td>Dusun</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (F)</td>
<td>Mother (Iban)</td>
<td>Iban</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Intergroup similarity

From Table 1, most of the participants stated that they are more or only attached to one side of their parents families. This relates to Question 3, where the participants are asked to give reasons as why they identify themselves as only being of one ethnic. All, except one, participants identify their ethnic based on their attachment.

1. Which side of your parents are you more attached to?
   I’m more attached to my mother because when I was born, kecik I always dijaga oleh my mother’s family.

3. Usually, which ethnic do you usually identify yourself with? Why?
   Malay la. Because I stay in Kuching not Indonesia. I go back to Indonesia but not live there so I use Malay culture in my daily life.

Excerpt 1: Appendix 4
As shown in the Excerpt 1, participant 4 said that he is more attached to his mother’s side because when he was small, he is always taken care by his mother’s family. But in answering question 3, he answered that he identifies himself as Malay due to the fact that he is staying in Kuching (his father’s hometown) and adhering to the Malay culture in his daily life. He is actually participating actively in the integration of both culture, Betawi and Malay, in his life. This participant is able to withhold his attachment with his mother’s family and accepting his father’s ethnicity as his own based on the place he resides.

Question 5 on the other hand; gives varied results among the respondents. 4 participants said that it is easier for them to accept and understand other culture, 1 said no and 1 participant is unsure of the answer. From Excerpt 2, all of the participants that responded positively had been nurtured from small that they should respect other people despite of their race and religion.

| Appendix 1 |
| Of course. Even...even I not always go to my mother’s kampung, my mother still use and teach me and other, some culture. When we go back to mother’s kampung, father teach me that some adat is not together with my akidah (as a Muslim), so I do not follow the adat. It make me more understand not everyone same. All have different different way of life and I have to respect them. |

| Appendix 3 |
| Yes. I learn to live with 2 culture from small. Bapak tell me respect everyone no matter they Christian, Islam or Buddha. Or they come from poor or rich. Mama also tell me to be friend with everyone. I like to friend different type of people, they always tell me new things I don’t know about. |

| Appendix 5 |
| Yes, I can learn both of their language and it was easier for me to communicate with other person also it was easier for me to understand and respect both Dusun and Murut culture. |

| Appendix 6 |
| Yes. Because Iban and Kenyah are also very different. The way my aki & inik (grandparents in Iban) live also different from my uko (grandparents in Kenyah). So when I go back to my father’s kampung I have to change my language and also eat their food. It is different, sometimes I don’t like but I don’t say because I respect them. |
Excerpt 3 above is the response made by participant 2. This participant is more concern from her religious point of view, not from the culture itself because she said ‘it is difficult to accept if other culture is not the same like my religion’. Here, the participant comes from a family of Malay (Islam) and Iban (Christian). So basically the mother’s original religion can not be accepted by her since it contrasted with her religion.

Meanwhile, participant 4 is still unsure of his acceptance and understanding of other culture. His response is in Excerpt 4 below.

He is having difficulties to identify whether he will be able to accept and understand others’ culture. This participant is from Malay and Betawi mixed marriage. For him to establish his stand seems to be difficult as Malay and Betawi have a similar culture. He is not experiencing any major differences between these two cultures, making him not open to accept and understand other cultures that are very different from his.

Intergroup anxiety

The questions that enable the researchers to identify intergroup anxiety are adopted from Stephen & Stephen (1989) anxiety scale. These questions are designed to identify if anxiety is present during interaction with the society.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Q2 (Participation)</th>
<th>Q6 (Interaction)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (M)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (F)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (M)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (M)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Mix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (F)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (F)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Positive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Intergroup anxiety

From Table 2, it can be observed that not all of the participants participated in both of their parents’ culture. Only three participants participated in their parents’ culture while the others either participated in certain occasions or totally abandoned it. Comparing Question 2 and Question 6, the pattern of interaction is not always influenced by the participants’ participation in their parents’ culture.

2. Do you participate in both parents culture? (Yes, how do you cope? / No, why not?)
   Ooo..no. only my father. Because I rarely go back to my mother’s kampung.. so.. now, even now, I don’t really know about my mother’s culture.

6. Do you feel it is easy to be friendly with people from different background from your own?
   Yes. At room (in polytechnic) my friend come from Sarawak. He is very different from me. We speak different language, eat different food and have different ideas but we are good friend. I like to try and learn something new.
Two participants (refer to Excerpt 5) have no or limited participation in both parents culture but they admitted to interact and have good relationship with others. Their lack of attachment to one of their parent’s culture is because they do not see each other often making their participation in the culture limited. Albeit, this does not affect the participants’ interaction with other people from different culture. This is because the participants interact with a lot of people; other students and also lecturers, in their daily lives. They learn to adapt to their surroundings.

Excerpt 6

2. Do you participate in both parents culture? (Yes, how do you cope? / No, why not?)
   No. Because I’m Islam so I prefer my father’s side. My mother’s side is not a Muslim.

6. Do you feel it is easy to be friendly with people from different background from your own?
   Some, yes. If they are Muslim. I have friends who are from other culture that is Muslim. I have no problem with them at all. They all very friendly.

Excerpt 6 shows participant 2’s response to Question 2 and 6. This participant said that she does not participate in her mother culture due to her mother’s original religion. For this participant, religion becomes the key measurement for her to be attached to someone. It influenced her interaction with others as she already set her mind that she could only be close or friendly to those with the same religion as hers but she does not have any problem regarding the ethnicity or culture of her friends.

Excerpt 7

2. Do you participate in both parents culture? (Yes, how do you cope? / No, why not?)
   Yes, because I always been there at least three or two years, once in two or three years like that la. It’s not..aa..takda apa..perbezaan yang ketara, just sama melayu la.

6. Do you feel it is easy to be friendly with people from different background from your own?
   Kind of, kinda…boleh la… Mun berlainan sangat, I cannot. Like I don’t really like to be friend with Chinese..sebab dorang tidak mandi pagi. But I don’t tell them,because I takut mereka kecik hati kelak..
Participant 4 on the other hand, responded positively when asked about his participation in his parents’ culture. This respondent participated in both parents culture. He said that there is not much difference between his father’s and mother’s culture despite the mother being a Betawi and father is a Malay. But when asked about his interaction with other people from other culture, he responded by saying that he could cope, provided that the difference is not much between his culture and his friends. Participant 4 also mentioned that he could not stand to be with Chinese because they do not bathe in the mornings. Still, he stated that he did not tell his friends that because he is afraid that he might offend their feelings.

**Attitudes on the benefits or drawbacks of being multi-ethnic**

Question 4 and 7 were constructed to distinguish the participants’ attitudes and whether being multi-ethnic gives more benefits or drawbacks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Q4 (Effect)</th>
<th>Q7 (Benefits or Drawbacks)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (M)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (F)</td>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (M)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (M)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (F)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (F)</td>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Attitudes on the benefits or drawbacks of being multi-ethnic**

Table 3 shows that only one participant gave negative feedback when asked on ways her attitude is influenced by the fact that she is multi-ethnic. But then, all of the participants said that being multi-ethnic gives them benefits.
In Excerpt 8, participant 2 said that being multi-ethnic still does not make her feel comfortable with her mother’s family. She feels that because she is a Muslim and her mother’s side are Christians, it is not good for her to mingle or be close to them. Religion really plays a big factor in participant 2’s daily life.

Excerpt 9

4. How does being of mix-parentage affect your attitude to other people?

Not a lot. I still not feel so comfortable when I have to go to my mother’s side. I feel it is not good for me as they are not Muslim.

Advantage. Because...everyday I will learn something new. And I know I can accept the new things because I am open minded, and also respect other people.

Advantage. Because I know their lifestyle and their culture. I can know what is good, what is bad and what to follow and not.

Probably advantage. Because I can feel what other race and I can use that advantage to improve myself. learn to be more penyabar dan bertimbangrasa dengan orang lain.

More advantage as I can know both ethnic like culture, what’s their food and apa-apa yang mereka semua la...

Advantage. Because I can learn both of their language. My cousin also tell me because I am mix, I have beautiful and white skin. I don’t need a lot make-up.

Advantage for me because being multiracial give me advantage because it cause me to be more friendly and I was easy to make friend with everyone. Beside that, I also can learn a lot of language and it is fun.
Except 9 shows the responses for all of the participation regarding whether being mix-parentage gives them advantage or disadvantage. Participants said that it gives them more advantages as they are open to learn new things, able to distinguish right or wrong, and teach them to be respectful toward others despite the differences between them.

Challenges

Question 8 is developed to gain response from the participants on the challenges that they faced in their daily lives. Their responses are as shown in Table 4 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Q8 (Challenges)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 (M)</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>2 (F)</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (M)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 (M)</td>
<td>√</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 (F)</td>
<td>×</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 (F)</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Challenges

As can be seen in Table 4, 4 participants dealt with challenges in their daily lives while 2 participants admitted of not having to face any challenges.

Teda juga challenge. Sebab saya rasa macam sama saja macam orang lain...

I don’t have any challenges. Maybe because I am mix, but my mother and father culture is almost the same and I know their culture.
The two participants’ responses that admitted having to face no challenges can be observed in Excerpt 10. Both participants said that they feel just the same like other people around them. Participant 5 responded by saying that because the mother’s and father’s culture are similar so he can adjust well in between the two cultures.

Excerpt 11

Regardless of gender, the challenges faced by these participants are almost the same. Three of the participants are facing with name-calling issue. They are branded by their community and even family members with names such as ‘Bajau sesat’, ‘PATI’, ‘kuli keng’ and ‘Banyah’. Rejections that they feel make them angry and frustrated. For participant 2, she tells of being angry at the mother’s culture that does not comply to her religion and also her cousin’s attitude that tend to leave her out during their conversation.
From all of the responses, all of the participants feel vulnerable and start to make their own assumption about their situation. Some of them choose to ignore but some still choose to try to be accepted.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the social attitudes, benefits and challenges faced by multi-ethnic children. Results have shown that the children are open to changes and have higher tolerance towards other people in their daily lives. They understand that not all cultures are the same and they learn to cope well into their surroundings. Most of these children can blend in well in the society making them less prejudice of people around them. Despite all the challenges that they face, they regard themselves being fortunate for having two cultures. Due to the limited number of participants in this research, the findings are not to be generalised to all multi-ethnic children.

As the study was only conducted to identify the social attitudes of the children from parents that have different cultural background and the challenges and benefits that they face in their daily lives, future study should then look more in depth on the effects of interfaith marriage to children’s perception towards others that have different faith as they do. This is mainly because from this study, it is clear that religion do play some significant influence in the participants’ lives. Hence, it is crucial that this issue is addressed to understand more on what these children have to go through daily.
References


http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2840244/


