THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CATEGORIES ON STUDENTS' SELF-SELECTED GROUP WORK FORMATION IN A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

When students of multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Malaysians and international students from culturally diverse backgrounds work together in group assignments, negotiations on whom to include or exclude would take place during the formation of self-selected groups. Social categories appears to influence students' choices in group membership during these face-to-face interactions. Set against the backdrop of Intercultural Communication, the objective of this study is to investigate the influence of the specific social categories of age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, mother tongue and English language ability on self-selected group work formation. Relying on a basic quantitative approach for a case study, a set of questionnaire with a 5-point Likert-type scale was developed. Participants were asked whether or not they prefer to work with other participants from the same or similar social categories. The study found that in the formation of self-selected groups, the social categories of age and English language ability are significantly influential. This study affirms that social categories influence students' choices in self-selected group work formations.

Keywords: intercultural communication, social categories, social identities, group work, self-selected group work formation

INTRODUCTION

As global tertiary education increasingly becomes borderless each day, intercultural communication (henceforth 'IC') becomes more prominent in institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. With the increasing number of international students studying in universitites in Malaysia, this has expanded the prospects of more social interaction between them and culturally diverse Malaysians. IC takes place when individuals from different cultural groups and contexts negotiate shared meanings in interaction (Gudykunst & Kim 1997; Martin & Nakayama 2013, 2014; Nair-Venugopal 2003, 2009, 2015) and during such interactions, the social categories, mainly but not exclusively of nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, gender, and social class become salient. These social categories are shaped by values, norms, beliefs, and attitudes during intercultural interactions (Hogg & Abrams 1988; Jenkins 2008; Tajfel 1981, 1982). Regardless of whether we may or may not be conscious of these social categories, they influence our communication especially with 'strangers' (Harman 1987). Hence, when students from different cultural backgrounds interact in groups, they are also interacting with 'strangers' that expose them to high degrees of strangeness and relatively low degrees of familiarity (Gudykunst & Kim 1997)

with each other. This increases the risk of misunderstandings, arguments, and even serious conflict to occur that can affect group work.

Working in small groups as a pedagogical concept has gained global acceptance among teachers, including Malaysians, as it encourages a learner-centred approach (Anis Maesin et al. 2009; Neo 2005; Reid 1987). By engaging in group work, the development of higher cognitive skills has been reported in student learning and performance (Bruffee 1981; Gokkhale 1995; Kelly 2008; Slavin 1980, 1996) and group work increases intercultural understanding, improves interpersonal skills, and prepares students for the modern participative workplace (Aggarwal & O'Brien 2008; Dyball et al. 2010). In this study, the researcher, a lecturer in a private university in Malaysia with eighteen years of teaching experience at the tertiary level, has observed that whenever students are informed of group work as a pre-requisite for the partial fulfilment of a course assignment, there are mixed reactions from the students. The observed lack of enthusiasm among the students seems to defy the general trend on positive attitudes towards group work. The observation by the researcher has been supported by some empirical evidence of negative attitudes towards group work (Clarke et al. 2007; Clark & Baker 2011; Melles 2004; Popov et al. 2012; Wang & Burton 2010), contrary to the findings of numerous studies conducted worldwide (Cantwell & Andrews 2002; Forrester & Tashchian 2010; Gillies 2007). Furthermore, there are few conclusive studies on the processes of group formation as research findings vary between assigned groups and self-selected ones (Chapman et al. 2006; Hinds et al. 2000; Strauss 2001; Strauss et al. 2011).

Despite the inconclusiveness, it is now widely accepted that group work skills are an important generic outcome for all university students. Due to the pressures of producing more 'employable' graduates, universities have responded by encouraging group work in course assessment. Group work skills have become an important course learning outcome in order to prepare these undergraduates for the workplace (Drury 2002; Killick 2011; Ostberg 2009). To achieve this, students are given extended opportunities to interact through collaborative learning and authentic assessment tasks. Group work for course assignments or projects is compulsory for students on the course the researcher teaches at the private university she works for. In this study, local Malaysian and international students comprise 47% and 53% respectively of her class. Students are required to work in small groups but they have the liberty to self-select their own group members. During the process of group formation, the researcher noted that students performed certain negotiations as observed by Keyton (1988), Hinds et al. (2000), Strauss (2001) and Strauss et al. (2011). This shows that the decision on whom to include or exclude is crucial to research in IC. Quite often, several students would remain 'groupless', despite the directive to be members of a group. It is quite clear that there are factors that impact on students' choices in group membership.

It was often observed by the researcher during the formation of self-selected groups that negotiations would take place among students regarding whom to include or exclude in these groups. The social categories of age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, mother tongue and English language ability were selected for study as these appears to be some of the more salient categories that had an impact on the formation of self-selected groups. It was posited that these would help understand students' perceptions of self and of others as 'strangers' (Gudykunst 1998, Harman 1987; Nair-Venugopal 2003, 2009), in identity constructions (Baxter & Wallace 2009; Bentwell & Stokoe 2006; Bucholtz & Hall 2005; de Fina et al. 2006) in intercultural encounters. The perceptions may vary due to different world views and cultural norms but an understanding

of self and cultural differences allows us to be aware of hidden prejudices and stereotypes which are barriers to tolerance, understanding and good IC (Jandt 2010; Hall, B.J. 2005; Martin & Nakayama 2014; Ting-Toomey & Chung 2005). Because certain negotiations regarding who to include or exclude are often observed among students in the formation of self-selected groups, social categories that may influence students' choices in group membership merits investigation.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

For many educational practitioners, group work is considered a universal strategy, but in reality, the processes of group work are considerably more complex. It is clear that intercultural group work must involve social interaction among individuals from different cultural groups. During such interactions, social categories become salient and often affects group work formation.

Group Work

In the classroom, group work refers to students forming a group to work together. Blatchford et al. (2003: 155) explain that in group work, a teacher may be involved at various stages, but the particular feature of group work is that the balance of ownership and control of the work shifts toward the students themselves. Group work often involves co-learning, so it is also commonly referred to as cooperative learning. While many studies do attribute the relationship among group members as the decisive factor in performance, leadership, decision-making, and conflict management (Forsyth 1999), the interactive role of intercultural communication vís a vís social categories as the social identities of the group members have been overlooked.

Ituarte & Davies (2007) surveyed 1694 students at two American universities (one on the east coast, i.e. New York City in New York, and one on the west coast, i.e. San Francisco in California) with regard to their perceptions of social groupings and boundaries among students. They found that students' responses indicated that grouping behaviours occurred within learning contexts such as classrooms, study areas, and class projects, and that the most prominent 'social boundary' factors were language, ethnicity, race and appearance (Ituarte & Davies 2007: 74). These 'social boundary' factors presented by Ituarte and Davies indicate social categorization among students. In terms of group behaviours, Ituarte and Davies (2007: 86) mention that more women than men identify grouping behaviours. They also find perceived divisions in attitudes toward learning between younger and more mature students. In terms of 'social boundary' factors, Ituarte and Davies (2007: 87) explain that it is logical for language to be the most significant social barrier for individuals to interact due to fear of not expressing oneself appropriately, fear of being misunderstood, or a self-conscious discomfort regarding a strong accent. For personal appearance, as the fourth most significant 'social boundary', Ituarte and Davies suggest that this category is laden with social meaning, such as economic differences, social role expectations of attractiveness, or of being 'in' with the latest trend.

Clarke et al. (2007) conducted a research on 15 groups of health and social care students across two sites of a university in the United Kingdom. Looking at the dynamics of face-to-face interactions among students, they focused mainly on stereotyping and power. Within small groups, social and psychological pressures are likely to influence participants' behaviours and have an impact on overall effectiveness. For Clarke et al. (2007: 202), age, gender, ethnicity, education

and work experience, and group composition, affected individuals' levels of participation. Moreover, their analysis of group observations, student interviews and focus groups revealed a range of other influences on group interaction such as participation, group roles, tasks and cohesion, and conflict avoidance.

Esmonde et al. (2009) examine group work in a heterogeneous (based on mathematical understanding, friendship, grade level, or social identities) urban high school mathematics classroom and present a case study of the ways in which race, gender, and other social identities might influence the nature of group work. They use the term 'socially constructed identites' or 'social identites' to refer to social categories – including, but not limited to race, ethnic, or gender categories – that are often imposed on people within a particular context. From the collection of narratives based on 14 semi-structured interviews with high school students, the participants reported mixed feelings about heterogeneous groupings (i.e. mathematical understanding, friendship, grade level, or social identities). Esmonde et al. found that these groupings might actually be supporting privileged White boys rather than students of colour and girls in general in terms of learning opportunities. This means that students experience mathematics classrooms as sites for power struggles that are often related to their social identities, and these power struggles may affect student opportunities to learn (Esmonde et al. 2009: 39).

In a study on student perceptions of working in intercultural groups in a diverse international academic environment, Montgomery (2011: 59) considers how students construct themselves and each other socially, culturally and linguistically through their experience of working together at a university. The study was carried out qualitatively in 2008 in the United Kingdom, based on Volet and Ang's (1998) research in Australia. In the 1998 study, Volet and Ang found that both Australian and international students preferred working in groups with their 'own people' (Montgomery 2011: 63). Both groups believed that doing group work with students of similar cultural backgrounds minimised conflicts and misunderstandings. They also saw language was as an influential factor. This study also revealed stereotypical views about other nationalities as it was the main reason given for not appreciating group work with a team of mixed nationalities. In the 2008 study, Montgomery (2011: 65) found contradiction and tension during the intercultural interaction in collaborative learning contexts. Montgomery reports that students perceive intercultural group work interaction as a 'troublesome space'. The students experience confusing and complex intercultural contact but they also strongly indicated that these difficulties were "transformative and significant despite not always being enjoyable" (Montgomery 2011: 66).

To review, group work does contribute towards students' achievements but there is also a need for more research on why certain types of group work produce negative outcomes despite all the positive studies recorded. Studies conducted by various scholars have drawn attention to social categories that influence group work, and therefore, contribute to the design of the present study.

Intercultural Communication (IC)

IC is a vibrant field of study that is based mainly on the discourse of language, culture and communication. In this study, IC investigates research participants from different cultures engaged in face-to-face interaction with each other in groups in a classroom setting. IC is a "situation where people from different cultural backgrounds come into contact with each other; or a subject of a study that is concerned with interactions among people of different cultural and ethnic groups and comparative studies of communication patterns across cultures" (Zhu 2011: 422). Moreover, IC

is "not only bounded by political, geographical and social borders and boundaries, but also restrained by contextually dependent and relational situations" (Nair-Venugopal 2015: 31).

At a fundamental level, IC is communication between individuals who identify themselves as culturally distinct from others. Martin & Nakayama (2013: 76) propose the dialectical approach to view the complexities of IC. The dialectical approach is a combination of three traditional approaches (functionalist or social science, interpretive and critical) and four components (culture, communication, context and power) to consider in understanding IC. For Martin & Nakayama (2013: 73), the dialectic approach refers to "a method of logic based on the principle that an idea generates its opposite, leading to a reconciliation of the opposites [and] the complex and paradoxical relationship between two opposite qualities or entities". In other words, the dialectic approach recognises that things may be 'both/and'. This is unlike the dichotomous thinking of 'either/or' (good or bad, right or wrong). For example, 'Kalsom' may be a Malay, and shares many cultural characteristics of other Malays, but she also possesses characteristics that are unique. So, she is both similar to and different from other Malays. This also entails that the dialectic approach emphasises the flexible, negotiable and paradoxical nature of IC.

Social Categories

The study of social identity (Tajfel 1978, Turner 1982, 1996, Brown 2000) has been synonymous with the study of social categories, roles and social locations such as 'woman', 'black', 'American', 'worker' (Wetherell 2010: 4). A social category is a way of 'self-sorting' based on common traits. Hogg (1996: 66-67) regards social category as "category-congruent self-definition that constitutes an element of the self-concept", such as nationality, ethnicity, political affiliation, motherhood etc. where it is "represented as a social identity that describes and prescribes one's attributes as a group member". This means that social categories encompass "class, ethnicity, gender and generation as cultural interpretations ... that people use to group certain signs, practices and persons together, positioning them in general social processes, differentiating some from others, aligning them with particular histories, trajectories and destinies" (Rampton 2013: 2-3). By categorizing and investigating members of society, Jenks (2013: 95-96) informs that social categories are also used as a descriptive framework to understand how people make sense of each other and their surroundings.

The present study examines the influence of social categories, which are extensions of social identities that are relevant in face-to-face interactions among students during their group work. The selection of age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, mother tongue, and English language ability as the social categories for this study was informed by studies conducted by Clarke et al. (2007), Esmonde et al. (2009), and Ituarte & Davies (2007), and based on the reviews of the concept of social categories in the work of Tajfel (1981, 1982), Hogg and Abrams (1988, 1993), Jenkins (2008a, 2008b).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper is part of a larger qualitative research project conducted in the English language classroom of a private university in Malaysia that seeks to find out how social categories influence, if they do, the face-to-face interactions among these students during group work. However, this

specific paper reports on which of the social categories of age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, mother tongue, and English language ability that were identified for study impact on students' preferences in self-selecting groups. The researcher employed the following research questions: Which of the social categories identified for the study, as informed by work by Clarke et al. (2007), Esmonde et al. (2009), and Ituarte & Davies (2007), namely those of age, gender, nationality, ethnicity, religion, mother tongue and English language ability impact on the formation of self-selected groups?

The quantitative component of the study is mainly descriptive and its purpose is to shed light on the qualitative analysis of the larger study. A questionnaire was administered to collect data on the impact of the identified social categories in the formation of self-selected groups.

In this case study, the participants were mostly first year undergraduate students in the Business School of a private university in Malaysia. All research participants of this study, comprising 47% Malaysians and 53% international students, from a total of 193 participants were non-native speakers of English. They ranged in age from 18 to 34, comprised 38.3% females and 61.7% males. They were of different nationalities from 27 countries, comprised 22 ethnic groups, and professed different religious backgrounds. These students spoke 20 different languages as mother tongues and possessed different levels of English language ability.

All the participants (N = 193) were required to respond to a questionnaire to find out which social categories impact on their choices in forming groups. The participants were asked as to respond to a 5-point Likert-type scale whether or not they prefer to work with other participants from the same or similar social categories of age (Q1), sex/gender (Q2), nationality (Q3), ethnicity (Q4), religion (Q5), mother tongue (Q6), and English language proficiency (Q7). The Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) was used for its univariate descriptive analysis (Blaikie 2003) to analyse the preferences for the social categories identified for the study.

In the larger qualitative component of this study, field-notes were made during direct participant observations, participants' self-reports from post-hoc interviews, and feedback obtained from expert informants were collected to ensure the validity of the analysis and its interpretation.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

With an internal consistency reliability of ($\alpha = 0.7802$) indicating a satisfactory degree, the data gathered was deemed valid for analysis. Table 1 shows that all social categories of were considered to be at least of some importance by the participants: English language ability ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.246$), age ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.272$), mother tongue ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.350$), ethnicity ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.360$), gender ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.289$), nationality ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.235$), and religion ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.165$).

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation of the Social Categories

	Social Categories	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.	English language ability	193	3.65	1.246
2.	Age	193	3.28	1.272
3.	Mother tongue	193	2.65	1.350
4.	Ethnicity	193	2.42	1.360
5.	Sex (Gender)	193	2.28	1.289
6.	Nationality	193	2.26	1.235
7.	Religion	193	2.08	1.165

Source: Ong (2016)

The participants' responses on the Likert scale indicated that they possessed a fairly high degree of preference for those of the same or similar age ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.272$) and of similar English language ability ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.246$) in the formation of self-selected groups. Thus, these two may be considered the most salient social categories that impact on the formation of self-selected groups. Preference for the same mother tongue speakers came in third ($M = 2.65$, $SD = 1.350$). With a mean score of almost 3, it indicated that mother tongue had a certain impact on the self-selected groups. Lastly, religion ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 1.165$) had the least impact as a social category in the formation of self-selected groups. Gender ($M = 2.28$, $SD = 1.289$), ethnicity ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.360$), and nationality ($M = 2.26$, $SD = 1.235$) did not appear statistically significant, yet with a mean score of above 2, they showed some impact on the formation of self-selected groups.

DISCUSSION

From the findings it would appear that certain social categories have a greater impact on the participants' choice of group members when forming groups. It is worthy to note that religion as a social category did not have an impact on the formation of self-selected groups in this study considering that religion is attributed to be one of the main sources of intercultural conflict (Ohlott et al. 2004; Tarakeshwar et al. 2003; Ysseldyk et al. 2010). Post-hoc interviews were conducted to find out individual views on religion. The participants, 68.9% of whom were Muslims students said that they did not think that religion mattered, with several Muslim students saying "*It doesn't bother me*". However, the students also had difficulty explaining why working with students of different religions did not bother them. This points to how religion is too stereotypically seen a problem. It is also evidence that it is communication that is the centerpiece of IC and how that helps to move the discourse in IC away from the cultural other and more towards the stranger as a social being (Nair-Venugopal 2009: 77).

However, in a study of perceptions of self and personal adjustment among international students in the United Kingdom, Sercombe (2011: 52) found that religion is a significant variable when it comes to Muslim students compared to students from non-Muslim backgrounds. In her study on profiles of identity marking on a group of students in Malaysia, Nair-Venugopal (2009: 83) finds that 90% of the respondents indicated religious affiliation to be a very important identity marker. In this study, however, religion as a social category was not statistically significant.

Based on the data, age ($M = 3.28$, $SD = 1.272$) and English language ability ($M = 3.65$, $SD = 1.246$) were the two most significant variables that impacted the formation of self-selected groups. The results for these two social categories are understandable because other studies on group work (Clarke et al. 2007; Esmonde et al. 2009; Ituarte & Davies 2007; Montgomery 2011; Volet & Ang 1998) conducted elsewhere have also found them to be statistically significant. Participants in this study preferred to form groups with members of similar age because they valued an equal level of participation from the group members. An 'older' female participant remarked in her post-hoc self-report interview that she had difficulty working with 'younger' students in her class because she felt that they were immature and relied on her too much to complete the task. A similar response came from a 'younger' female participant who remarked that 'older' participants tended to dominate the discussion and disregard others' input.

With regard to English language ability, the participants in this study prefer to form groups with members of similar English language ability due to the ease in communication. Participants who perceive themselves to have good proficiency of the English language, tend to look for members whom they perceive to be proficient as well. One proficient female participant self-reported in the self-report interview that she found working with group members who have low levels of English language proficiency tend to have communication problems. Another less proficient male participant self-reported that he tended to avoid participants who were good in English language because he felt embarrassed about his poor command of the language. Apart from that, a female expert informant also said that English language ability is a factor that students consider when forming self-selected groups. She observed that the more proficient students find working with less proficient students cumbersome as they are often made the leaders and end up completing more of the task. An explanation for these findings can be traced to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) study which found that individuals tended to move closer to others with whom they share a social identity. In this study, the participants demonstrated this tendency for age and English language ability when it comes in forming self-selected groups.

In sum, the findings in this study show that social categories of age and English language ability have a greater impact on the participants' choice of group members when forming groups. These findings also supported the previous findings from studies such as Clarke et al. (2007) on age, gender, ethnicity; Ituarte and Davies (2007) on language, ethnicity, race, gender and age; Esmonde et al. (2009) on race, ethnic and gender; that social categories have an impact on students' group work.

CONCLUSION

Considering the in-flux of international students in Malaysian universities since 2000, intercultural interactions between local Malaysian students and their international counterparts is inevitable. Students' perceptions of self and of others as 'strangers' in identity constructions play a role in intercultural encounters. With an understanding of self and cultural differences, it allows us to be aware of hidden prejudices and stereotypes which are barriers to understanding intercultural interactions.

The analysis of the questionnaire of 193 participants confirmed that the participants had more positive attitudes towards particular social categories. The participants' responses on the Likert scale indicated that they possessed a fairly high degree of preference for those of the same

or similar age (M = 3.28, SD = 1.272) and of similar English language ability (M = 3.65, SD = 1.246) in the formation of self-selected groups. Thus, these two may be considered the most salient social categories that impact on the formation of self-selected groups.

Finally, this study ratifies that social identities which are extended as social categories influence students' choices in group membership during the formation of self-selected groups. Some form of negotiations about who to include or exclude take place. The participants indicated a higher preference for certain social categories in the formation of self-selected groups. In other words, certain social categories have a greater impact on the participants' choice of group members when forming groups.

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