

Challenges and Opportunities Faced By An Insider Researcher In Malaysian Ethnicity Studies: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Ethnicity in most social contexts is largely treated as a simple and reified concept especially by insider researchers in post-colonial countries. In certain cases, some of these insider researchers have a perception that being part of an ethnic group would primordially equip them with prior knowledge about their group, hence neglecting the complexity of the ethnicity itself. The outcomes would be problematic for the development of ethnicity studies: theoretically and methodologically. The main objective of this article is to discuss methodological (epistemological and ontological) challenges faced by insider researchers in Malaysian ethnicity studies. Using the Extended Case Method (ECM), I reflect on how I engaged methodologically as an insider researcher in understanding ethnicity. The discourse is intended to assist insider researchers in justifying their methodological perspective in ethnicity studies without neglecting their identity and position.

Keywords: Ethnicity; extended case method; insider researcher; post-colonial countries; colonial epistemology.

INTRODUCTION

Ethnicity studies can be considered as a complicated area for research. The concept itself continues to be debated by many scholars, which has contributed to different major theoretical paradigms. Another important concern related to ethnicity studies is their methodological approach. In this article, I offer epistemological and ontological justifications for the qualitative approach to understanding ethnicity and its outcomes in my fieldwork. This article is divided into two main sections. The first section offers an overview of the methodological paradigm of ethnicity construction in the context of Malaysia. The second section is my shared experiences and challenges as an insider researcher in ethnicity studies during the fieldwork and the analysis stages. These real in-field experiences are important for preparing others to face expectations and challenges in the Malaysian ethnicity studies.

METHODOLOGICAL PARADIGM: EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND ONTOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

Epistemological understanding and Malaysian ethnicity studies

To study ethnicity in Malaysia, it is first necessary to comprehend the *identity* of the epistemological understanding of ethnicity through a critical analysis of Malaysian history. Colonial 'knowledge' has become naturalised and embedded at two levels of Malaysian reality: within the Malaysian system (authority-defined) and in everyday relations (everyday-defined) (Shamsul, 1999). The authority-defined and everyday-defined are both categories of practice (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000); the former

indicates an authoritative and political understanding of ethnicity which is shown within the Malaysian ethnic bureaucratisation system. The latter refers to everyday actors' understanding of ethnicity which is accumulated through their everyday experiences (Shamsul, 1996). This knowledge is grounded in the colonial legacy of investigation modalities (Cohn, 1995).

Shamsul (1999) stated that there were six investigative modalities utilized by the British colonial authorities in order to dominate local epistemology: historiographic, survey, enumerative, surveillance, museological and travel modalities. The *historiographic* modality basically referred to settlement reports which focused on the local revenues, colonial ideological construction and civilizational mission for a particular colony, and a construction of the colonial histories within the colonies. The second modality – *survey* – encompassed mapping, classification of flora and fauna and the recording of architectural and archeological sites of historic significance which were made available for colonial administrators to understand and to control the locality – geographically, politically, economically and socially. The third modality – *enumerative*, which I consider to be the most important modality in Malaysian inter-ethnic relationships – assisted the British in identifying and constructing ethnic categories. It reified the population into segregated categories of locals and immigrants based on their religious, linguistic and regional characteristics. The fourth modality – *surveillance* – was used to monitor those categories of people whose activities were considered to be a threat to this social order, by means of identification: fingerprinting and photography. The *museological* modality helped to create the 'history' and 'status' of the indigenous civilization in the form of historical trajectories and a hierarchical universal civilization. During this process, several images of the indigenous community were created, such as monuments, artefacts and architecture. The final modality – the *travel* modality – was used to complement the museological modality. The museological modality provided tangible presentations of the natives/colonised, whilst the travel modality offered an intangible presentation of them, including images and stereotypes according to European perceptions. At least two consequences emerged from the methodological adaptation in post-colonial Malaysia. First, it led to the continuous construction of ethnic categories in Malaysia. The determining, codifying and categorising of groups under categories of ethnicity are still being maintained in the post-colonial nation by repeating the colonial techniques of the construction of 'facts' and 'knowledge' (Shamsul, 1998). This can be seen in the present regulation of the population census, birth registration, land enactment and other everyday bureaucratic forms and documents (Shamsul, 1998). Second, living in this context has made ethnic identification and categorisation real and meaningful for everyday actors.

These consequences should be taken into consideration by an insider researcher. For example, during my research on the importance of ethnicity in Malaysia, I was challenged by my everyday understanding which saw ethnicity as reified, simple and natural. This understanding was imprinted in my understanding due to my upbringing and lived experiences within the Malaysian "ethnic-bureaucratic system" (Siddique, 1990, p.41). It creates an assumptive, seemingly common-sense view of ethnic identity and categories which avoids analytical inquiry and which attempts to support 'us' and 'them' as something which exists in the natural order and is merely waiting for Malaysians to experience it. Within this everyday experience and understanding, it is common for Malaysians to see ethnicity as simple and unproblematic. It should be a concern when ethnicity – as a category of analysis – is reified by social researchers, giving a sense of concrete reality rather than socially constructed organisational types.

Howard Becker (1967) highlighted the axiological and epistemological concerns for social researchers by asking the question 'whose side are we are on?' As noted by Warren and Garthwaite

(2015, p.226), “This question was whether social research and the individuals engaged in it were part of the established order or could contribute to the emerging counterculture”. Two points were articulated by Becker (1967) which I consider important for the study of Malaysian ethnicity. First, social scientists cannot remain fully objective or value-free. This is related to a researcher’s everyday experiences – as a member of particular ethnic group – which were built within the Malaysian ethnic reification system. Living within this system provides him/her with (insider) challenges in avoiding the reification of ethnicity. Second, the issue of the hierarchy of credibility, which involves power relations between the superordinate and the subordinate. In this context, superordinate refers to the State or a public higher education institution as the financial funder of ethnic relations studies. Subordinate, on the other hand, refers to social researchers whose progress is properly monitored and depends on the funding provided by the superordinate. Knowledge has a tendency to be moulded on the consequences of this societal power relationship (Warren & Garthwaite, 2015). A researcher may be expected to provide an analysis or discussion which can be harmonised with the current Malaysian system. Any attempted change could be perceived as criticising the government or even threatening the national security and political stability of the country. It could also create contention between Malaysian social science fields and the State (Shamsul, 1998). So in order to avoid falling into the reification of ethnicity and bias, appropriate methods and analyses of ethnic studies should be carefully justified and employed. The following section is my response to these issues, which I intended to address through reflexive science.

Ontology: Reflexive science as an alternative to positive science in ethnicity study: Burawoy’s four dimensions of the extended case method

In any study, the nature of the research question(s) defines the research methods used (Burawoy, 1991; Morse 1998; Yin, 2009; Bryman, 2012). Prior to making any methodological decision, a researcher should consider his/her research aim and its strength/shortcomings in terms of positive science. Positive science aims for objectivity which is reinforced by reactivity, reliability, replicability and representativeness (Burawoy, 1998). However, according to Becker (1967) and Alatas (1972), social scientists cannot remain fully objective or value-free. The positive science objectivity itself is limited by the *context effects*: interview effects, respondent effects, field effects and situation effects. The reactivity, for example, is influenced by *interview effects* (Burawoy, 1998). In the case of my own research, my identity as a Malay could indirectly create this effect in the interviews. The Malay respondents would probably expect me to understand their experiences as a fellow Malay, but for the Chinese respondents, my identity might create an impediment in terms of gathering information. At the same time, I did not want to take for granted the contextual significance of my everyday identity as a Malay. Many previous ethnicity studies conducted by insider researchers can be misleading when the researchers have failed to reflect on the potential implications of their own life histories in the studies – which can cause bias and lead to emotionally driven and defensive analyses (Stanfield, 1993). In addition, it can be problematic if an insider researcher interprets ethnicity on the basis of his/her understanding in the popular or everyday life-world sense.

Reliability is also a problematic target as it is limited by the *respondent effect* (Burawoy, 1998). For Bryman (2012), reliability was in fact quite rare. Standardised questions can be prepared, but the outcomes might differ depending on the respondents’ backgrounds. The variety of respondents’ backgrounds can simply be overlooked, particularly by insider researchers. The reason for this is their confidence in their ‘prior’ and local knowledge about their community (Shamsul, 1982). Although

Malaysian population categorization has been limited to several major ethnic groups – Malay, Chinese and Indian, their individual regional identities and social background were scattered and varied in nature. This created a complexity in ethnicities studies which should not be neglected. Replicability, on the other hand, is limited by the *field effect*. To create replicability, a stable context must be controlled. The field effect recognises the importance of the political, social and economic contexts within which the research takes place (Burawoy, 1998). Time phase and condition during the research can potentially affect the results. My identity as a Malay-Muslim-Malaysian female, in comparison with a non-insider researcher such as a non-Malaysian, non-Muslim male, likely resulted in different feedback from the respondents. Differences in the political and economic conditions at the present time could also affect future research outcomes. This is the *situational effect* (Burawoy, 1998), which is something that could not be controlled for and which made representations and generalisations of the findings of my study arguably difficult to apply to other cases. There are many external and internal factors which need to be taken into consideration before making any generalisations. To address these concerns, I recommend reflexive science, focusing on the ECM, as an alternative to positive science in ethnicity studies.

Reflexive science is regarded as one of the alternatives to positive science. Burawoy adopted its principles – intervention, progress, structuration and reconstruction – in his ECM. There are four dimensions to Burawoy’s ECM. The first dimension is the *extension of the observer to the world of the participant* (Burawoy, 2000). Intervention is emphasised in this dimension. This extension is in fact common to all ethnographic and participant observational studies (Borchgrevink, 2003; Iosifides, 2011; Denscombe, 2014). In the case of my own research, my identity and status as an insider researcher could possibly interfere with or affect the respondents’ feedback. Since this is unavoidable, reflexive science suggests using it as an extension into the respondents’ world. My identity as a Malay during the interviews with the Malay respondents helped me to explore more deeply their everyday understanding of ethnicity in regard to their inter-ethnic relationships with the Chinese. For the Chinese respondents, my status as Malaysian helped me to achieve access into their community, experiences and expectations. The purpose was to find a similarity with the respondents as an extension to their world. The second dimension is the *extension of observation over time and space*. The multiple nature of the respondents’ backgrounds may have undermined the reliability of the findings. In order to overcome this issue, reflexive science suggests the “aggregation of situational knowledge into social process” (Burawoy, 1998, p.15). The answer is to collect ‘points’ in multiple readings of a single case and combine them into social processes. The ‘social process’ in my research refers to the development of ethnicity which has been changed, reformed, contested and negotiated through time, space and location.

The third dimension is the *extension from the micro-processes to macrostructures and forces*. This extension is particularly significant for understanding the importance of ethnicity in Malaysia. Its aim is to incorporate wider geographical and historical contexts into the analysis of social processes and the role of broader social forces in shaping local phenomena (Iosifides, 2011). Maanen (2011) described this method of ethnographic study as structural tales in accounts which link ethnographic studies of the quotidian to wider issues within society at large. The nature of the extended case study avoids conflating the micro- and macro-levels: “It takes the social situation as the point of empirical examination and works with given general concepts and laws about states, economies, legal orders, and the like to understand how those micro situations are shaped by wider structures” (Burawoy, 1991, p.282), and *vice versa*. This statement suggests how both the state and everyday actors are capable of reinforcing each other in maintaining ethnicity, and how each can cause the recurrence of the other. The final dimension is the *extension of theory*. The ECM is theory-driven and theory-oriented; it seeks to formulate

theoretical generalizations “by constituting the social situations as anomalous with regard to some preexisting theory, which is then reconstructed” (Burawoy, 1991, p.280). The scope of the method is to develop existing theory through the identification of observed anomalies: “What makes the field interesting is its violation of some expectation, and an expectation is nothing other than some theory waiting to be explicated” (Burawoy, 2000, p.28). The ECM is explanatory: it advocates a notion of causality which departs from regularity and is implicitly realist: “Causality then becomes multiple, involving an individual connectedness of elements, tying the social situation to its context of determination” (Burawoy, 1991, p.280). It also accounts for social complexity and the role of power within social relations. In sum, the ECM offers a compatible method for understanding ethnicity in Malaysia after taking into consideration the researcher’s status and position, the respondents’ varied regionality status and socio-background, and Malaysian macro forces and micro processes, with the aim of extending selected theory.

In-field experiences as an insider researcher

a) Semi-structured interview: Questioning and experiencing ethnicity during the fieldwork

During the fieldwork,¹ my identity as a Malay gave me some advantages in the interviews with the Malay respondents. Trust was easily built and the Malay respondents were genuinely willing to share with me their perceptions regarding their Chinese peers, both positively and negatively, on the perceived grounds that I, as a fellow Malay, would empathise with their views. This expectation of empathy was not based on my status as a researcher, but on my identity as Malay. The Malay language was highly preferred among the Malay respondents, particularly in Penang. The interviews were carried out in a casual and informal way so that I might be able to manage to gradually develop the process of information gathering from relatively small and uncontroversial issues, such as friendship and marriage, into bigger and more sensitive issues, such as quotas for *bumiputras* and their political views in regard to their relationships with Chinese Malaysians. Furthermore, as a Malay, it was an advantage for me to easily predict which questions would be regarded as sensitive or insensitive, and I was able to apologise politely in advance or to construct the question more appropriately before asking it. On the other hand, the interviews with the Chinese respondents were quite challenging. Trust was not as easily built with the Chinese respondents because to them I was an outsider (not Chinese) and a stranger (not an acquaintance or a friend). In other words, there was no immediate link between us. I worked hard and took time to build a rapport with them. Fortunately, my identity as Malaysian was particularly helpful during our discussion of Malaysian political issues. The Chinese respondents in Glasgow could particularly relate to my identity as Malaysian. Upon reflection, my identity as Malaysian was in fact proven to be an asset, as it took me less time to build a rapport with the Chinese respondents in Glasgow compared with the Chinese respondents in Penang.

I usually began discussions with the Chinese respondents by raising general and public issues in order to build a good rapport with them, and then progressively moved on to more sensitive issues regarding ethnicity and identity. In some interviews, my status as a researcher did help me considerably in gaining the trust of the respondents. Additionally, I felt that the Chinese respondents were very

¹ I carried out research on ‘The importance of ethnicity in Malaysia: a comparative study in Penang and Glasgow’. 30 Malay and 25 Chinese respondents were interviewed in the research.

interested in sharing their perceptions regarding the issues which we discussed, but they were also concerned about my identity as Malay. They frequently apologised before making any statements, particularly any regarding the Malay community or Islam. I, on the other hand, lacked insight into issues which the Chinese might regard as sensitive. I therefore always apologised before asking them a question which I thought they might consider sensitive or insulting. In order to avoid making the same mistake more than once and causing further emotional damage, I asked my first Chinese respondent whether a question was sensitive for the Chinese in Malaysia. The feedback he gave was helpful and I was then able to know which questions – generally, not exclusively – were considered to be sensitive by the Chinese community.

Language was another important aspect which emerged during my interviews with the Chinese respondents. I do not have any proficiency in Mandarin or in any other Chinese dialects, except for a few sentences that I am familiar with as a Malaysian. Nonetheless, I did not have any problem conducting interviews with the Chinese respondents in Glasgow because they preferred to speak in English. In some cases, a few of the Chinese respondents in Glasgow admitted that they actually had poor proficiency in Mandarin or in a Chinese dialect. However, I still cannot deny that the proficiency of an interviewer's use of language can be used as an extension into a respondent's world. For example, during an interview with a Chinese respondent in Glasgow, we were politely interrupted by the respondent's friend, who interrupted our conversation to ask her something. Although I cannot speak Mandarin, I do at least know a few sentences in the Chinese language, such as *Wo fu sher tau*, which means 'I don't know' in English. To reduce my awkwardness in that situation, I said '*Wo fu sher tau*', and both girls were quite surprised and happy; it created a friendly atmosphere and they seem to appreciate my apparent 'proficiency'. As a result, I managed to recruit the friend as my next respondent for the study. The Chinese respondents in Penang, on the other hand, preferred to use Malay, English and Manglish (a combination of English and Malay) interchangeably during the interviews. It is important to state here that most of the interviews were carried out efficiently and without any problems. However, the topic of the study itself intrigued one of the respondents. This unexpected outcome showed me that ethnicity studies could be a sensitive issue for everyday actors if they are not scrupulously academically prepared and the participants are given full and detailed explanations. My experiences during the interviews also showed that ethnicity – language, religion and custom – is not about fixed and reified identification and categorization, but about how it is being experienced and reacted to in everyday life.

b) Analysis, data management and discussion: challenges to the insider researcher

In order to avoid allowing my experiences as an insider researcher to shape my analysis, I adopted Larkin and Thompson's (2012) suggestion of starting the analysis by writing down everything, including my emotional reactions and initial ideas regarding the potential themes. The purpose of this was to identify my potential preconceptions as an insider researcher. This step was important, as I was constantly worried about the possibilities of researcher bias and sentimental judgment (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Due to this concern, I could at least be aware of and differentiate my understandings as an everyday actor (Malay/*Bumiputra*/Muslim/Malaysian) and as a sociological researcher. I also chose to employ thematic analysis for understanding my data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006, p.78), "thematic analysis should be considered a method in its own right". It is a "method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Themes can be

identified in both the inductive and the deductive approaches. The themes in the inductive approach are strongly linked to data and are mostly associated with the grounded theory. Its analytical course hence is data-driven. In contrast to the inductive approach, the deductive approach is dependent on the theoretical framework; its analytical course is theory-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was the latter that I employed as my analytical method.

In Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodological approach, there are at least five steps in thematic analysis which I closely followed in my research. The first step was familiarising myself with my data: primary and secondary. Since I was concerned with the dialectical relationship between the State and everyday actors in regard to the importance of ethnicity in Malaysia, I thus had to familiarise myself first with the Malaysian ethnic bureaucratization system, including its history, development, jurisdictions and concerns. For this, I had to look into secondary data in published censuses, laws, statistics and related news for this research study – something which I take for granted as an everyday actor. This familiarization with the secondary data offered me an understanding of how the Malaysian ethnic bureaucratization system works in the Malaysian macro-structures. The next data familiarization refers to my primary data. It was at this stage that I realized that the long and time-consuming interview transcriptions indeed gave me more time to familiarize myself with each individual interview and respondent.

The second step was generating initial codes from the data. Codes (overt and latent) refer to “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p.63). The coding in my study was guided by the theoretical framework and the research questions constructed at the beginning of the fieldwork. My coding strategy was focused on giving attention to interesting aspects and repeated themes. The coding at this stage is often general and broad. At the beginning of my coding, I had more than hundred codes and repeated patterns which were gradually reduced in the subsequent steps. The third step only began after I had finished coding all potential aspects and sets of patterns. This stage involved sorting, organizing and collating all the codes into identified themes. The main task in this stage was finding “the relationship between codes, between themes, and between different levels of themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.91). The fourth step refers to thematic refinement. It was at this stage that I decided whether the identified themes were coherent with one another or not. The aim of this stage was to get an idea of how these different themes work together in answering my research questions. In the fifth stage, I began to write a detailed analysis and discussion of each major theme, guided by the theoretical framework and the research questions. I sought to avoid creating an overlapping ‘story’ of my data. The final discussion of the importance of ethnicity was presented based on the chronology of the respondents’ social lives. Based on my field and analysis experiences, Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis steps proved to be useful for me (as an insider researcher) to avoid the reification of ethnicity and to prevent me from making analyses based on my everyday understanding as a Malay.

CONCLUSION

The methodological paradigm offered in the first part of this paper proposes that ethnicity is a complicated concept which is deeply intertwined within the Malaysian structural system which has been maintained over time. It therefore requires the researcher to have more than assumed-primordial or ‘prior’ knowledge as a member of particular ethnic group. Also, the outcomes from the in-field experience and during the data analysis suggest that first, status as an insider researcher, resulting in my case from being

brought up and living in the Malaysian ethnic bureaucratic system, should not be taken for granted as it can contribute to bias and sentimental analysis which inevitably can contribute to the reification of ethnicity. Second, the ECM with an ethnographic research style in ethnicity studies can be useful for creating 'objectivism' by the insider researcher. Third, the systematic data-driven thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) is also useful in ethnicity studies without neglecting the researcher's own identity as an insider researcher.

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