

# **“WHAT THEY DO THAT WE DON’T DO”: ETHNIC IDENTITY REPRESENTATION IN STUDENTS’ INTERCULTURAL EXPERIENCES**

**Syarizan Dalib**  
**School of Multimedia Technology and Communication**  
**College of Arts and Sciences**  
**Universiti Utara Malaysia**  
syarizan@uum.edu.my

## **Abstract**

The rapid process of emigration and immigration in this 21<sup>st</sup> century has resulted in a remarkable population change across national borders. This trend has led to the re-assertion of ethnic identities and the attention on ethnic differences as an important agenda for many societies. Accordingly, ethnic identities have become relevant in how we understand the process of communication between diverse people in this global world. Despite the consciousness of ethnic identities, the tendency to approach intercultural communication through the lens of nationality remains dominant in the field. As researchers are influenced by the idea that “national culture” is shared by all cultural members, utilizing nationality as the unit of analysis often forces researchers to analyse the unifying elements that describe the whole populations and ignore differences between groups. Consequently, such tendency has led researchers to utilize homogenizing views in their analysis, hence simplifying the complex nature of heterogeneous environment where people of different ethnic identities may co-exist. As such, scholars have pointed out that ethnic identities are not fully addressed in the analysis of intercultural communication. This study explores the representation of ethnic identities in intercultural experiences among diverse students in a Malaysian university. In-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted with fifteen participants. Two themes emerged from the data analysis that elucidates the intricate nature of ethnic identities in students’ intercultural experiences: (i) identifying self as an ethnic being and (ii) encountering differences between self and the other. The central metaphorical interpretation that emerged from this study, that is, “what they do that we don’t do”, recognizes not only participants’ consciousness of their ethnic identities that filter their interpretations of selves and the other in their communication, but also consciousness of dissimilar communication behaviours. The findings of this study offer an interesting insight on ethnic identities as it is situated within students’ intercultural experiences. It contributes into thinking through the complex representation of ethnic identities as a framework for understanding the process of intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** Intercultural experience, Phenomenology, Ethnic identity, In-depth interviews, Representation.

## **Introduction**

The process of emigration and immigration is occurring at a rapid pace in many parts of the world. Such process has resulted in a remarkable population change across national borders. As individuals live within an increased multicultural population, this presents numerous opportunities for experiencing communication with others who come from vastly different cultural backgrounds. Intercultural communication has now become ubiquitous in every facet of life; they occur in workplaces, educational institutions, family, and community.

Scholars noted that the study of intercultural communication is permeated by a national emphasis resulting in the problem of oversimplification of culture (Moon, 2010; Yep, 2014). As today's nation-states are facing rich internal diversities due to globalization process, it points to the fact that the simplistic ways to define cultural boundaries by means of nationality can no longer be pursued (Banks, 2009; Moon, 2010). Given the multicultural turn in many nations leading to the emergence of rich ethnic diversities (Banks, 2009; Stiftung & Cariplo, 2006); ethnic identities have become relevant in how we understand the process of communication between diverse people in this global world. Accordingly, ethnic identities need to be addressed in the analysis of intercultural communication.

This paper first presents how "culture" is often defined in intercultural communication studies. Drawing from the gap that warrants an analysis of culture at the level of ethnicity, this paper highlights a phenomenological study that explores representation of ethnic identities in students' intercultural experiences.

## **Thinking through "culture" in Intercultural Communication**

Defining "culture" is not an easy task since there are over more than a hundred of its definitions in the literature (Gudykunst, 2003). The study of culture originates from anthropological studies in which anthropologists immersed themselves into the life of the people under study (Hall, 1959). The earliest definition of culture was written by a British anthropologist, Sir Edward Burnett Tylor. In his writing, culture is portrayed as a complex whole that include knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs, capabilities and habits that are learned as a member of society (Tylor, 1871). Hall (1959) asserted that culture has long been defined by anthropologists as "way of life of a people, for the sum of their learned behaviour patterns, attitudes, and material things" (p.20). He further claimed that "culture controls behaviour in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and beyond conscious control of the individual" (p.25). Culture has also been defined as a system of knowledge or implicit theories of the games being played by relatively large number of people to know how to communicate and interpret behaviours of others (Gudykunst & Kim, 2003). Similarly, McDaniel, Samovar and Porter (2012) proposed culture as the rules of games of life that are ingrained subconsciously enabling the cultural members to behave in familiar situations. Regardless of the specific definitions adopted by researchers, Levine et al. (2007) remarked that culture is referred to as "something that is shared among people belonging to the same socially defined and recognized group. Culture is something people have in common with some people but not with others." (p.205)

Since culture is usually viewed as a collective or group phenomenon, to a large extent, intercultural communication is considered to be types of intergroup communication (Gudykunst, 2003). Accordingly, there are various operational definitions for "culture" within intercultural communication studies. Researchers used "culture" to include studies of communication between people from different national, ethnic, or racial groups, intergenerational communication, able

and disabled communication, gay and lesbian, and other areas of research under the heading of intercultural communication. (e.g., Bippus & Dorjee, 2002; Collier, 2006; Lustig & Koester, 2006; McDaniel et al., 2012). This simultaneously reflects the expansiveness of the term “culture” in the study of intercultural communication (Bippus & Dorjee, 2002; Syarizan, 2011, 2014). Nonetheless, most scholars usually study intercultural communication between people from different national cultures who engage in face-to-face communication (Gudykunst, 2003). Because of such tendency, all too often, researchers treat culture as synonymous with national membership (Moon, 2010; Syarizan, 2011, 2014).

As the nation has been treated synonymously with culture within the study of intercultural communication, it is worthy to explain how a ‘nation’ is defined. In his ground breaking volume, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1991) proposed the following definition of a nation:

It is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is an imagined political community because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... it is imagined as limited because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations...it is imagined as sovereign, because the concept was born in age of Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Finally, it is imagined as community because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as deep horizontal comradeship. (pp. 6-7)

Hofstede et al. (2010) echoed that nations are political units that divide the entire world and one of which people are supposed to belong as manifested in one’s passport. Whereas nations can have multiple cultures, it is often assumed that people in one nation may have a unifying national identity and values. As political units, many nations exert strong forces for integration which may manifest through commonalities in language, political, economic and educational systems that provide sources for considerable collective properties ascribed to their citizens.

Approaching culture on the basis of national membership has produced interesting insights on intercultural communication. However, the issue that needs to be considered is whether nations and culture can be meaningfully equated and, the implications of conflating culture and nations to the study of intercultural communication (Levine et al, 2007, Moon, 1996; Yep, 2014). In her genealogical investigation of the concepts of culture in the intercultural communication field, Moon (1996) identified many of the published works are grounded in defining culture in terms of nation-states or in terms of Hofstede’s individualism/collectivism dimension in which two or more national cultures are compared and contrasted. In her current review, Moon (2010) remarked from its original signification of culture as nation-state, the meaning of culture has been broadened to include race, gender and ethnicity. However, much of the published work continues to define culture as nationality despite the critique levied against equating culture with nations. While approaching culture on the basis of national membership has produced valuable insights on intercultural communication, researchers have questioned whether national and culture can be meaningfully equated and how such equation implicates the study of intercultural communication. Yep (2014) pinpointed two areas of problem with the conception of culture as national membership: (1) it leaves out the internal diversity within a nation and (2) it can never fully reflect the lives of diverse individuals living in it. Moon (2010)

argued that using nationality as a unit analysis hides more than what it illuminates. Moon claimed that since researchers most often focused on discovering unifying elements to describe the whole population, such approach may result in stereotypes that blanket a society. Unfortunately, in the field of intercultural communication, such stereotypes are often taught as tools for survival for individuals who may need to communicate with the persons described by the stereotypes. While population in a nation in many years ago may share homogenous identities, Moon contended that it is less likely the case in today's world. In today's global economy, people leave their current home countries in search for work leading to mobile populations that may give significant impact on the new markets. Such change certainly needs more intricate ways of understanding today's changing environment.

The argument levied against the inadequacy of treating "culture" as synonymous with national membership has led scholars to make the call for extending current definitions of culture to include various social positions such as race, ethnicity, and gender (Moon, 2010; Yep, 2014). Given that the most feasible fraction of society can be identified through ethnic groups (Schemerhorn, 1996), ethnicity provides one possible way to move beyond approaching culture as national membership. It is important to note that the issue of ethnicity is not new since many societies have long been ethnically diverse. However, as the world's population continues to result in a complex multicultural society at a quickstep, ethnic differences have now become the most important agenda for many societies (Banks, 2009). Since ethnicity is relevant to be considered, this term certainly needs further clarification.

### **Ethnicity and Identity Representation**

It is worth noting that nationality and ethnicity are both fairly general types of cultures (Collier, 2006). However, ethnicity is a bit different. Ethnicity can be defined as a wide variety of group who normally have origins that are external or precede present nation-state and share common heritage, history, religion, tradition, religion, and language (Collier, 2006; Hecht, et al., 2003). Lustig and Koester (2006) suggested that the nature of ethnicity depends upon a number of characteristics. For example, many people such as in the United States still identify themselves with their ancestors' ethnic group who emigrated from other nation. Ethnic groups may include, for example, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Mexican Americans. In other cases, ethnicity may coincide more completely with nation such as in the case of the former Yugoslavia where the three major ethnic groups – Slovenians, Croatians, and Serbians – each with their own distinct language and culture were forced into one nation-state. Ethnic group may also share common identification although they belong to many different nations such as Jewish people who share a common ethnic identification although they are citizens of many different nations.

Kim (1986) proposed two components of ethnicity, namely, objective and subjective perspective. The objective perspective views ethnicity as "the character or quality of belonging to an ethnic group as well as the ethnic group itself" (p.10). In this perspective, ethnicity requires symbolic markers such as race, religion, language, national origin, and combinations of these characteristics that designate and differentiate ethnic groups. Subjective perspective views ethnicity as a self-perceived membership. In this perspective, ethnicity is very much defined by the extent an individual affiliates self with an ethnic group and the extent such affiliation influences his or her behaviours. In view of this, it is important to acknowledge that no two ethnic individuals may possess similar ethnic characteristics. Since defining ethnicity emphasizes the consciousness of members of an ethnic group on their sense of belonging to the group,

thusly, understanding ethnicity must go hand in hand with identity. The notion of identity centralizes the concept of self - a sense of who we are and who others think we are (Harun, 2007; Martin & Nakayama, 2013). Hecht et al. (1993) claimed that our sense of selves are partly shaped by the ethnic group in which we belong. We form ethnic identities through a process in which we learn about and internalize the beliefs, values, norms and social practices of our ethnic cultures and identify with that culture as part of our self-concept (Collier, 2006; Lustig & Koester, 2006). Lustig and Koester (2006) remarked that the cultures with which we identify would in turn affect our views about where we belong and who we consider to be “us” and “them”.

In understanding the intricacy of how ethnic identity influences our communication, Communication Theory of Identity is useful (Hecht, Collier & Ribeau, 1993; Hecht & Choi, 2012). Hecht et al. (1993) proposed that the basic premise of this theory rests on the assumption that “identity is inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages are exchanged. These messages are symbolic linkages between and among people that, at least in part, are enactments of identity.” (p. 161). The central feature of this theory is the proposition that identity can be examined at four levels which include the personal, enacted, relational, and communal levels. These four levels define the “location” or the “layer” of identity from which it can be examined. The personal level is an individual’s self-perception of his or her identity that signifies the avowal aspect of identity (Collier, 2006; Hecht & Choi, 2012). The personal level is a characteristic of an individual’s self-concept that provides an understanding of the individual’s feelings about self and how the individual defines herself or himself in general as well as within particular situations (Hecht et al., 1993). Hecht and Choi (2012) explained that the relational level takes an individual’s perception of others’ communicated views of the individual’s identity that reflects the ascribed aspect of identity. This level reveals that identity is not constructed in a vacuum; rather it is co-created between self and relevant others. The enacted level refers to identity as it is expressed in communication while the communal level is the group’s conception of identity. The communal level indicates that the collectivity itself has its own identity. Such communal level is internalized as group members share common features, histories, and collective memories that bond this group together. Hecht and Choi further added that this communal level of identity may be in a form of stereotypes or it can be projected through the cultural code that defines the social construction of the individuals at the group level.

Hecht and Choi (2012) attested that the four levels should not be treated in isolation from each other; rather they may overlap and interpenetrate with one another to explain identity. For example, the personal and communal frames may operate jointly or there may be a dialectical tension between and among the levels. The levels are often defined and understood separately for the purposes of analysis. However, the four levels make up the composite whole of identity. In view of this, each of the level can be analysed independently but the analysis can be enriched if they consider how each level is entwined with others to make up a whole view on identity.

The levels of identity can be considered as part of the lived experience of social actors and thus, they are useful to researchers as the means for interpreting the ways people have of conceptualizing their own identity (Hecht et al., 1993). As Lustig and Koester (2006) remarked that the self-concept of a person who belongs to a particular cultural group has a significant effect on intercultural communication, as such, the levels are not only useful for interpreting people’s construction of their identity. It can also work as the means for interpreting people’s intercultural experiences. Taking the levels of identity as indicated by Hecht et al., (1993), these

questions can be raised: How do individuals think of themselves as Latinas, Malay Malaysians or Korean Americans? How do individuals come to identify themselves as representatives of a particular ethnic group? How does such identity representation influence interpretation of individuals' intercultural experiences? McDaniel et al. (2012) proposed that through our experiences in the cultural group that we exist; the proper ways of thinking, feeling and behaving are communicated to us and we learn cultural behaviours of our own specific cultural group. The "unwritten" societal rules are internalized for us to function effectively that guide the proper way to act, what to say, and what to expect in interaction with others. As individuals live and interact within their cultural groups that consists social networks of people similar to them, interaction may be relatively satisfying since there are shared cultural expectations (Collier, 2006; Hecht & Choi, 2012; Hecht et al., 2003). However, when individuals interact with others from different cultural groups, it is likely that the individuals may experience uncertainties due to differing cultural expectations (Gudykunst, 1998). Although individuals may experience discrepant expectations, it is contended that individuals do not passively enter interaction. Rather, they are active social actors who seek to understand what is going on in their interaction (Bird & Osland, 2005). Taking this proposition, intercultural experience provides an important context for interrogating how people represent themselves in an ethnic way and how such representation filters their understanding on their interaction with "the other" who hold different ethnic identities. Since ethnic identity is likely to be important in the majority of our interaction because it provides an essential framework for interpreting our experiences (Lustig & Koester, 2006), what would intercultural communication look like if it considers lived intercultural experiences from the standpoint of ethnic identity representation? This realm certainly offers an interesting investigation.

### **The Study**

Malaysia offers an interesting setting for an investigation of ethnic identity representation. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic society with a population of 28.33 million people comprising three major ethnic groups namely the Malays (64 percent), Chinese (28 percent) , and Indians (8 percent)(Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012). Although these three major ethnic groups share many general commonalities as Malaysians, specific ethnic differences in terms of degree and priorities of values exist. For instance, while the Malay values accentuate their identity to Islam and Malay cultural world, the Chinese derive their values from Confucian philosophy (Asma, 1996; Shamsul, 1999). Such value differences give significant influence on management and social practices of each ethnic group (Asma & Pederson, 2004).

It is quite certain that there have been several studies addressing the issue on ethnicity/ethnic identities in Malaysia. Since researchers were often driven by the agenda of national integration, much of their attention is based on examining ethnic relations between domestic ethnic groups namely the Malays, Indians, and Chinese (e.g., Tamam, 2009; Tamam, Yee, Fazilah, & Azimi, 2008). While focusing analysis on the three ethnic groups have considerably offered valuable insights, such focus seems to be inadequate to capture the complexity of intercultural competence in today's Malaysian campuses. Malaysian higher education is fast becoming an industry in which a large amount of promotion has been done to encourage international students especially from Arab, Africa, and South East Asian regions (Nazri & Rozita, 2012). The influx of international students has further expanded Malaysia's ethnic diversity and it is projected that ethnic diversity will continue to rise in the coming years in Malaysian campuses (Singh, 2012). This development has resulted in a rich ethnically diverse

students' body. The intermingling among students has certainly brought along new and complex phase of interaction to the various ethnicities that co-exist within Malaysian campuses (Pandian, 2008). Since students live within such setting, it can be expected that students may experience interaction with the other, locally and internationally. Given the complex nature of ethnic diversity and intercultural experiences in today's Malaysian campuses, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How do students describe their ethnic identity?

RQ2: How does ethnic identity influence students' experiences with the other?

## **Method**

As this study aims to explore lived intercultural experiences of students, phenomenology is an appropriate approach. Van Manen (1990) remarked that the basic assumption of phenomenology is to question the way we experience the world and to know the world we live in as human beings. The fundamental phenomenological question is oriented toward answering "what is the nature of the phenomenon as meaningfully experienced by human? What is it like to have a certain experience?" As phenomenological studies aim at gaining deeper understanding by describing one's experiential meanings in his or her everyday existence, phenomenological study is carried through reflection of one's consciousness of the experience that one lived through.

The setting for this study is a public university in the northern region of Malaysia. Local students constitute about 29,467 of the statistic, and another 2,222 are international students coming from mostly South East Asian, Arab and African countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, China, Somalia, Jordan, Yemen, Nigeria and so forth. Participants for this study involved both local and non-local students in the university who had the experience with the other in the campus. Participants were postgraduate students. Their selection is based on the assumption that postgraduate students may possess adequate intercultural experience within higher education. In addition, they have reached a certain level of maturity that would allow them to be able to articulate their experience more fully.

In locating participants who met the established criteria for an in-depth interview, this study utilized a snowballing sampling. Snowballing is a method that expands the sample by asking one participant to recommend others for interviewing (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011). In thinking through how the beginner of the snowballing chain could be chosen, the chain is categorized into local and non-local participants. The beginners of chain for local participants include representatives of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia and these representatives were Malay, Chinese, and Indian. For non-local participants, statistics of international students were obtained from the Department of Statistics in the university. Based on the statistics, international students in the university came from three main geographical regions which are South East Asia, Middle East, and Africa. Based on this data, the beginner of the snowballing chain for non-local participants included representatives from Indonesia (South East Asia), Jordan (Middle East) and Nigeria (Africa). The snowballing sampling began with six participants, with each represented major ethnic groups within the campus who then referred the researcher to others like themselves for research participation.

In-depth interviews were used to collect data from participants. The interview ceased when saturation of data was reached and resulting in fifteen participants being interviewed

(Table 1). Their frequencies of intercultural interaction range from every day to monthly basis. Most of their interactions occurred in classrooms and residential halls.

*Table 1: In-Depth Interview Participants*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Program of study</b>	<b>Semester</b>	<b>Gender</b>
<b>1 (P1)</b>	Bugis- Makasar	Indonesia	PhD Accounting	8	Female
<b>2 (P2)</b>	Hausa	Nigeria	PhD economics	2	Male
<b>3 (P3)</b>	Arab	Jordan	Msc International Accounting	3	Male
<b>4 (P4)</b>	Chinese	Malaysia	PhD Economics	2	Male
<b>5 (P5)</b>	Malay	Malaysia	PhD Economics	2	Male
<b>6 (P6)</b>	Arab	Palestine	PhD Accounting	5	Male
<b>7 (P7)</b>	Indian	Malaysia	PhD Economics	2	Female
<b>8 (P8)</b>	Malay	Malaysia	PhD Economics	2	Female
<b>9 (P9)</b>	Arab	Jordan	PhD Human Resource Management	5	Male
<b>10 (P10)</b>	Yoruba	Nigeria	PhD Communication	2	Male
<b>11 (P11)</b>	Malay	Malaysia	PhD Multimedia	3	Male
<b>12 (P12)</b>	Indian	Malaysia	PhD Human Resource	2	Female
<b>13 (P13)</b>	Chinese	China	PhD Economics	4	Female
<b>14 (P14)</b>	Sunda- Balinese	Indonesia	PhD Multimedia	2	Female
<b>15 (P15)</b>	Malay	Malaysia	PhD economics	2	Female

In terms of interviewing structure, this study utilized Seidman's (2006) structure of phenomenological interviews that guide participants (i) to reflect their life history in the light of the topic, (ii) to provide details of their experiences and (iii) to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. Taking this structure, participants were asked to reflect on their intercultural experiences and the meanings they attached to such experience from their ethnic identity standpoints. Specifically, participants were guided to recall several incidents they identified as "an encounter with ethnically dissimilar other" (referred as the other) and the meanings that they impart to such experiences. NVivo 10 software was utilized to manage the data. In analyzing data, I followed rigorous, systematic steps of data analysis by Moustakas (1994). Within such framework of data analysis, researchers must commit to the attitude of "Epoche" which demands an examination of a phenomenon without a preconceived theoretical proposition. However, once the findings have been determined, it is acceptable to draw attention to relevant theories so that the researcher can dialogue with theories and findings in the literature that have not been phenomenologically determined (Giorgi, Personal communication via e-mail, May 21, 2013). Taking this tenet, in this study, the data were coded into themes that emerged through participants' voices rather than a predetermined theoretical perspective. Once the findings have been delineated, the findings were compared with that of Hecht et al.'s (1993) Communication Theory of Identity

## Findings

The data analysis showed the emergent of two core themes that illuminate participants' lived intercultural experiences. The core themes include: (i) identifying self as an ethnic being and (ii) encountering differences between self and other. Table 2 summarizes these themes provides general descriptions of these three core themes that becomes the central findings of this study.

### Theme 1: Identifying self as an ethnic being

This core theme illuminates how participants describe their ethnic identities. Participants primarily associated their identity with the ethnic markers that characterize and distinguish ethnic groups. Such markers include language, religion, skin colour, ancestral lineage, common territory values, and practices. Participants also described how the ethnic markers are manifested into their own experiences living within an ethnic group. Amongst the ethnic markers, language was viewed by the participants as the most obvious marker. For example, Participant 4 commented:

*I feel it is the color of the skin that reflects one's physical. Language is the sharpest thing. Once you speak... people will identify that you are not from the same culture. So people will question which group are you from... and then also religion...I mean for Malaysia case...so far religion can be used to differentiate cultures."*

*We have Christians 1500 years ago they still are Arabs because they speak Arab. If you are Arab, it depends on language. (P9)*

Interestingly, although participants described language as the most important marker for one's ethnic identity, it is does not work as a mandatory factor. Rather, it is subjectively defined by the extent a person "stick to the culture". For example, Participant 4 explained:

*Although there are Chinese who don't speak Mandarin but they still stick to the Chinese culture. They still pray the Chinese way...they still apply the Chinese way. Then another group...they are more to Christianity. This group is not the majority. They start their*

*education in Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan (primary school)*

Given that this study includes both local and non-local participants, it is interesting to highlight whether ethnic identity matters for participants. Participants noted that ethnicity is significant because it shapes their values and behaviours. For example, Participant 12 viewed her ethnic culture is important because it is something that she “has to follow”. Similarly, Participant 10 expressed his own ethnic values that guide what he believes in life:

*My ethnicity is important to the extent that Allah creates for identification. I believe I'm a traditional person. I believe in the cultural values of my community. I encourage people to retain it to the extent that is not in conflict with Islam. I believe in close knit interaction that's important in my culture.*

Since Participant 10 came from Nigeria, this participant was asked whether ethnic identity matters when crossing his national boundary. Participant 10 commented that he preferred to be identified as Nigerian. However, he noted that his ethnic identity “sticks to him” even though he has left his home country. In this sense, he believed that people are somehow shaped by their own ethnic values that manifest in the way they behave in interactions.

Participants also described whether the specific ethnic identity of the other matters in their experiences. For local participants, they tend to notice those students coming from foreign countries in terms of their national rather than ethnic identity. Non-local participants, on the other hand, seemed to notice the specific ethnic identities among Malaysians over the course of living in the country. For example, Participant 10 shared his experience:

*When I came down from the plane in KL...I started to identify... this one is Malay...this one is Chinese...I have to learn this. Just like you can easily identify an Indian, a Chinese, and Malay.*

Participant 10 further noted that noticing the existence of different ethnic identities seems to be important in his experience. As this participant claimed Islam is central to his ethnic identity, he felt it was much easier to initiate conversations and relate with the Malay Malaysians who are predominantly Muslims than with other ethnic groups. Such experience also resonates with an Arab participant (Participant 9) as he described:

*I have many Malay friends. I love them. Last time...two of my friends are my neighbour. We used to be closed. We have similarities with the Malay culture because of the religion.*

## **Theme 2: Encountering differences between self and the other**

As participants reflected on their experiences with the other, participants described encountering behaviours that they found as “different” from what they usually experience within their own ethnic groups. Two most important aspects emerged from the data that include differences in ethnic norms and language barrier. In terms of ethnic norms, for example, Participant 10 reflected on his experience interacting with Malay Malaysians. He remembered feeling “surprised” when the topic for conversation during the first meeting includes his marital status. Such surprised feeling came to exist when he explained that “asking about marital status is seen as personal” in his culture. He described:

*It was a night journey... I stopped at two points and a Malay person asked...where do you come from? Nigeria...oo Nigeria. This is your first time? Where are you studying? If you stay longer...the next question you'll get is "are you married?" ah...What's happening here...yesterday a Malay technician came to repair in my room. He asked...you have your family? You come with your wife? ...there are certain things we don't normally discuss when we meet first time. We don't normally ask questions we consider personal. That's the difference. You know like I will not go all out. I've had my friends saying in class...you discuss your wife. It's not bad. It's just not something we do.*

Participant 5 recounted an incident where his Arab friend patted his head. Given that this gesture is considered as “rude” in his Malay Malaysian culture, this participant felt surprised by such gesture as he described:

*That day...an Arab pats my head... geramnya (a feeling of anger that was suppressed or concealed). I know he was joking and I love joking too. He does not know...he came and pat my head... Ishhh geramnya... I knew he meant joking but I was like... I feel like I'm getting close to get mad (laughter).*

Participant 3 explained that head patting is considered “a friendly joking” in the Arab culture and noted this may not be acceptable to the Malay Malaysians as he said:

*Touching the head for boy is normal for us. I think it's not good for Malays, right? Or touch the hair because someone told me it is not good to touch the head. Boy's head. If you want to play, we touch the head. It is okay for us...accepted. Even now in this age...if someone comes to touch my hair... It's okay.*

In terms of language barrier, participants' experiences ranged from their description in grappling with dialects of a language to challenges they faced within situations that necessitate them to use a lingua franca (mainly English). For example, Participant 4 noted that language is not much an issue in his interaction with his Malay Malaysian friends given that Malay is the official language among Malaysians. Even though he was able to speak the Malay language, the language as it is spoken by his Malay Malaysian friends include local dialects or Malay cultural expressions to which presents some difficulties for him to understand what they said. Participant 14 described an interesting experience with language. Being a Sunda-Balinese from Indonesia, she explained that the Indonesian and Malay language are relatively similar which made it easier for her to interact with her local friends. Despite such commonality, she noted the existence of similar words in both languages that carry different connotations which may lead to misunderstanding. Although participants noted that such experience illuminates the challenge they faced in interaction, it seems to be little. Other participants talked about limitations they experienced when their ability to use a language that connects them with the other was not available. In this particular realm of experience, participants admitted that interaction was far more challenging. For example, Participant 14 noted experiencing some struggles to express her thoughts in English that impede the smoothness of her interaction with non-local friends who need to rely on such language for interaction. Another participant (Participant 2) noted similar problem. Since he is a non-local student in the campus, the only language that he could use as a

lingua franca in the campus is English. Noticing that not all his local friends can speak English, he felt that language can be a constraining factor:

*The main problem with some ethnic groups I came across was especially when it comes to communication. There's a communication barrier. From my experience, there is one Malay girl talking to me saying that my problem is that I can only speak English, why can't I speak Bahasa (Malay language).*

It is telling that even when several participants were able to speak in English, they experienced various accented English which requires more effortful communication. For example, Participant 10 noted having difficulties to grasp the accents of the other as he commented:

*What we have also learned here...I'm facing the fact that Nigerians speak big grammar... apart from accent problem...with pronouns... English words not the same way. The Malaysian person pronounce this way.*

## **Discussion**

This study is conducted to answer these two questions: (i) how do students describe their ethnic identity and (ii) how does ethnic identity influence students' experiences with the other. The two emergent themes that include identifying self as an ethnic being and encountering differences between self and the other reveal the essence of identity representation as it is experienced by the participants.

The finding of “identifying oneself as an ethnic being” indicates how participants came to identify selves as representatives of a particular ethnic group. If a participant identified himself/herself as a Malay Malaysian, what is entailed with being an ethnic individual? What represents such identification? Based on participants' description, it is interesting that the ethnic representation of participants seems to be primarily based on the sociological markers that generally characterize and distinguish one ethnic group from another (such as language, religion, and common territory). This personal level indicates that participants' ethnic identities are much based on the co-existence they felt between selves and the community that invokes the sense of “our people”. This finding corresponds with the literature that proposed through cultural socialization with relevant others such as family and friends within the ethnic group that individuals exist; individuals learn to be an ethnic member by speaking the language of the group, learning ancestral and historical roots, beliefs and values, and practicing cultural norms which in turn shapes the individuals' sense of self (Collier, 2006; Martin & Nakayama, 2013). Such cultural socialization speaks volume in participants' ethnic identity. It sets important distinctions between the groups that the participants find their sense of belonging against others that they do not belong. Such distinction provides the “us-them” boundary that defines participants' existence as ethnic individuals. Nonetheless, the sociological markers may not work as a definite pointer for one's affiliation with an ethnic group. Participants noted that even though there is a language that broadly characterizes an ethnic group, language as a way of ethnic identification may not serve as a mandatory factor. A person may not be able to speak a language that is commonly used by members of an ethnic group but affiliates self to such group. Interestingly, despite differences between ethnic groups, participants noted how they could relate with the other based on similarities they shared, which in turn affects the extent they could relate with ethnically diverse people. For example, as this study has indicated, a non-local participant (a Yoruba Nigerian) noted sharing similar religion made him feel much easier to relate with the Malays rather than other ethnic groups in Malaysia.

It is telling that the study indicates how participants described whether ethnic identity matters in their experiences. From the standpoint of selves, participants acknowledged the importance of their own ethnic values that guide the way they behave in daily lives. It is more interesting that even when they have left their own countries, non-local participants felt that their ethnic identity sticks with them. This finding supports the literature that the ethnic properties are likely to become part of the person's consciousness even if the person leaves the ethnic culture and lives as a sojourner (Hecht et al., 1993). Although ethnic identity is very significant in participants' view of selves, the importance of ethnic identity from the standpoint of another person seems to be elusive. The study reveals that the specific ethnic identities of non-local participants hold no significance in the eyes of local participants. This finding corresponds to Byram's (1997) assertion on the fluid nature of social identity that depends upon situational factors in determining which identity should emerge in a given interaction. Byram further pointed that when interaction involves interlocutors with different nationalities, the first identity that comes to the fore at the initial stage of interaction is national identity. Nonetheless, the absence of ethnic identity in any given interaction does not suggest that it is ultimately ignored. Harun (2007) argued that people are superficially categorized together and only when one meets with the person at interpersonal level or on daily basis, they become acquainted with her or his ethnic identity. This argument is warranted given that non-local participants in the study noted their consciousness on the existence of different ethnic identities among Malaysians over the course of living within the campus.

The finding of "encountering differences between self and the other" elucidates the influences of ethnic identity on participants' experiences with the other. This finding illuminates that ethnic identity provides the framework for participants to interpret "differences" as they compared the behaviours of the other against the ethnic groups that they identified with. This representation corresponds with the personal and relational levels of identity as indicated by Hecht et al., (1993). Ishida (2005) suggested that when a person identifies something as different; the object of experience is compared to something else. How a person knows which object of experience is "normal" and which one is "different" relates to one's cultural system which is pre-consciously ingrained from the cultural context one lives in. By viewing self as belonging to a cultural group, a person learns the shared agreement of rules that informs socially expected behaviours in the group (Byram, 1997; Collier, 2006; Hecht et al., 1993). Such shared rules of expected behaviours are evident in this study. As the finding indicates, the topic of conversation that includes one's marital status is "surprising" for a Yoruba Nigerian participant. Touching or patting the head is viewed as "rude" by a Malay Malaysian participant but a "friendly joke" by an Arab.

Additionally, participants' experiences are not only about finding the object of experience in which they found as different. It also entails how much "differentness" is possible in their experiences with the other. This consciousness is particularly evident when it considers participants' experiences with language. The study indicates that even when it is possible for different ethnic groups in Malaysia to interact using the Malay language, the cultural values that are inherent in the language as it is used in daily interaction by the Malay Malaysians may be non-comprehensible for the Chinese Malaysian participant leading to a form of cultural barrier. Nonetheless, the sphere of interaction in which participants found as far more challenging pertains to situations that require them to enter into another language for interaction to take place. If the ability to use such a language seems to be unavailable for participants, language can be a constraining factor in their interaction. In this regard, much of participants' experiences

seemed to be centred on using a lingua franca (mainly English). As the awareness on language's central role in the ability to interact is heightened when people realized the use of language disconnects them with others (Lustig & Koester, 2010), this assertion fully resonates with participants' experiences. Additionally, the finding of this study shows that participants experienced various accents of English in their interactions. This finding points into the importance of considering cultural elements on language. Baker (2011) remarked that when interactions include a language which is foreign to both speakers in interaction, there are significant influences on communication that arise from their initial language.

At this juncture, the essential features that characterize participants' experiences have been delineated through the two core themes. In phenomenological inquiry, the identification themes is not the final step as Cornett-Devito and Worley (2005) remarked that "the interpretation of themes involves the exegesis of the interrelationships among the themes and discovering meta-meanings not immediately apparent in the earlier steps"(p. 327). In this study, the phenomenal expression "what they do that we don't do" emerged as the meta-meaning that captures the interconnectedness of the two core themes. This expression symbolically indicates not only participants' consciousness of who they are as ethnic representatives, but also consciousness of how such representations influence their experiences as they compared cultural behaviours of other ethnic groups (they) against their own ethnic group (us). Phenomenologically speaking, participants' ethnic identities provide an important framework in understanding their interpretation of "how we do things" and "how they do things". Such "doings" squares with participants' description on the cultural practices that shape their identities as ethnic individuals. When participants enacted their ethnic identities in communication, it influences participants' interpretation of selves and the other that signify their encounters with cultural differences.

### **Contributions to the field of intercultural communication**

This study offers an understanding of intercultural communication in the light of how participants construe selves as representatives of their ethnic groups. As participants understand who they are as ethnic individuals, they become aware of how their own worldviews give impact on their behaviours. As participants try to see things through the eyes of the other who hold an alternative worldview, their perspective is added into participants' own personal repertoire.

Since this study includes diverse voices from both domestic and non-domestic ethnic individuals, this study offers a new insight on thinking through the complexity of identity representation in the process of intercultural communication. Considering the diverse nature of participants in this study, identity representation must consider the extent that ethnic identity matters in participants' interaction. Since participants may belong to various social groups, as such, intercultural communication must take into account the multifaceted, multi-layered and fluid nature of identity. The multifaceted nature of identity suggests that what is important in comprehending intercultural communication is to look at how ethnic identity intersects with other identities (such as religious or national identities) and how these identities play their roles in intercultural situations. The multi-layered aspect of identity suggests that the meaning of being an ethnic individual is not only based in a 'given' manner which is constructed through the ethnic sociological markers. It must also consider how identity is being redefined and reconstructed in the course of participants' interaction with the other. In this regard, identity representation can be understood by looking at how ethnic individual self-positions his or her identities in relation to the other that determines which identities seem to be activated in intercultural situations. The fluid nature of identity suggests that intercultural communication can

be viewed as encounters between culturally complex beings. In this regard, individuals are viewed as changing entities that define and re-define their sense of selves within the realm of interpersonal connection with the other. It is within this fluid aspect that enables us to see the intricacy of identity representation as individuals interpret their experiences of differences and “different-ness”. This study has indicated that such experience may not only include the presence of cultural differences but also the degree of cultural differences (such as values, religion, norm, language, and nonverbal cues) that both ethnic individuals felt in their interaction.

### **Conclusion**

This study brings forth a perspective of intercultural communication that considers identity representation in the context of lived experiences of multi-ethnic students in a Malaysian university setting. As such, this study contributes into expanding the existing knowledge on intercultural communication that is mostly based on national membership. As this study considers students reflections on their lived intercultural experiences, it does not observe actual intercultural interactions. Future researchers may observe actual situations to understand how the multifaceted, multi-layered and fluid nature of identity works when people from different cultures get by with one another. Findings from such research would be beneficial into delineating the dynamics of identity representation as it occurs in real intercultural situations.

### **References**

- Anderson, B. (1991). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Asma, A. (1996). *Going glocal: Cultural dimensions in Malaysian management*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Malaysian Institute of Management.
- Asma, A., & Pederson, P. B. (2004). *Understanding multicultural Malaysia: Delights, puzzles and irritations*. Selangor, Malaysia: Prentice Hall.
- Banks, J. A. (2009). *Teaching strategies for ethnic studies*. Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Baker, W. (2011). Intercultural awareness: modelling an understanding of cultures in intercultural communication through English as a lingua franca. *Language and Intercultural Communication*, 11(3), 197-214.
- Bippus, A. M., & Dorjee, T. (2002). The validity of PRECA as an index interethnic communication apprehension. *Communication Research Reports*, 19(2), 130-137.
- Bird, A., & Osland, J. S. (2005). Making sense of intercultural collaboration. *International Studies of Management and Organization*, 35(4), 115-132.
- Byram, M. (1997). *Teaching and assessing intercultural communicative competence*. New York: Multilingual Matters.
- Collier, M. J. (2006). Cultural identity and intercultural communication. In L. A. Samovar, R. E. Porter & E. R. McDaniel (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Cornett-Devito, M. M., & Worley, D. W. (2005). A front row seat: A phenomenological investigation of learning disabilities. *Communication Education*, 54(4), 312-333.
- Department of Statistics Malaysia. (2012). *Yearbook of Statistics Malaysia*. Retrieved from <http://www.statistics.gov.my>.
- Gudykunst, W. B. (1998). *Bridging differences: Effective intergroup communication* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gudykunst, W. B. (2003). Intercultural communication: Introduction. In W. B. Gudykunst (Ed.), *Cross-cultural and intercultural communication*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gudykunst, W. B., & Kim, Y. Y. (2003). *Communicating with strangers: An approach to intercultural communication* (4th ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Hall, E. T. (1959). *The silent language*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Harun, M. (2007). *Malay-Chinese interethnic communication in Malaysia: An analysis of sensemaking in everyday experiences* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from [http://etd.uum.edu.my/2094/1/Harun\\_Minah.pdf](http://etd.uum.edu.my/2094/1/Harun_Minah.pdf)
- Hecht, M. L., Jackson, R. L., & Ribeau, S. A. (2003). *African American communication: Exploring identity and culture*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hecht, M. L., Collier, M. J., & Ribeau, S. A. (1993). *African American Communication: Ethnic identity and cultural interpretation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Hecht, M. L., & Choi, H. (2012). The communication theory of identity as a framework for health message design. In H. Choi (Ed.) *Health Communication Message Design: Theory and Practice* (pp. 137-152). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Hofstede, G., Hofstede, G. J., & Minkov, M. (2010). *Cultures and organizations software of the minds: Intercultural cooperation and its importance for survival* (3rd ed.). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Ishida, K. (2005). *Cross-cultural adaptation reconceptualised: A phenomenological study of intercultural identity* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <http://ohiolink.edu/etd/>

- Kim, Y. Y. (1986). Introduction: A communication approach to interethnic relations. In Y. Y. Kim (Ed.), *International and intercultural communication annual (Vol. x, pp. 9-17)*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Levine, T. R., Park, H. S., & Kim, R. K. (2007). Some conceptual and theoretical challenges for cross-cultural communication research in the 21st century. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 36*(3), 205-221.
- Lindolf, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lustig, M. W., & Koester, J. (2006). *Intercultural competence: Interpersonal communication across cultures* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Martin, J. N., & Nakayama, T. K. (2013). *Intercultural communication in contexts* (6th ed.). Avenue of the Americas, NY: McGraw Hill.
- McDaniel, E. R., Samovar, L. A., & Porter, R. E. (2009). Understanding intercultural communication: The working principles. In L. A. Samovar, R. E. Porter & E. R. McDaniel (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (12th ed., pp. 6-17). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- McDaniel, E. R., Samovar, L. A., & Porter, R. E. (2012). Using intercultural communication: The building blocks. In E. R. McDaniel, L. A. Samovar & R. E. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural communication: A reader* (pp. 4-33). Boston, MA: Wadsworth.
- Moon, D. G. (1996). Concepts of "Culture": Implications for intercultural communication research. In M. K. Asante, Y. Miike & J. Yin (Eds.), *The global intercultural communication reader* (pp. 11-26). New York: Routledge.
- Moon, D. G. (2010). Critical reflection on culture and critical intercultural communication. In T. K. Nakayama & R. T. Halualani (Eds.), *The handbook of critical intercultural communication* (pp. 34-52). Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Nazri, M., & Rozita, I. (2012). The development of higher education in Malaysia: An ethnic relation perspective. *The Social Sciences, 7*(4), 568-574.
- Pandian, A. (2008). Multiculturalism in higher education: A case study of Middle Eastern students' perceptions and experiences in a Malaysian university. *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies, 4*(1), 33-59.
- Schemerhorn, R. (1996). Ethnicity and minority groups. In J. Hutchinson & A. D. Smith (Eds.), *Ethnicity* (pp. 17-18). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Shamsul, A. B. (1999). Identity contestation in Malaysia: A comparative commentary on 'Malayness' and 'Chineseness'. *Akademika, Julai*, 17-37.
- Singh, M. K. M. (2012). Friendship patterns between international and local undergraduates in a Malaysian public institution of higher learning. *International Journal of Social Sciences and Education, 2*(1), 267-280.
- Stiftung, B., & Cariplo, F. (2006). *Intercultural competence - the key competence in the 21st century?*. Retrieved from [http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/bst/de/media/xcms\\_bst\\_dms\\_30238\\_30239\\_2.pdf](http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/bst/de/media/xcms_bst_dms_30238_30239_2.pdf)
- Syarizan, D. (2011). What it takes to interact with "The other"? : A Phenomenology of Interethnic Communication Competence among students in an American University. *Human Communication, 14*(3), 221-239.
- Syarizan, D. (2014). *Intercultural competence: A phenomenological study of students' intercultural experience in Universiti Utara Malaysia* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Universiti Utara Malaysia, Sintok, Kedah.

- Tamam, E. (2009). Influence of interethnic contact on interethnic attitudes of Malay and Chinese-Malaysian university students in Malaysia. *Human Communication, 12*(1), 53-66.
- Tamam, E., Fazilah, I., & Yee, W. M. T. (2011). Interracial communication and perceptions of the compatibility of different races among Malay and non-Malay students in a public university in Malaysia. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Science, 15*, 703-707.
- Tylor, E. B. (1871). *Primitive culture: researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, art, and custom*. New York: Gordon Press.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. London: State University of New York.
- Yep, G. A. (2014). Encounters with the "Other" : Personal notes for a reconceptualization of intercultural communication competence. In M. K. Asante, Y. Miike & J. Yin (Eds.), *The global intercultural communication reader* (2nd ed., pp. 339-356). New York: Routledge.