

ETHNOCENTRISM AND INTERCULTURAL WILLINGNESS TO COMMUNICATE: A STUDY OF MALAYSIAN PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *Universities are considered as a great platform to polish students' intercultural communication skills as they learn to interact with students from different cultural background on a deeper level than school. However, past studies revealed that intercultural communication among university students are still limited; students are reluctant to participate in intercultural communication beyond the classroom settings due to ethnocentrism. This study investigated the relationship between ethnocentrism and intercultural willingness to communicate among Chinese and Indian undergraduates from a private university in Malaysia. A total of 75 Chinese and 75 Indian respondents (N = 150) were recruited to participate in this study. The Generalized Ethnocentrism (GENE) and Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (IWTC) scales were adopted and modified to assess respondents' level of ethnocentrism and level of intercultural willingness to communicate, respectively. Data were coded, entered, and analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistics 22. Pearson's correlation analysis revealed a moderate significant negative correlation between ethnocentrism and intercultural willingness to communicate; higher the level of ethnocentrism, lower the level of intercultural willingness to communicate. The implications of the findings are discussed.*

Keywords: *Ethnocentrism, Intercultural willingness to Communicate, Undergraduates, Private University*

Introduction

Being multi-ethnic with multi-religious country, Malaysia faces greater challenges compared those countries with single race (Kasmo, Usman, Taha, Salleh & Alias, 2015), especially in promoting unity within the country's multi-religious and multi-cultural society (Muzaffar,

2018). Muzaffar further added that the challenges of fostering national integration has become even more noticeable with the decline of social interaction among people of different ethnic backgrounds (David, Kuang, Alagappar, Hui, & Manan, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that Malaysia struggles with national integration in order to unite the citizens under a national identity (Chang & Kho, 2017).

Besides, Ketab, Tamam, and Bolong (2015) revealed that Malaysian students are not much interested in getting involved with other ethnic students due to ethnocentrism. High levels of ethnocentrism will lower the intercultural willingness to communicate (IWTC), which eventually effects the initiation of intercultural communication (Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2014; Neuliep, 2012). Based on the review of the literature, past studies overlooked the impact of ethnocentrism on IWTC, which acts as a catalyst to initiate the intercultural interaction.

Based on the gap found in the review of literature, the aim of the current study, therefore, is to examine the relationship between ethnocentrism and IWTC among undergraduates in private university.

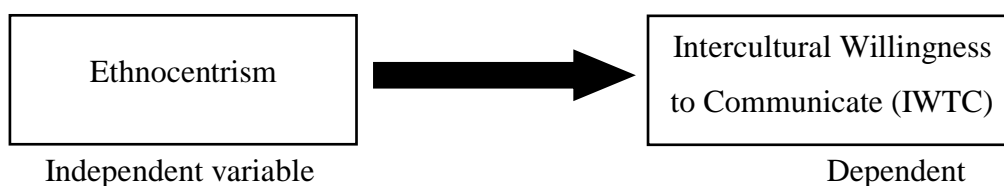
As such, the research poses the following questions:

- RQ1: What is the level of ethnocentrism among private university undergraduates in Malaysian?
- RQ2: What is the level of IWTC among private university undergraduates in Malaysia?
- RQ3: What is the relationship between ethnocentrism and IWTC among private university undergraduates in Malaysia?

Theoretical Framework

According to the Contact Theory, intercultural interaction is effective in reducing prejudice and improving intercultural relations (Amichai-Hamburger & McKenna, 2006; Allport, 1954), and it seems that interethnic interaction can lead to a total elimination of prejudices between ethnic groups (Komalasari & Saripudin, 2015), which can consequently contributes to the development of national integration (Bazzi, Gaduh, Rothenberg, & Wong, 2017). Contact theory also proposes that interethnic interaction should lead to improved interethnic attitudes when the contact occurs in a favourable environment and on an equal-status basis (Berryman-Fink, 2006). However, Allport cautioned that not just any interaction would produce a contact effect, the interactions had to be meaningful and positive (Buyuker, Jadidi-D’Urso, & Filindra, 2017). Thus, the Contact Theory could be used to explain the impact of ethnocentrism on IWTC (Buyuker et al., 2017).

Table 1: Research Framework



Literature Review

Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (IWTC)

Kassing (1997) defined IWTC as “one’s predisposition to initiate intercultural communication encounters”. Jackson (2014) further elaborated people with high willingness to communicate don’t wait for their partner to start the conversation. Instead, they tend to approach their partner to initiate intercultural interactions and demonstrate a high level of willingness to communicate with them. They make an effort to share their feelings and ideas with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Altemeyer, 2003; Duronto Nishida, & Nakayama, 2005; Lin & Rancer, 2003; Lin, 2006; Neuliep, 2012; Ulu, Weiwei, & Yu, 2015).

People with high level of communication apprehension possess lower willingness to communicate; they tend to avoid or withdraw from communicating with others (McCroskey & Richmond, 1990). Besides, IWTC was noted to be initial positive sign to engage in intercultural interaction (Justen, 2009). Krakhellen (2010) has stressed that as interaction is a central process of intercultural competence, without the willingness to engage with others, it seems impossible to develop any level of intercultural competence.

Campbell (2016) identified that there are many reasons why individuals might avoid communicating with people from culturally diverse background. Gonzalez, Pang, Sweeney, and Wang (2017) mentioned as individuals attain a greater sense of belonging through integration, this can lead to a greater intercultural willingness to communicate when the opportunity arises. Additionally, it may also lead to a greater level of intercultural competence as individuals attain an ethno-relativist point of view that makes them more sensitive to different cultures, as well as an intercultural adaptability to their surroundings.

As the private university chosen to conduct this study is highly populated by Chinese students, and less Indian and Malay students, it is worth to study the IWTC of the students rather than their face-to-face interethnic interaction.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism has become a predominant topic since the term was introduced more than a century ago to the vocabulary of social scientists, by William Sumner. As cited by Neuliep (2012), Sumner (1906) referred ethnocentrism as “the technical name for this view of things in which one’s own group is the centre of everything, and all others are scaled and rated with reference to it”. Logan, Steel, & Hunt (2016) asserted ethnocentrism as a fundamental aspect that significantly affects IWTC and needs to be further investigated.

Ketab et al. (2015) explored the impacts of ethnocentrism on interethnic bridging social capital through mediating of online interethnic interaction among Malaysian multi-ethnic undergraduates. The results revealed that although more than 50% of the respondents had daily interaction with their peers from different ethnics, yet the respondents’ level of ethnocentrism was reported negatively correlated with the level of interethnic interactions. Tamam (2013) added, when people judge an out-group members based on their own beliefs and values, it is difficult for them to engage in bias-free interethnic interactions. Thus, Tamam observed ethnocentrism as an impediment to multi-ethnic community.

Although studies related to ethnocentrism are highly available in overseas, however, in Malaysia, the number of studies are very still limited, especially among samples from private university. Thus, this study aims to fill the gap.

Sample

Approximately 12,000 undergraduates enrolled in the private university selected for this study, which majority are Chinese students. The sum of Malay and Indian students is less than 10% of the total undergraduate population. Due to small population of Malay students, this study was conducted among Chinese and Indian undergraduates only. Table 2 shows a total of 150 respondents (N = 150) were participated in this study, consists of 75 Chinese undergraduates (M=21, F=54) and 75 Indian undergraduates (M=42, F=33).

Table 2: Respondents' Demographic

Gender	Chinese	Indian	Total
Male (M)	21	42	63
Female (F)	54	33	87
Total (N)	75	75	150

Convenience sampling method was employed in this research. Research questionnaire was distributed to every fifth student who was entering the lecture hall; a ball pen was given to the selected student as a token of appreciation. All the questionnaires were collected from the students when they coming out from the lecture hall. This approach was continued in various faculties until the required number of respondent for each ethnic group was achieved.

Measurement and Scale

Demographic Information of Respondents

Respondents were required to fill in their demographic information such as age, gender, race, and level of study.

Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (IWTC)

Kassing's (1997) Intercultural Willingness to Communicate (IWTC) scale was adopted and modified for this study to measure respondents' level of IWTC. Based on the 6 measurement items, the maximum scores of the scale is 600. The score of 300 and below is considered as low IWTC, and the score of 301 and above is considered as high IWTC. However, in the current study, the scale was modified to five-point Likert; *Always (5), Most of the time (4), Sometimes (3), Rarely (2), or Never (1)*. This changes was done in order not to confuse respondents, also to be consistent with the scale of ethnocentrism. Therefore, the maximum score for the present scale is 30. The score of 15 and below is considered as low IWTC, and the score of 16 and above is considered as high IWTC.

Ethnocentrism

Neuliep & McCroskey's (1997) generalised ethnocentrism (GENE) scale was used to measure respondents' level of ethnocentrism. The questionnaire consists of 22 items, 15 of which are measurement items and 7 of which are fillers, with five-point Likert; *Strongly Agree (5), Agree (4), Neutral (3), Disagree (2) or Strong Disagree (1)*. Based on the 15 measurement items, scores can range from 15 to 75. The score of 56 and above is considered a high level of ethnocentrism, and score of 55 and below is considered a low level of ethnocentrism (Neuliep 2009; Neuliep & McCroskey 1997).

Results and Analysis

Data of GENE scale and IWTC scale were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 22.

RQ1: What is the level of ethnocentrism among private university undergraduates in Malaysia?

Participants' scores on the GENE scale will determine their level of general ethnocentricity with a high score indicating a high level of ethnocentrism and a low score indicating a low level of ethnocentrism. Table 3 shows that among 150 respondents, 38 respondents (25.3%) scored above 55, which considered as highly ethnocentric, and 112 respondents (74.7%) scored less than 55 were found to be less ethnocentric.

Table 3: Level of Ethnocentrism

Level	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
High	38	25.3	25.3
Low	112	74.7	74.7
Total	150	100.0	100.0

RQ2: What is the level of intercultural willingness to communicate among private university undergraduates in Malaysia?

For the present study, IWTC score of 16 and above is considered a high level of willingness to communicate in intercultural settings, and vice-versa for IWTC score of 15 and below. Participants' scores on the IWTC scale will determine their level of willingness to communicate in intercultural settings. Table 4 shows that among 150 respondents, 107 respondents (71.3%) scored 16 and above, which considered as high IWTC, and 43 respondents (28.7%) scored 15 and below, considered as low IWTC.

Table 4: Level of IWTC

Level	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
High	107	71.3	71.3
Low	43	28.7	28.7
Total	150	100.0	100.0

RQ3: What is the relationship between ethnocentrism and intercultural willingness to communicate among private university undergraduates in Malaysia?

Table 5: Pearson Correlation

		GENE	IWTC
GENE	Pearson Correlation	1	-.376**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	150	150
IWTC	Pearson Correlation	-.376**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	150	150

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The Pearson correlation analysis in Table 5 shows that there is a moderate but significant negative correlation between the GENE and IWTC ($r = -.376$, $p < .01$), which means higher the ethnocentrism, lower the IWTC, and vice versa.

Discussion

This study was carried out to investigate the relationship between ethnocentrism and IWTC. The findings discovered few important insights on ethnocentrism and level of IWTC private university undergraduates in Malaysia. In terms of ethnocentrism, present study revealed that among 150 students, 38 students (25.3%) were highly ethnocentric, and 112 students (74.7%) were found to be less ethnocentric. Crosstab analysis clarified that out of 38 students which reported highly ethnocentric, 29 of them were origin from mono-ethnic neighbourhood background in their hometown. A significant difference was evident between students from mixed-ethnic neighbourhood (42.33, SD = 11.10) and mono-ethnic neighbourhood (42.33, SD = 11.05), ($t = -6.643$, $df = 148$, $p < 0.001$). This shows that students' hometown background influences their level of ethnocentrism.

Meanwhile for IWTC, present study revealed that 107 students (71.3%) were found high less to communicate, and 43 students (28.7%) were found to be less willingness to communicate in intercultural settings. the present analysis found that 66 students were having frequent communication with students from different ethnicities (44%), 27 students were communicating 3-5 days in a week (18%), 22 students communicating 1-2 days in a week (14.7%). Although no students reported never experienced interethnic communication, but 35 students (23.3%) reported that they rarely involve interethnic communication. This shows that there are some students that still not interested in interethnic communication as reported by Marsani et al., (2016) and Ketab et al., (2015). The finding could also explain the reason for 28.7% of low IWTC among the students.

The present study also revealed that there is a negative relationship between ethnocentrism and IWTC as reported in past studies (Yousaf, 2017; Campbell, 2016; Fatemi, Khajavy, & Charles, 2016; Logan, 2014; Tegelaar, 2014; Neuliep, 2012). Although the correlation is just moderate, but it is significant. On top of that, the present findings improved the generalizability of Allport's (1954) Contact Theory's predictions for interethnic communication. Allport (1954) proposes that interethnic communication should lead to improved interethnic attitudes when the contact occurs in a favourable environment and vice-versa.

Finally, the present study suggests that private universities should take initiative to reduce ethnocentrism and promote intercultural willingness to communicate among multi-ethnic students in their campus.

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