Ethnic Socialisation of Chinese Youth: Cultural Heritage and Silenced Aspects

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Introduction

Members of an ethnic group are defined as a group of people who share a common culture, religion, language, or nationality (Cooper, Garcia Coll, Bartko, Davis, & Chatman, 2005). In some countries, ethnic identity is authority-defined. Jehom (1999, p. 83) argues that authority-defined ethnic identity may not correspond with "the everyday-defined identity members of the group have of themselves", and advocates the importance of studying "subjective aspects of identity formations among ethnic groups since it is through their interactions identities are constructed, reconstructed and reinforced". Based on studies on how children of various ethnic groups negotiate culturally diverse contexts in the development of their ethnicity, Hughes et al. (2006) have identified the parents' role to be among the most important of these socialisation processes.

Hughes et al. (2006) also pointed out that there is limited empirical knowledge about normative developmental and family processes that may be unique to various ethnic groups although they live in the same country or sociopolitical entity. This includes knowing how parents socialise their children to handle societal discrimination and bias and to develop pride in their ethnic identity, particularly relevant in the case of ethnic minority groups. Other content of parents' socialisation include issues such as "cultural heritage and group social status, including discussions about the prevalence of stereotypes and discrimination based on phenotypic characteristics, language competencies, and other group characteristics" (Hughes et al., 2006, p. 748). The flux in local and international situations is giving rise to different processes by which people are socialised into their ethnic identity. Because of the fluidity of collective action, researchers on ethnic socialisation can no longer focus on cognition and identity anchored in the past to understand societal engagement or disengagement, particularly youth disenfranchisement. It is their engagement with the present concerns that must be studied, and not only the dominant but dissenting views, in order to arrive at an understanding of youth perspective on identity and national unity.

This study examines the ethnic socialisation of Chinese youths from ethnically homogeneous and heterogeneous family, peer and school environments. The specific aspects examined are

ethnic socialisation practices, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, and subtle daily socialisation by family.

Method

A case study was conducted using interviews and questionnaires to explore how Chinese youths are socialised by their parents into certain ways of relating to Chinese and other ethnic groups. The commonly explored aspect is transmission of cultural heritage. As a preliminary foray into investigating the less explored aspects of ethnic socialisation, that is, the strategies used by parents to protect their children from discrimination, three Chinese youth in their thirties were selected based on the ethnic diversity in their social network.

To examine ethnic socialisation practices, preparation for bias and promotion of mistrust, Hughes and Johnson's (2001) questionnaire was used to elicit relevant information on positive strategies to inculcate pride in ethnic heritage and negative strategies to promote mistrust in other ethnic groups, and to prepare for bias. The 15-item questionnaire used by made use of an 8-point scale to investigate frequency of parents' actions in the past year. The questionnaire responses were used to profile the ethnic socialisation of the participants, and this was later used as background information to contextualise the interview results. In addition to the section of ethnic socialisation, the questionnaire also elicited the participants' socio-demographic information, which includes whether there were intermarriages in the family, ethnic composition of friends, ethnic composition of schoolmates, and their socio-economic status.

To examine subtle ethnic socialisation by parents, a semi-structured interview was conducted using three key questions from Kim, Reichwald and Lee (2012) who studied the cultural socialisation of adopted Korean adolescents in Minnesota, Canada by getting the parents and children to discuss given issues in real-time interactions. A slight adaptation was made for the present study by presenting these questions to the participants by changing the pronoun to "you and your family" to obtain the perspective of the children on ethnic socialisation by their parents:

    (1) How does ethnic and racial background affect you and your family?

    (2) Provide an example of when your ethnicity or race has been an issue for you.

    (3) How well do you and your family talk about ethnicity or race?

The participants' responses in questionnaire and interview were analysed to write vignettes to show the profiles of their ethnic socialisation by their parents.

Results and Discussion

This section presents vignettes of the three participants, which include both the questionnaire and interview results. Participant 1 is from a homogeneous Chinese environment as there are no intermarriages in his family, and less than 10% of his peers and school contacts are from other ethnic groups. It was only at university that 70% of his course mates were from other ethnic groups. His parents, who were farmers and now vegetable sellers, have talked to him about discrimination of his own ethnic group and that of others this year. Because of that they have told him that he had to be better to get the same rewards. His parents have also said things to keep him from trusting other ethnic groups, but all these incidences occurred less than two times this year. In the interview, Participant 1 said that his ethnic background has affected him the most in terms of socio-economic opportunities to secure university places, government jobs and work projects. In their family, when they talked about social injustice, they touched on ethnic issues. An example is policies that are based on ethnicity.

Participant 2 is came from a Chinese-dominant school environment: all his course mates in university were Chinese; most of his schoolmates were Chinese; 70% of his friends are Chinese. His father repaired watches for a living and his mother is a homemaker. His parents have talked to him about important people or events in the history of his own ethnic group and stressed that his ethnicity is an important part of his identity. When they see something on television that show discrimination against the Chinese, they usually highlight the matter to him and this has occurred several times this year. They have also talked to others about discrimination in his presence. They told him about unfair treatment due to ethnicity and that he has to be better than others to get the same rewards because of his race. Although he has not personally encountered it, his Chinese friends have not succeeded in getting jobs in the government sector. Occasionally his parents have said things to promote mistrust in people from other ethnic groups. In the interview, Participant 2 said that his ethnic background has affected him in that he views the world from his cultural view. For example, he expects his sister to behave in a Chinese way and being respectful is of paramount importance to him. He is proud as a Chinese and takes pride in the Chinese culture and history. In his family, it is usually his mother who raises ethnicity issues, triggered by the newspaper. When his friends draw ethnic connections where they are none, he is the one to "extinguish the fire".

Participant 2 said that this could be because he mixes well with other ethnic groups and therefore understands them.

Participant 3 is from an ethnically diverse environment. He said that it is 1Malaysia in his family because his stepfather and stepbrother are Iban and his sister married a Muslim Malay man. His social and school networks comprise more contacts from other ethnic groups than Chinese: 60% of his friends are from other ethnic groups and 50% of his university course mates were from other ethnic groups as well. His father was a police officer and his mother worked as a clerk in the police station. His stepfather was also a police officer. Participant 3 is not in close contact with his parents because of geographical distance. Therefore, he cannot recall any incidents of ethnic socialisation by his parents this year. His family seldom talked about ethnicity even when he was younger. When his sister wanted to marry a Malay man, his mother was initially skeptical but life went on. Now the two sides of his family get together during festivals. His sister's family is Muslim and his mother and stepfather are Christians but food has not been an issue. Participant 3 talked about the respect he has for them, and the respect they have for him. He said that ethnicity has not been an issue for him but he has heard of others who could not secure university places because there is a quota in the distribution of university places based on ethnic grouping.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The preliminary study indicate that the ethnic diversity of home, peer and school environments affects experiences of ethnic socialisation. The participants were reluctant to talk about incidents when ethnicity has been an issue for them and preferred to give examples affecting others. It is socially desirable to talk about cultural heritage and pride as these are accepted in the context of cultural diversity and multiculturalism. However, even though the hidden aspects of ethnic socialisation, which include promotion of mistrust and preparation for bias, are difficult to study, it is an important angle to pursue in order to understand how fissures in ethnic relations develop. The familial ethnic socialisation may be a starting point, but in research involving working adults, the influence of peers and the media need to be investigated.

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