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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### Ethnocultural Empathy in A Pluralistic Society: Inter-ethnic Relationships of Javanese and Chinese Children in Surakarta

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#### Abstract:

#### Objective:

The present qualitative research described the ethnocultural empathy existing between Javanese and Chinese children in a pluralistic population.

#### Materials and Methods:

Data was collected using focus group discussions and oral interviews. Sixteen students (boys and girls) of multi-ethnic schools in Surakarta of Indonesia participated in the present study.

#### Results:

Results indicated that (1) participants acknowledged that they had to feel what other people felt, and it is the beginning of ethnocultural empathy; (2) participants who had interaction-experiences with those from different backgrounds seemed to have high levels of ethnocultural empathy; and (3) at school, both ethnic groups were taught to respect each other's culture.

#### Conclusion:

The present study indicated that empathy had a strategic role in building social strength. Using empathy, each group understood and felt conditions of other groups.

**Keywords:** Ethnocultural empathy, Javanese, Chinese, Surakarta, Multi-ethnic, Pluralistic population.

#### Article History

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is an archipelago country which has cultural diversity. This diversity appears in languages, ethnic groups and religions. On the one hand, this may be considered as the strength of the country and needs to be preserved. On the other hand, it can also lead to conflicts and disintegration. Frequently, diversity has triggered conflicts which actually had their causes in other factors such as an unfair economic system, social injustice, and politics.

Demographically and sociologically, Indonesian people are highly at risk of conflicts, precisely because of their division in groups based on the cultural identity. As some authors pointed out, such differences could induce deep psychological distrust or enmity [1], and inhibit cultural communication that in turn may lead to international misunderstanding and violence [2]. Some inter-group conflicts in Indonesia are some of the

examples. The conflict between the Javanese (native people) and the Chinese in Surakarta, Central Java is a violent conflict that has a long history and potential to pop up again.

In a pluralistic society, like the one in Surakarta, social problems indicate relationships of ethnic groups. The problem is not only about misunderstanding or misperception of ethnic groups, but also about violence conflicts. There are many conflicts and clashes between groups including the riot between natives (Javanese) and non-natives (Chinese). These violent conflicts have a long history since the foundation of Surakarta in 1745.

There were about ten big violent conflicts between Javanese and Chinese in Surakarta: Chaos in *Pecinan* (30 June 1745), Ngawi incident (23 September 1825), incidents prior to the establishment of Syarekat Islam (1911), Mangkunegaran soldiers vs. Chinese (December 1912), 615 cases of robbery and 4977 cases of animal theft on Chinese property (1905-1913), Chaos in Jatinom (1947-1948), incidents after "G 30 S/PKI" (October 1965), shops' destruction in Coyudan and Nonongan (6 November, 1966), opposition to Chinese (20

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November, 1980), and Grieving May (14 May, 1998) that was the biggest riot in Surakarta's social history [3]. The potential for conflict still continues including verbal conflicts between Javanese and Chinese children where they insult each other for their ethnicity and other social problems. If this continues, the ethnic conflict will probably re-arise in Surakarta.

Those incidents clearly indicate that ethnic groups and cultural diversity must be seriously taken into account as they may be the reason behind the conflict. The conflict should be managed and may become an important culture heritage as it created a social distance between the Javanese and Chinese. From the perspective of intergroup relations, the interaction between Javanese and Chinese in Surakarta has not really changed. As a minority group, the Chinese still like to live in their own world and create borders with the Javanese. Even though the Javanese and Chinese seem to live in one place, they actually live in different places [4]. Therefore, there is a social segregation between the Javanese, as local people, and the Chinese in Surakarta society. This segregation appears virtually in all sectors of life. For instance, the Chinese prefer sending their children to private schools which are dominated by Chinese [5]. Besides, many Chinese consider their own levels superior to the Javanese. Such views obviously affect their relationships with the Javanese.

For example, the Chinese mature women are encouraged to get married only with Chinese men, while Chinese men are allowed to marry women from other ethnic groups including Javanese. These conditions make it difficult for Chinese children to communicate with Javanese children. They rarely make friendship because they have little or no interaction or communication with each other. Consequently, the Javanese and Chinese children often mis-communicate; and physical contact often occurs for small problems.

However, some schools realized the importance of peace values to build positive communication between Javanese and Chinese after "Gray May 1998". The most significant influence was shown by students of pluralistic schools where Chinese and Javanese students interacted on a regular basis with each other in a community. The Surakarta Society United (PMS) also plays a significant role in building togetherness between two ethnic groups including organization of collaborative activities (*i.e.*, Javanese and Chinese) to reduce the perceived difference. Most of these activities are related to art and sport such as singing *keroncong* and *campursari* songs, *gamelan* music, *wayang orang*, badminton, chess, *wushu*, *barongsai*, and *yang khim* (*siter Tiongkok*). Interaction in daily activities promote relationships by which emotional and cognitive understanding; in other words, empathy can grow. According to the contact hypothesis, an intergroup contact can be effective in reducing negative stereotypes and mutual prejudice at least when certain conditions are met [6]. Empathy of ethnic groups can decrease prejudice when directed to share identity with different ethnic groups [7]. Stephan & Finlay found that empathy had a number of worthwhile effects on the individual behavior; however low empathy implicated to a number of negative effects primarily on relationships of ethnic groups.

## 2. ETHNOCULTURAL EMPATHY REVIEW

The concept of ethnocultural empathy is relatively new in

the social psychology. Different researchers studied this term in different ways. Wang *et al.* [8] asserted that the terminology to define this construct was not solidified. Terms such as cross-cultural empathy [9], empathetic multicultural awareness [10], cultural role-taking [11], ethnic perspective-taking [12], ethnotherapeutic empathy [13], cultural empathy [14] have been interchangeably used to indicate the empathy in cross cultural settings.

The latest theory of empathy in cultural settings was developed by Wang *et al.* [8] and was called "Ethnocultural Empathy." The Ethnocultural Empathy (EE) is developed on the theory of general and culturally specific empathy. Ethnocultural empathy is defined as a learned ability and a personal trait which is related to certain personality traits on which people of any race, ethnicity, or culture vary [8]. The term, *Ethnocultural*, stems from two words, ethnicity and culture. According to Bercovitch and DeRouen [15], ethnicity refers to a characteristic by which groups are distinguished and which may ultimately lead to conflict. As described in a research by Christensen [16], culture includes shared similarity about values in society, social norms, individual roles in the social context, and individual ways of dealing with social and political realities that flourish in society. Wang *et al.* [8] combined both words in a term, *ethnocultural*.

In general, the EE structure consists of three components: intellectual empathy, emphatic emotions, and the communication of two [14]. Wang *et al.* [8] specifies the three components as follows. Intellectual empathy referring to a person's competence to comprehend thoughts and feelings of a racially or ethnically different person. It is also the ability to perceive the world as the other person does. In other words, the intellectual empathy is *racial* or *ethnic perspective-taking*. Empathic emotion is the ability to give attention to feelings of another person or people from another ethnocultural group to such an extent that one is able to feel the other's emotional condition from the point of view of that person's racial or ethnic culture. In addition, it refers to a person's emotional response to the emotional display of a person or people from another ethnocultural group. Finally, communicative empathy component is the expression of ethnocultural empathic thoughts (intellectual empathy) and feelings (emphatic emotions) towards the members of ethnic groups which are different from one's own feelings. This component can be expressed through words or actions.

## 3. METHODS

Participants of the present research included both Javanese and Chinese children in Surakarta. As the name implies, they stemmed from two ethnic groups background which in many ways opposed each other. Two research assistants joined the researcher and selected four students from each group (Opposition Group = OG, Interaction Group = IG, the Chinese Majority Group = CMG, and the Javanese Majority Group = JMG) to create the discussion-groups.

Participants included sixteen Javanese and Chinese students aged 13-14, who were recruited using purposive sampling with three characteristics namely: 1) Javanese and

**Table 1. Participants**

Group	Ethnic Groups	Religion	Age	Gender
Opposition Group	Javanese	Islam	14	Male
	Javanese	Islam	15	Female
	Chinese	Christianity	15	Male
	Chinese	Christianity	14	Male
Interaction Group	Javanese	Islam	14	Male
	Chinese	Christianity	14	Female
	Javanese	Christianity	14	Female
	Chinese	Christianity	15	Male
Chinese Majority Group	Javanese	Islam	15	Male
	Chinese	Christianity	15	Female
	Chinese	Christianity	15	Male
	Chinese	Islam	14	Male
Javanese Majority Group	Javanese	Islam	14	Male
	Javanese	Islam	14	Female
	Javanese	Christianity	14	Male
	Chinese	Christianity	14	Male

Chinese; 2) Active students in school organizations, and 3) They did not have any obstacles in communication. The participants were grouped in accordance with the ethnic groups' composition namely two Javanese and two Chinese participants in OG (Javanese + Javanese vs. Chinese + Chinese); two Javanese and two Chinese participants in IG ( Javanese + Chinese vs. Javanese + Chinese); three Chinese and one Javanese participants in CMG (Chinese + Chinese vs. Chinese + Javanese); and three Javanese and one Chinese participants in JMG (Javanese + Javanese vs Javanese + Chinese). Informants were asked to discuss in Focus Group Discussions (FGD) setting, and it continued with interviews towards special cases which were submitted by the informant in the FGD process. In the interviews, participants were asked to explain their experience of interaction with other ethnic groups. Table 1 presents informant characteristics:

Stewart & Shamdasani [17] suggested conducting FGD studies on questions about general-to-specific issues, and also provided questions about relative to important issues. In this study, researchers asked questions about inter-ethnic group relationships and ethnocultural empathy. The discussion was focused on three ethnocultural empathy components namely intellectual empathy, empathic emotions, and communicative empathy. Special findings of the FGD were followed up by interviews. The interview questions focused on the informants' daily activities like what do you think about Javanese and Chinese relationships in Surakarta? How do you feel when you heard the suffering of other ethnic groups? Please tell us more about that? You said that you disagree if people are differentiated according to their ethnic groups, what do you mean by disagreeing? The semi-structured interview guide was used to find out more information about ethnocultural empathy of the Javanese and the Chinese.

Based on the explanation above, data was collected using two techniques: Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and in-depth follow-up interviews to explore special issues arising from the initial focus group discussions. There were some reasons for

using FGDs to collect data. First, FGDs provided opportunities for participants to explore their viewpoints and attitudes of individuals in groups directly through observation and discussion methods developed within the group [18]. Second, the FGD emphasized the interaction between observer and subject and interaction among participants. Such an interaction model encourages participants to discuss, ask and share their opinions with other participants, and to re-evaluate their understanding of the case that was previously presented by the observer [19]. FGD can also provide more complete data when compared with other methods because the observer not only directly observes the participants' behavior, but can also describe the psychological dynamics among individuals in a group [20].

During the FGDs, researchers served as the moderator and facilitator. Sometimes, researchers invited participants to ask questions and let other participants respond to questions. Researchers were assisted by a co-researcher to fulfill all research needs. All discussions within the group were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed qualitatively [21].

**4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**4.1. Empathic Feeling and Expression**

A participant mentioned that sometimes some friends called other ethnic groups friends by names of their fathers (in Javanese culture, such a calling is a verbal abuse). They also heard that Javanese children called Chinese children with some negative terms, and vice versa Chinese children called Javanese with some negative terms. For instance, the Javanese used some terms to the Chinese like “Ciduk” (*Cino Ndladuk*) “impolite Chinese” or “Cipo” (*Cino Koplo*) “mad Chinese.” The Chinese, in turn, used some terms for the Javanese as well like Jaduk (*Jawa Ndladuk*, meaning impolite Javanese), and “lonthe” (prostitute). Sometimes, the Chinese made extreme jokes about the Javanese. For example, they might call Javanese children “Jekpot” (*rejeki ngepot*) meaning that the economic level of the Javanese parent was really low. The

participants in the discussion group realized that such terms were negative, and it would be better not to use them.

Participants were aware of the worse effect of the above interactions in the communication. They understood that jokes about other ethnic groups were very risky, and often induced misunderstanding, and often created enmity. They admitted that their jokes were sometimes too extreme and would result in insults and enmity. In fact, they understood that extreme jokes would evoke insult, and they did not enjoy those situations.

The participants tried to feel what other people felt. They did not agree with the discrimination of other ethnic groups because they knew that when they were in such a position, they would not enjoy their situation. They were sad and felt sorry for someone who was insulted or persecuted although the actor of insult or persecution was from his own ethnic groups.

Feeling the same emotion as what other people feel (emotion matching) is a common part of the empathy definition [22]. Such an emotion matching is a stepping-stone to empathic concern [23] and occurs in the form of emotional contagion [24]. In other words, empathic concern is the beginning of emotion matching.

During the focus group discussion, there were many empathic expressions about experiences of being discriminated, for instance, about achievement at schools. Chinese children were generally considered smarter than Javanese children. Most of the first-ranks were reached by the Chinese, rather than the Javanese. This condition was a factor which created social distance between the Chinese and Javanese. However, some participants did not consider it as a real problem. They were sure that the achievement was not correlated with the ethnic groups' background, but depended more on how much people worked or how they improved themselves.

It indicated that the participant seemed to understand that the competition achievement phenomenon at school was unfair. They were aware that it depended on the students' efforts, and not on the ethnic groups' background. A participant felt even happy when he had a clever friend. This shows the happiness for other people's success, despite being from different ethnic backgrounds. The achievement phenomenon (Chinese rank higher than Javanese), which developed in the society, should be understood by the Javanese and the Chinese as an individual achievement phenomenon that was not related to the ethnic groups' background.

#### 4.2. Empathic Perspective-Taking

Davis [25], and Galinsky and Ku [26] suggested that imagining oneself in another person's situation increased the salience of self-attributes leading one to see the other as more self-like. To the extent that one's self-image is more positive than one's image of the other group, and to the extent that one's view of the other generalizes to the group as a whole, such an effect should produce a more positive view of the other group. The positive views can be produced in many ways, one of which is by listening to positive stories or positive information from close people.

The personal case, which was referred to some Chinese

participants, showed that positive information from parents about the other ethnic groups influenced their viewpoints about the Javanese as mentioned by a participant "My parents told me that the Javanese people helped us when "Gray May 1998" occurred, they kept us from the turbulence". Batson and Ahmad [22] mentioned that such positive information could reduce stereotyping and lead to more positive evaluation of (1) the outgroup member in whose situation one imagines oneself, and (2) the outgroup as a whole. Likewise, negative descriptions about the other ethnic groups would negatively affect the public perceptions.

These cases indicate that parents play significant roles in the transfer of knowledge and understanding to their children. Parents should be aware of their stories or advices about other ethnic groups as they affect their children viewpoints toward others. Therefore, negative stories about others have to be restrained, while positive stories should be developed. A Javanese's proverb says "mikul dhuwur mendem jero," meaning that "we have to cover other people's negative characteristics, and we have to expose other people's positive characteristics." Descriptions from parents about the characteristics of other ethnic group members are the first lessons which children get about how to interact with people from different backgrounds. These descriptions, implanted from the earliest days, will grow powerfully over time, and will affect the children's daily activities especially when they interact with others.

Some scholars presented evidence indicating that adopting an imagine-other perspective can increase the likelihood of making understanding rather than dispositional attributions for what the other person does [27]. In this study, the Javanese participants were aware that Chinese people got material and immaterial loss in some conflicts or incidents in Surakarta. Therefore, they could understand why Chinese people did not enjoy making friends with the Javanese. As stated by Javanese respondents, "I know, the Chinese people have incurred loss by Javanese people in some cases. When they do not enjoy making friends with Javanese, it is quite normal"; "I still make friend with them. I want to show them that all Javanese people are not like that". Therefore, they would maintain relationships with Chinese people. For instance, they explained to their Chinese friends that their views of Javanese people were not completely right because all Javanese were not like it.

Galinsky and Ku [26] contended that perspective taking could be an effective social tool that not only reduced prejudice, but also increased the social awareness and strengthened interpersonal relationships. The perspective-taking reduced prejudice against others, affected the individual's self-description and produced consistent and adaptive behavior, thereby strengthening social ties between group members, and could also promote productive cooperation in the real sector.

Positive experiences teach participants how to understand other people from different ethnic group backgrounds. The ability to understand other people will promote social bonds, as stated by the participant, "We have to appreciate and understand each other, because it will be conducive for relationships". Wieselquist *et al.* [28] suggested that it was a continuous model in which 1) dependence promoted responsi-

bility, 2) the responsibility enhanced strong interpersonal relationships, 3) strong interpersonal relationships affected partner perception, 4) partner perception increased confidence and trust between couples, and 5) trust and confidence increased interdependence among couples so that both are synergistic under any circumstances. In other words, when people intensively interact with other people, they will have a close relationship. The close relationship refers to quantity and quality. The quantity means how many times they interact; and the quality means how close they become friends.

Children, who have good interaction with other children from different backgrounds, will have positive trust in them. Subsequently, they will transfer their positive emotions to other people in their surroundings. There are traces of this issue in the following comment: "My Javanese's friend often shares his problems with me; he is very kind. I think all people are equal, it depends on each individual". In this case, we saw that participants, who have interactive experiences with different ethnic groups, have high levels of empathy. There is a lot of evidence that the individual empathy towards other individuals in need increases the preparedness to help not only the individuals, but also other people from the same group. This finding supports a research by Pettigrew and Tropp [29] who concluded that individuals, who made friends with people from other ethnic groups, had lower levels of prejudice than those who did not make such friends. Maner and Gailliot [30] also found that close relationships with people of another ethnic group indicated a high level of empathy. Schlenker and Britt [31] emphasized that people, who had high empathy, were more likely to respond to social pressures from friends.

Subsequently, empathy feelings towards members of a group, which is stigmatized, can increase a person's readiness to help others of the same group. This was visible in the participant's statement that "*After that, I am close with other Chinese friends, even sometimes I help them with their homework*".

Findings in this case are consistent with Batson and Ahmad [22] who found the more positive individual attitudes towards the group, which was stigmatized, could provide many benefits to individuals including a harmonious relationship, build cooperation among group members, lead to understanding, and reduce the potential for conflict. Empathy feeling towards a member of a stigmatized group could improve positive attitudes and behaviour of an empathizer towards a member of stigmatized group. This also proved Batson's [32] empathy-altruism hypothesis that empathy feelings for a member in need increased readiness to help not only that certain person, but also the group as a whole.

#### 4.3. Acceptance of Culture Differences

Being as a dominant group, Javanese's culture or customs have an influence on other groups. For instance, all the other ethnic groups, including the Chinese, use the Javanese language in daily activities. Even the Chinese people state that most of them cannot speak the Chinese; they speak Javanese and Bahasa Indonesia (Indonesian language). Doane [33] convinced that dominant ethnic groups played important roles in society particularly when majority groups maintained their

position at the top of hierarchy. In the era of democracy, the majority contested by political groups to achieve the rigidity.

In addition to languages, we also have to pay attention to customs. For more than a hundred years, the Javanese people (especially in Surakarta) have stuck to their own customs and used them in daily activities. This is very different from the Chinese who say that they do not even understand their own customs. They acknowledged the better understanding of the Javanese's customs than their own. Perhaps, this was a result of previous dominance of the Javanese culture and the social-political history. For instance, in 1967, Soeharto (the second president of Indonesia, 1966-1998) made a regulation (*Instruksi Presiden nomor 14, tahun 1967*) which prohibited Chinese people to conduct activities related to Chinese religion and customs (Confucianism was not admitted as one of religions in Indonesia), which forced them to use Indonesian names, instead of Chinese ones, and to change all terms which were related to Chinese (in the beginning Chinese people were called *Tionghoa*, but afterward this was changed into *Cina*), and to speak of Republik Rakyat Cina (RRC) rather than Republik Rakyat Tiongkok (RRT). The rule was made because of the incident (G.30/S/PKI) where the Chinese people were considered as the main actors.

Despite the fact that the Chinese could not fully understand and practice their own customs, Chinese students were given opportunities to explore their own culture at some schools of Surakarta. Chinese participants informed that "In the Kartini day, we were asked to wear the traditional clothes"; "My teacher said that it was done to introduce Javanese and Chinese cultures". The purpose of this activity was to introduce the cultural diversity, so that the Javanese students knew the variety of Chinese culture, and *vice versa*, the Chinese students knew more about the Javanese culture.

Moreover, some people were convinced that the ethnic groups' conflicts in Surakarta were triggered by differences in religion. Most of the Javanese people were Muslim, and most of the Chinese people were Christian. This view, however, seemed careless because it was based on mere assumptions without any sufficient evidence. This was also in contrast to the findings of the present research. Despite the fact that the Javanese and Chinese people are different in religions, they are still good friends. Obviously, the participants understood the religion difference, but they did not consider it as a reason for conflict.

#### 4.4. Empathic Awareness

Empathic awareness focuses on the awareness or knowledge that someone has in experience with other people from a different race or ethnic group. In the focus group, this theme was addressed by a single question, which actually combined four items from the Ethnocultural Empathy scale. The question was "Do you understand why people often portray other people based on racial or ethnic stereotypes?"

Participants gave positive responses to the question; for instance: "Perhaps they had negative experiences with other ethnic groups in the past, while I have a positive impression of other ethnic groups"; "Classifying ethnic groups based on types of individuals is not good because it can evoke an enmity. The

individual characters are different. It depends on the individuals"; it depends on the individual; all Javanese are not polite, and all Chinese are not stingy". Based on participant responses, positive impressions based on participant subjective experiences lead to the awareness of other people. Even not only the other person per se, but also lead to the awareness of the group as a whole. When a Javanese has a positive impression on a Chinese, it will lead to a positive understanding of the Chinese. As stated by Batson *et al.* [34], the positive attitude for a member of a group can improve positive attitudes towards the group as a whole.

These findings also confirmed Bockler *et al.* [35] who found that to understand people from other groups, individuals have to first understand themselves by recognizing parts of their personality and patterns of attitudes and behavior, and it would then help to improve individual relationships with others. Based on Bockler *et al.*'s [35] findings participants, who were capable of identifying various parts of their personalities, had the highest ability to establish empathy. Therefore, empathic awareness is based on the self-awareness. If people want to understand others, they first have to learn how to understand themselves. Understanding yourself will help people understand and accept their conditions. Understanding and accepting one's condition is very important for a healthy life and is the basis of an empathic awareness.

## CONCLUSION

The present study indicated that empathy had a strategic role in building social strength. Using empathy, each group understood and felt conditions of other groups. There were at least four interesting findings: first, participants in this research are having empathy feelings towards what other people were feeling, which is recognized as the beginning of ethnocultural empathy; second, participants who had interaction-experiences with those from different cultural and religious backgrounds seem to have a high level of ethnocultural empathy; third, participants at school, both ethnic Chinese and Javanese groups were taught to respect each other's culture, and teachers providing inter-ethnic groups joint activities so that they get to know friends from other ethnic groups more closely; and fourth, participants who had positive knowledge and impressions toward other ethnic groups will have empathic awareness.

## ETHICS APPROVAL AND CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

Not applicable.

## HUMAN AND ANIMAL RIGHTS

No animal/human was used for studies as the basis of research.

## CONSENT FOR PUBLICATION

Informed consent was obtained from patients prior to data collection.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise.

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