FOCUS GROUPS AS A RESEARCH METHOD: YOUTH AND SOCIAL CAPITAL FOR UNITY

Dr. Wendy Yee Mei Tien1 and Dr. Lau, Patricia Yin Yin2
1Section for Co-Curricula, External Faculty Electives and TITAS, (SKET), University of Malaya
wennyce2000@um.edu.my
2School of Business, Monash University Sunway Campus.
patricia.lau@monash.edu

Abstract: Social capital is commonly defined as the value of social networks, bonding similar people and bridging between diverse people, with norms of reciprocity (Dekker and Uslaner 2001; Uslaner 2001). It focuses mainly on social relations that have productive benefits although there are numerous other definitions of social capital found in the literature. As such, the focus of this study is to identify the social capitals for unity in a multi ethnic society. This is because the questions of what are the necessary social capitals needed to unite a society that is divided along ethnic and religious lines have not been adequately addressed. It is also the aim of this study to focus particularly on the youth’s perspective in identifying the social capitals for unity. The variety of definitions for social capital identified in the literature stem from the highly context specific nature of social capital and the complexity of its conceptualization and operationalization. Hence, this study discusses how focus group methodology to identify the social capitals for unity among the youth based on the multi ethnic Malaysian context. Involving youth from the multi ethnic groups through focus groups is an important process in conceptualizing and operationalizing social capitals in the local context. This process is also critical in developing a culturally appropriate instrument that accurately reflects the social capitals for unity in the multi ethnic Malaysian society. This paper will therefore discuss the strategies of conducting meaningful and successful focus groups and the analysis of transcripts for thematic variable identification.

Keywords: focus group, social capital, unity, youth

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has 27.6 million people that comprises of Malays (49%), Chinese (23%), Indian (7%), other ethnicities (11%), and other non-citizens (10%) (UN, 2011). The multiculturalism is united through common identities among different ethnicities through a national language, namely, Bahasa Malaysia. The New Economic Policy (NEP) was created in 1971 to eradicate the economic inequality among the different ethnic groups where Chinese people were found mostly in business sector, Indians were found in rubber plantations and Malays were found in the rural areas (Chitose, 2003). Different programs and actions have been taken such as developing and implementing different training and education, forming alliance and partnership between Chinese and Malays in order to get new or renew business licenses, providing agricultural subsidies and financial support for rural farmers, labour quotas in employing employees in MNCs and many others (Lee, 2006; Ritchie, 2005). However, such policy was found to protect dominant groups while favours some local entrepreneurs to prosper further in the businesses (Ritchie, 2005). Additionally, after fifteen years of implementation of NEP, the poverty and dissatisfaction among Malays remain because of unchanged quality of lives in the rural areas (Lee, 2000) and unequal income distribution between three ethnic groups (Saari, Dietzenbacher & Los, 2010). This enlarges the economic divide between rich and poor people regardless of the ethnicities. Therefore, the extent to which the 1Malaysia concept (refers to national unity) is achievable needs to be revisited and revised. As such, there is a need to study and identify the social capitals for national unity focusing particularly on the youth’s perspective. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the theories of social capitals as the aim of this paper is to discuss why and how focus group discussions are used as a research methodology in order to identify the social capitals for national unity in Malaysia.

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