

The Elements of Social Development: The Social Experiences of Malaysian College Students at an Institution of Higher Learning

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Abstract

This article examines the process of social development experienced by college students that brings new knowledge and a model for social development in sociology of higher education. Findings from 15 in-depth field interviews reveal that there are four main elements in the social development experienced by this group of students. The process begins with the self-awareness by students of their social condition both in past and present situations. The second element is their adaptability, where students come to understand how to interact within their circumstances and are able to find new ways to adapt to their environment. This is followed by the third element, responsibility, where students become responsible to the degree that they possess leadership abilities; thoughtfulness, independence, supportiveness and determination. The last element is potentiality, which is important in helping students progress to a higher stage of life by actualizing their full potential.

Keywords: Higher education, Social development, Social experience

1. Introduction

In Malaysia, college and universities like other organization create products or services to meet a particular set of needs. Higher education can be understood as a “service industry”. The core of the service is generating, integrating and communicating knowledge for a variety of audiences: academic, professional, student, public etc... The health of higher education institution depends on its providing value in by services and being recognized as doing so. Ruben (1995), Gopal & Abdul Malek (1998) and Kogan & Hanney (2000) have pointed out that judgments by constituents about its quality and service: or lack thereof, will be translated directly into an institutions reputation, which forms the basis for individual decisions as to whether to attend or not; support or not, recommend or not, hire its graduates or not. The issues are how well a students’ social ability is developed during his or her college studies and how well a students’ social ability is continuously developed within the context of the college. The social environmental network in college comprises the teachers, peers, parents and other adults. Social environment plays a significant role in the behavioral aspects of student learning and experiences (Clark, 1996; Barling & Kelloway, 1999; Goh & Khine, 2002; Cheng, 2005 and Holborn & Haralambos, 2008). Teachers are as a key factor in the human environment of the college setting, and he or she helps the students to develop those attitudes and skills that are essential to their success in the future. Students learn from peers through interaction, which includes social support. A strong social climate gives strength to students and encourages them to continue engagement with the task, analyze strategies and manage the failure and its frustrations. In this way human contact and interaction become fruitful stimuli to a student’s development (Stockard & Mayberry, 1992; Calhoun, Light & Keller, 1997; Robinson, 1997; Goh & Khine, 2002 and Gonyea, 2006). Education as one of the major items of public expenditure in Malaysia and the government steadily continues to allocate 19 to 20 per cent of the national budget to the education sector of which almost 5 per cent goes to financing public institutions of higher education (The Ninth Malaysia Plan and Morris, 2007). This

suggests that education, especially in higher institutions, is contributing significantly to the progress of the nation and its people.

2. The Sociology of Education

Sociology is a way of determining why people behave the way they do; it is the science of the associated life of humanity (Wilkins, 1973; Haralambos & Heald, 1985; Etzioni, 1991; Mulkey, 1993; O'Donnell, 1994; Gellens & Levine, 1995 and MyIntyre, 2008). The goals of sociology are; to understand human behavior in the context of society, to generalize human behavior and to predict human behavior. In social realm, there are six regular ways in which social phenomena influence human behavior: institutions, socialization, stratification, organization, social control and social change. In viewing the issues raise in the sociology of education as the affect the rate of social and educational change, it is important that as an educator one should never lose sight of the individual and his or her individual change. Institutions of higher education are the sites of social changes. They should not simply respond to the demands of society, but must explore their role in making change and leading the way. It is most important as a researcher or an educator that one assess the impact of social change on society. It is also important to recognize the ever-evolving nature of social change and the social context. Furthermore, to a certain extent as an educator one also has the responsibility of providing the students with the opportunity to make informed choices about their roles in society. According to Cargan & Ballantine, 1985; Layder, 1994; Tischler, 1996; Adams & Sydie, 2002 and Cheng, 2005 that functionalism takes the position that education has its functions at the individual, societal, political, economical and cultural levels. Today's college students are described as preferring learning experiences that are digital, connected, experiential, immediate and social. They prefer learning by doing rather than learning by listening. They become impatient in situations where they don't feel engaged. Abrahamson (1981), Jones (2002), Ashley & Orenstein (2005) and Craig *et al.* (2007) make the point that college experience is not only about learning in the classroom, it is also about encountering new social situations and gaining new social skills.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The initial sample contained 15 participants solicited from students ages 19-23. This study makes use of conveniently obtained participants, students from all faculties, who have enrolled for diploma courses with the duration of study two years and four months, and have an entry requirement of an S.P.M or equivalent qualification, with at least three credits, plus a pass in Bahasa Malaysia.

3.2 Procedure

This study's in-depth interview methodology has been closely patterned on the process, meaning and understanding of social experiences of college students. This method reveals the real experiences of the participants in college environment. The researcher is the means for data collection and analysis, with the results obtained directly through observation, interview and field memos. The data has been collected through interviews of approximately one to three hours in length. The interviews have been conducted in English and where the interviewee reverted to Chinese, the material was translated into English by the researcher herself. All interviews were electrically recorded by MP4 and also transcribed. Informal observations of the setting in which the interviews were conducted have been include to provide confirmatory information. Each interview sought to understand the meaning of participants' individual experiences by the telling of their first experience in college, sharing with the interviewer the development of their adjustment and the daily life changes encountered in their new academic environment. It is such data that are analyzed throughout the study. This study use the inductive framework of grounded theory and qualitative analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) with interview recordings, transcripts and notes that were analyzed and coded to identify the various experiences participants drew on to reconcile the social change process. Subsequent iterations of data analysis elaborated and refined the categories with the most salient findings included in this writing. In addition, participants were contacted to answer a post interview questionnaire that presented several closed-ended questions to validate the findings.

4. Validity Check

This researcher has interviewed 12 participants to arrive at the final themes, categories and sub-categories and to establish the theoretical data base. The study then incorporated an additional three participants in the cross analysis to confirm that the final list of themes and main categories were the same for all of the data collected. The reanalysis also confirmed the original pattern of results, and confirmed that the data had reached the saturation stage and there is no new findings immersing. It is thereby confirmed that the results are stable and unlikely to change even with the inclusion of three more participants. This can be taken as a validity check on

the data gathering process as shown by Lincoln & Guba (1985), Myer (2000), Gillham (2005) and Barbour (2008). Furthermore, a post interview survey has been carried out to validate the findings from the field interviews.

5. Findings

5.1 Elements of Social Change

Four themes emerged within the social development process: (a) Self Awareness, (b) Adaptability, (c) Responsibility and (d) Potentiality. Awareness of one's self significantly influences the actions of participants and how they respond and interpret their environment. Participants reported several instances of self awareness such as "...I am not so confident about studying in Singapore, as it is very advanced and it needs a higher level of English to study well." This meta-category contained four themes; (i) Social Awareness (ii) Experience of Success and Failure (iii) Scholastic Relationships and (iv) Autonomy. Participants also reported to bring with them the values and beliefs of their past experiences and felt obliged to fit them into their new environment. As one of the participants stated, "...It influences me; good values are from my family and religion." Awareness of the actual social context aids the participants in attaining a better means to cope with future encounters. The participants reported that the social environment plays a key role in providing a contextual setting for the relationships that will influence the course of their development. The participants also tend to be interactively associative with their environment. Social awareness has been proven to be closely linked to the other elements of society. For example one participant stated, "I think it's a cultural difference...I'm from a good school...It was very result orientated, competitive and stressful." As the participants become aware of themselves they are able to function better as one of the elements in the social environment. Similarly, another participant reported, "...That's why we need a set of values to guide us. It will be the guidelines for us to make judgments." Another participant argued that, "... I talk to teachers on social topics...we talk about my hobbies and interests such as photos and travel..." Other participants described their position explicitly; "...I have problems. Language is one of the most serious problems. Not sport, I can run as fast as can be." and another said, "Friends always encourage me." Another participant stated, "I love freedom...I believe in study one should be able to handle issues or unexpected things confidently." Interestingly, these sets of elements then contributed to the participants' adaptability in the following theme.

5.2 Adaptability

A second theme that emerged from the data was adaptability. With respect to adaptability, in this study participants reported to take a short period of time to adapt to their new environment. Participants also worked out with resolution to overcome the problems that they encountered. There are various types of strategies that participants applied and most often they practiced self-reflection, looked for peer help and at times registered complaints. The other way of adapting to a new environment is by taking part in social activities and becoming an active person. One participant stated, "Something special in this college is that students will help each other. They are very co-operative, particularly in organizing activities. There were many big events organized by students themselves. I think this is something great. I myself enjoy it very much." The participant also stated:

I think they should change to participate in activities. I took part in LEO club, sport activities, I adapt to it. Extra curriculum is good for students. Yes. I agree. Activities are better. You know from the college organization, that the quality of the college is very low in standard. But the activities which had been carried out were quite good. All of us can see it and judge it by ourselves. I enjoy it very much.

As pointed out by Lauer (1982) and Clarke (2003), significant changes in human behavior can be brought about only if those who need to change participate in deciding what the change should be and how it should be made. Analysis of participants' transcripts indicated that the active participation of students in small groups has been successfully employed to make specific changes. Either through face-to-face or non-face-to-face communication, research participants reported to some degree to have adjusted to the expectations of their society. Each participant also learned to interact with others and to perform his or her role. The extent of participant change depends on the choices that he or she makes. Analysis suggests that the process of socialization makes social life possible and involves all aspects of sociology. It contributes to the stability of social life and brings about changes in individuals as they interact with their society. Through the process of social interaction, participants learn from others such as family, friends and teachers. This study finds that the greater the diversity in people whom participants meet in college, the more adaptability they can be expected to have in the working world or more broadly in the world outside of college, and this also develops a student's social competences, as Astin (1985), Pascarella & Terenzini (1991), Bjarnason & Coldstream (2003) and McNay (2006) have found.

Adaptability is the stage where participants reported to understand the method to interact with their circumstances, where they become able to find ways to adapt and adjust in order to have a better and a more comfortable existence. For example, one participant justified, "I was scared that I cannot mix with them because I am older. But I have no problems...I can adapt to this environment." This is in line with findings by Sanderson (1991), Tepperman & Richardson (1991), Gellens & Levine (1995), Gorrod *et al.* (2002) and Grusec & Hastings (2007), who state that how successful the adjustment to change is, very much depends on how similar the new environment is to the past one and on the attitudes of the individual towards change. This study finds that participants who are able to adapt successfully have the traits of high self-esteem, optimism, strong personalities, and are thus well prepared to grow stronger. For example one participant stated, "Now I learn not only from books. I've learnt how to communicate with outsiders. I've changed my mind set. I'm here not only for study." Other participants explained their agreement more explicitly; such as, "We do projects, not individually, most of the time in groups, we spend time meaningfully. Sometimes, perhaps I have to do more than others, but I still enjoy and feel grateful to them. At times, we stay late in the night and so on..." Similarly, another participant reported, "I had no problem to adjust to the environment, the people and cultural is just like ours. No problems at all."

5.3 Responsibility

Another theme that emerged from the data was responsibility. This study finds that at this stage participants' responses reveal that they integrated their self-awareness, adaptability and responsibility with the need to coordinate their component parts in order to contribute to the maintenance of the group. At this stage participants are considered responsible to the extent that they are able to regulate the interrelationships of their component parts by blending their personality into the group. Problem solving and decision skills are inherent in the responsibilities required of the leadership role. It was found that participants utilize their problem solving skills to advance their learning. One participant stated, "Now, I have my own way of thinking, my own way of solving problems. Even when I am frustrated, I still can do things. I do not depend on people." Another participant explained:

Control my temper. Sometimes if there are many things; urgent, very important, important I will kind of panic. So I think maybe planning would be able to help. Plan and see things out. We are able to fill our time more efficiently.

As Cargan & Ballantine (1985), Cross *et al.* (2001) and Hoover (2002) have pointed out, the basic problem solving procedures established by John Dewey in 1910 are still useable by students when they define and analyze a problem, and development a set of criteria by which to judge potential solutions, list possible alternatives, evaluate all solutions and finally choose the best solution. One participant expressed it this way, "I've changed to be more patient. I can talk and communicate to my parents so as to my friends. Now, I will never fight or punch others." And so it is that responsibility (the desire to contribute) is the third focus of this research. This research finds that participants are able to be responsible to the degree to which they possess leadership abilities; thoughtfulness, independence, responsibly, supportiveness and determination. This also includes problem solving skills; communicativeness, critical thinking, timing, decisiveness, self-control, action orientation and realism. The data analyzed indicated that social development has a variety of sources. This research finds that responsibility provides participants with the opportunity to explore enhance and practice their knowledge and skills in a real-life environment. For example, one participant said, "I do not know how to communicate. I am still not so good. I can be better. Anyway I noticed that I have improved." Another participant stated, "I am more daring to voice my ideas now. I even can make my judgments in a shorter time." And another, "... it is thinking or I become more mature. I will think of many things and care for many things." As stated by Coffey (2001), Calhoun, Rojek & Turner (2005) and Newman (2006), change is the preeminent characteristic of modern human societies. It is caused by a variety of social forces; these include environment, cultural innovation and technological diffusion. This study also shows that social development is driven by human action and it changes with the changes in human societies. From the beginning of being aware of one's capacities and social characteristics, a participant can move on to the adaptability stage that contributes to the understanding of circumstances, to the ability to face changes and further explore the social environment.

In this research, it is found that participants who have the ability to influence others through encouragement and sensitive, considerate and supportive direction become leaders and inspire their followers to accept challenges and reach distant goals. Participants reported that to invest a high level of effort to a given task will create a strong need to achieve and excel in whatever he or she does. In the interviews, participants stated that they take the initiative in making decisions and have a willingness to accept responsibility. One participant stated, "I think time management is important. My time management is good. I do a lot of things in a day." Another participant

described it this way, "I should be able to help and do more things for my family. I am a grown up son." Recognizing that participants are more willing to share and serve others, one participant said, "If I have more money, I will do charity. I will care for others. I think humans like us should be more caring and warm at heart." Another participant stated:

I prefer to come to college, to get involve with club and sport activities. I had changed to be more devoted and caring. I love to organize activities for old citizens and do charity fund raising.

The participants also have shown the ability to solve problems, make good decisions and communicate in a way that others understand. This is in line with Zanden & Wilfried (1990), Tischler (1996), Brown (2009) and Northouse (2009), who define leadership as the ability to lead; a simple assertion but a very complex process. From the analysis, the emerged sub-themes of leadership include traits such as being trustworthy, foresighted, positive, intelligent, encouraging, informed, decisive and able to plan ahead. The socialization performed by education is an ongoing process, and by nature students integrate their knowledge of the social environment with the ability to explore further for the benefit of their further development (Mulkey, 1993; Hamilton & Thompson, 2002; Scott, 2006; and Cooley, 2009). Participants reported to know themselves better by becoming involved in group activities. The theme of responsibility is holistic and interactive in nature. Participants relate to each other in groups when they are involved in sports, clubs activities, volunteer work and other informal activities. They come to know themselves and others better as a result of this interaction. This concurs with the findings of Bjarnason & Coldstream (2003), Watson (2007), Brown (2009) and Northouse (2009).

It is interestingly to note that higher education, to be fully effective, must pay close attention to the development of decision making skills and a realistic basis for self-esteem. Education should help college students acquire durable self-esteem and close human relationships that enable them to learn about themselves through others (Muuss & Porton, 2002; Schneider & Silverman, 2006; Northouse, 2009). As Coffey (2001), Cooley (2009) and Northouse (2009) have affirmed, the process of change involves natural selection from the surrounding influences together with a degree of creativity in thought and action when reacting to and choosing from influences. From this study, it appears that social development, as a process, may be slow and its direction may be difficult to determine, but it is inevitable in the social environment. College students become more complex individuals as they assess, evaluate, adapt to, and integrate the knowledge and abilities that they have gained from applying these social skills to tasks in their group activities or studies. And so it is that these students move on to another stage of social change – potentiality.

5.4 Potentiality

Finally, the theme that emerged is potentiality, which refers to those elements that serve to vitalize and maintain the motivation of participants as they perform the roles established by their social expectations. The educational system must furnish, maintain, and renew both the motivation of the participants and the cultural patterns that create and sustain that motivation. Participants reported behaviors that are needed for a group to furnish maintain and renew the motivations of its members. This is embedded in the functionalist theory of stratification. It motivates participants to strive to move up in the system and occupy a higher position. One student expressed it this way:

Anyway I am happy to have my sister at home. I appreciate that. You know I have something hot to eat, nice to have dinner and lunch with her. But I insist to go out to work part time to earn some pocket money. I gave money to my mother too. I learn to be more caring and concerned then...

Participants shown characteristics of motivating oneself and renewed from time to time in order to keep them working and striving. Potentiality, at the macro-level, refers to the need to sustain the system and keep people involved in striving to move up in the system. The norms and values that support such a system and such striving must be put firmly into place and sustained. As one participant described it this way:

I will ask others to give comments and suggestions. Then I gather all ideas. Compare among each one, I study each of them. I will spend time to analyze them. I mean I do all the homework. Then I will make the decision.

This study concur with the findings of Anderson, Riddle & Martin (1999), DeCenzo & Silhanek (2002), Schriver (2004), Watson (2007) and Grusec & Hastings (2007), who find that the need for achievement will drive a person to excel, to adapt to a set of standards, to strive for success and develop social competency. One participant supported this by saying, "...but I believe action is very important. I need to be realistic and see the feasibility of my thought. I will list out the possibilities and do detail study on it." Another participant stated, "I will change and listen to criticism. I want to be a better person in doing my design." Another participant also

observed this from his personal experience, "He even stays up late in the evening to do that work...he is helpful and not calculative he is willing to do anything...with him they can do many impossible jobs." Another example from the field reported, "His attitude is good, independent, determination and responsible. He wants both his parents to stay in a better house and better environment. So, he will to work harder than before."

A participant's potentiality, his or her capacity for advancement, is the last social attribute and is highly important in helping him or her to excel and develop to a higher stage of live by actualizing their full potential. One participant stated, "One must be pro-active and sensitive to the environment, be flexible." Another argued, "I am the one who approaching others most of the time. I am active, have initiative and am aggressive." Another participant said, "Normally, as I work, I show my best, I show the results; I take initiative, I am pro-active." There are other statements such as "I am active, but not over active. After I came to this college I became more active." This study finds that when a participant possesses useful language skills, is very pro-active and highly self-aware, he or she will achieve his or her full potential in the journey of advancement (Domaine, 1981; Bjarnason & Coldstream, 2003 and Watson, 2007). This meta-category potentiality contained eight sub categories. These are; pro-active, willing to contribute, appreciative, respectful of differences, prepared for the future, ready for change, high in self-expectation and highly flexible. In this context, one student said, "I always treat them well; respect them, listen to them, and provide an opportunity for them to express their ideas and views." Another participant explained, "I can work with various ethnic students. Respect! We play together and we respect each other." Another participant also stated, "In the past I was quite a self-centered person. But now I try to understand and put myself in different positions to consider new ideas." Another participant said, "I will ask my friends for comments and I will keep changing things until it seems kind of perfect to me, and then only I submit to my teacher." Some participants also reported, "As a big brother of three children in the family, I think I should lessen his burden. I decided to work and earn a living." Another participant described it this way "I know better what I want. I can make my judgments wisely. It is better." These finding are in agreement with the research done by Johnson (1996), Bjarnason & Coldstream (2003), and Northouse (2009) who find that at the heart of socialization is the growing awareness that the social world involves more than the individual's own experiences, and the needs of a society are more than those of the individuals in it. Finally, participants reported using values to create an ideal self and to make judgments about them through the process of socialization. One participant reflected, "I had learned something new; to work in a team. We may have different ideas and methods to work together. For example to carry out a charity sale; how to organize it, when, where, what." The participant also remarked "Sometimes, I join the praying group to pray for the dead ones. I even thought of being a monk."

6. Discussion

This analysis of conversations regarding the social development of students suggests that there are four major themes in the process; self awareness, adaptability, responsibility and potentiality. These results highlight the elements of the social development process in a college setting. In-depth interviews reveal sub categories at the level of the individual and the development process and further provide evidence of both the universal and contextual aspects of the sociology of education in institutions of higher learning. The findings confirm that environment plays a significant role in the behavioral aspects of participants. Teachers are just one factor in the human environment of a college, and he or she helps students to develop those attitudes and skills that are essential to their future success. Students learn also from peers through interaction, which includes social support. A strong social climate gives strength to students and encourages them to continue their engagement with tasks, to analyze strategies and manage failure and its frustrations. In this way human contact and interaction become fruitful stimuli in a student's development. In the process of educational socialization, the stages in a group of individuals are interactive changes at all levels. The interaction between levels is reciprocal among components of larger systems. They are dynamic and complex interactions. Development is so much a part of human life that people often take it for granted. As stated by Boudon (1986), Williams & Arrigo (2005), Hughes & Kroehler (2009), the study of social change is an attempt to understand and predict changes in the world. In order for humans to survive, they must achieve a working relationship with their environment. There are many types of adaptation. Individuals have to make appropriate adjustments to adapt to the changes in their environment. College students are exposed to other students from diverse social, ethnic and economic backgrounds, all of which have the potential of enabling them to become more tolerant.

This researcher does not want to over-generalize from this case study, but it is in agreement with the findings of Wallace & Wolf (1980), Turner (1994), Schaefer (2003), Rury (2009) who have been led by their research to the conclusion that social change is a slippery concept. It takes place everywhere that individuals function within the context of society. Social change consists of the modification of the social organization of a society in any of its

social institutional or social functions. It also includes changes in attitudes and beliefs. This study in no way contradicts the generally agreed upon contention that early family life significantly effects a college student's patterns of behavior, particularly as he or she generates loneliness and dependency. In recent years, however, the relationship among family members has change significantly. Families have become smaller and often both parents work. Changes in family structure, such as single parenting, offer fewer financial resources. This research finds that education, as it manifests itself in a college environment, contributes significantly to social change by making social interaction an effective pathway to success for individuals and groups when they are able to utilize it for self-improvement and social mobility irrespective of their family background. Social change is a fundamental requirement for the continued development and growth of a society. It is important to determine whether a given social change will lead to positive outcome. There is no single cause for change, there are many factors that interact to disrupt, alter, destroy, promote, reward and humiliate both groups and individuals. The educational environment helps society to solve the problems caused by development and change. It provides individuals with skills, knowledge and titles that upgrade their social status. Formal education allows a person to enter more prestigious occupations and gives greater opportunity for job advancement and mobility. If there is widespread educational failure not only individuals but the society as a whole suffers, especially in the age of high technology and globalization. So, the quality of education, both academically and socially, is important in this country. Change in the way people see themselves changes their world (Alcock, Carment & Sadava, 1994; Gellens & Levine, 1995 and Smith & Preston, 1997).

Finally, it is evident that the understanding of the sociological implications of the choices students make will positively contribute to their ability to make appropriate choices in other social contexts. Findings from the quatitative survey on the Pearson Correlation Significant Test show that there was significant correlation of a student's social experience with his or her career development ($M=6.87$, $SD=1.642$, $P < .544$). These findings are in line with the research done by others who find that change, as it takes place during the process of socialization, will enable a person to become a more competent member of society (Gellens & Levine, 1995; Etzioni, 1991; Sadovnik, 2007 and McIntyre, 2008). This analysis also reveals that club activities are significantly correlated with a students' career development ($M=3.67$, $SD=1.234$, $p < .564$) in Pearson Correlation Test. This indicated that there is no simple formula for mediating the social development that takes place, but understanding the process and identified the elements is a step toward better understanding of social development in institutions of higher learning. In college, learning is as diverse as the range of social experience in general and the activities too are of a wide variety. It can be affirmed that within such a context individuals can, with a conscious effort, develop into valuable members of society and achieve their full potentiality.

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