The Global Youth Anti-Culture: Realities, Trends and Implications for Malaysian Youth Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to highlight some of the key issues pertaining to the advent of what is been coined "global culture," and its impact on youth both in Malaysia and around the world. Global culture has become a reality in Malaysia due to the rapid globalization process that has burgeoned over the past two decades. This piece focuses particularly on the plight of young people within a dramatically changing world, with a particular emphasis on implications for youth research. Some of the topics covered include: the universal nature and rise of social ills among youth; the deteriorating state of the family in societies including Malaysia and its impact on youth; how youth are viewed and targeted by multinational corporate entities in an ever-increasing materialistic and consumerist world culture; the traditional status of youth in Western and Eastern societies and how that status is changing; and how today's global culture impacts young peoples' ability to carve out an identity for themselves. The paper concludes with general suggestions for the potential role of youth research as the primary mechanism for explaining the intricate issues facing young people as they attempt to grow and succeed in the modern world.

INTRODUCTION

Any discussion on priority areas for youth research must begin with a correct understanding of the present age and context in which young people live. We cannot hope to fully understand the breadth of youth issues without knowing where modern global culture is taking young people. To provide some insight into critical issues currently affecting youth, we must also understand the pace in which the world is changing, and the impact such changes are having on everyday life. This paper attempts to highlight some current needs in youth research relating to the phenomenon of youth social ills and their relation to the ascendancy of 'global culture'.

Young people today are living in a time unlike any before. For the first time in history, the lifestyle of a young person in Malaysia can be directly influenced by the trends of his counterparts on the other side of the world.

Youth of today are citizens of a global culture – a culture that does not stop at the local *kampung*, state, or nation, but one that stretches across continents. This culture must be understood, for it is not value-neutral. It is fueled by human desires, whims, and the economic 'bottom-line', and as such, transforms youth into a vulnerable group.

When considered in connection with youth-related priorities such as leisure-time activities or participation in decision-making, it becomes apparent that many information and communications technology (ICT) and media-related factors have contributed enormously to the development of the global media-driven youth culture. The effects of this emerging culture are increasingly identifiable in the lives of many young people and are altering socialization patterns, processes and experiences. The magnitude and implications of this trend make it imperative that a closer look be taken at

what it means to grow up in the current global youth culture and what this means for local researchers (UN, 2005).

Violence and the Culture of Meaningless

The string of violence that has occurred in Western schools over the past several years has set off alarms in communities everywhere. Perhaps not so much the violence itself, but the fact that such crimes are being committed in 'developed' countries by supposedly 'normal' young people, has left leaders and concerned stakeholders bewildered and determined to act. There crimes such as the now infamous mass murder shooting committed by two teens in Columbine High School (Colorado, U.S.) eight years ago and the most recent tragedy, the Virginia Tech shootings committed by a lone Korean student, unlike any other crimes previously perpetrated by young people, continue to leave an indelible mark on the collective conscience of America. To many concerned adults, these unthinkable crimes and the violent culture that borne them are a clear message that adults must get in touch with what young people are feeling, thinking and going through in this complex era.

Though eight years have passed, the Columbine High School murders provided much of adult society their first glimpses into a mysterious, dark, and disconnected youth sub-culture that is yet to be fully grasped. According to Garbarino (1999), one of the shared characteristics of such violent juvenile offenders, is what he refers to as a 'crisis of meaninglessness.' He says, "Because of this spiritual vacuum, kids live with the simple creed, 'I am born; I live; I die.'" At best, the only value that many young boys receive from the culture at large is materialism or the pursuit of physical pleasure. The understood purpose for existence is the accumulation of 'things.' This, says Garbarino, is not enough to anchor young people. This lack of meaning leads to despair and plays an important role in the lives of violent juveniles. Without a sense that their lives have some higher purpose, which is predominantly grounded in religious faith, these young people see no point in restraining offensive or violent behavior (Garbarino, 1999, p. 154-155).

Once described as producers of cultures that oppose an oppressive societal order, urban youths are now being portrayed as much more prone to engage in socially destructive acts of violence. They appear to be producing what can be aptly described as a youth culture of hostility (Hemmings, 2002). According to Hemmings (2002), the phrase "youth culture'' was coined by Talcott Parsons (1964) to refer to the distinctive patterns of behavior adolescents express during the transitional phase between childhood dependence and adult independence. Today, violence, materialism, sectarianism, cultural ambiguity, and an increased sense of 'meaninglessness', color the modern global youth culture. Conversely – and often a source of confusion for many – is that it is also a world rich in information, resources and opportunities. Nevertheless, incidents like Columbine and Virginia Tech have awoken people to the realization that the modern world, with its emphasis on economics and material success, is taking its toll on the human soul.

From Violence to Social Ills

Social ills everywhere are now reaching alarming proportions. For example, on a daily basis in Malaysia, there are newspapers reports about incest, murder, drug abuse, AIDS, crime, and others. Social ills in the West have been a major problem for decades, but now Asian countries, as well as others where certain social ills were once unheard of twenty years ago, are facing similar circumstances. According to the United Nations (2005), countries with economies in transition have witnessed a dramatic rise in juvenile delinquency rates. Since 1995, juvenile crime levels in many of these countries have increased by more than 30 per cent.

The global age, with its emphasis on material success, has created an environment that defines people in terms of their economic productivity and value – as resources, rather than human beings. No group is more affected by this than the youth, who are especially targeted in terms of their "future earning potential," and their expected role in the nation-building process. Historically, this was also the role of youth in such periods as the Industrial Revolution in the West, where (very) young people worked as manual laborers, contributing to the building of the Western industrial nations. The current post-industrial information age is much the same, with youth being valued as resources that will one day determine the economic competitiveness of their countries.

The trend of nations toward a greater emphasis on economic competitiveness and development is not without costs to society and youth. Along with what is printed in the newspapers, young people are facing an ever growing uncertain era, with political, economic and social instability on the rise throughout the world. Thus, the depth and full nature of problems affecting youth today are still largely unknown. As such, there must be an effort made by those with the insight, ingenuity, and general caring for the well being of youth to reverse the ongoing dehumanization and sense of meaninglessness that threatens to further engulf young hearts and minds.

Youth Social Ills Across the Globe – Behind the Numbers

Typically, research is conducted to answer specific questions about a given phenomenon, event, behavior or population. The current pace of modernization and change occurring in societies throughout the world has opened up a wide variety of research possibilities in the area of youth studies. Education, work, health, recreation, religion, family relations, gender relations, race relations, and lifestyle – all are important areas for researchers to pursue.

Within this plethora of opportunities for research, researchers must make themselves relevant by attempting to understand and explain the world of youth through the eyes of young people themselves. The global age compels us to gauge young people for the simple reason that they are key players in it, particularly from an economic perspective. For example, multinational corporations now openly target youth as a major consumer group with considerable spending power. As such, much of the behavior around buying and selling of products, including marketing, is driven by youth wants and needs. According to research, by the age of eight a child acquires all the skills needed to become an independent consumer, and these skills come from three main sources: parents, peers, and TV (Abdul-Lateef Abdullah, 2001).

Businesses now listen and watch youth more than ever because of their value as consumers and resources. By 1998, nine- to 19-year-olds living in Canada, for example, spent an astonishing $13.5 billion (Clark and Deziel, 1999). The impact of this is the creation of a global, consumer-driven culture where youth are bombarded by products and advertisements encouraging them to feel good, look good and act in a certain way, a way that is defined primarily by 'pop' culture.

As developing countries face the insurgence of global culture and its profit-driven values, they are witnessing the rapid devaluation and practice of traditional customs and values. The vast increases in wealth that have resulted from globalization, have increased the value and emphasis placed on materialism (Cheu, 1997). With this rise in materialism, many believe that traditional cultures grounded in religious and spiritual values have lost their influence on peoples' lives. Modern society enjoys mobility and wider access to multimedia and new technologies, and these factors have played a major part in shaping youth today. But, so, too, have the erosion of families and the breakdown of traditional communities. Young people have suffered as families have become less stable (Carlowe, 2007).

Change in the developing world is taking place at a breath-taking pace. The level of economic development and technological advancement that has occurred over the last generation has caused major structural changes in the social fabric of many nations. For example, though related members of different generations continue to live with one another in the family context, family structures are undergoing profound changes. There has been a shift from extended to nuclear families and an increase in one-person households. The age at first marriage has risen to the mid- to late twenties in many areas, often owing to extended educational careers and delayed entry into the labour market, particularly for young women. There is also a trend towards later childbearing and having fewer children (United Nations, 2005).

In addition, rapid globalization, which has cleared the way for use of electronics and computerized communication for the dissemination of information, values and beliefs, and the rapid spread of global culture through the media, have all had far-reaching effects on the development of human communities and youth. In the transitional phase from childhood to adulthood, young people establish their own identities, adopting the cultural norms and values of their parents and adapting them to their own social and cultural environments. The globalization of media has expanded the scope

of norms and values upon which young people draw in creating their identities. Young people are increasingly incorporating aspects of other cultures from around the world into their own identities (United Nations, 2005).

A plethora of research has shown how dramatic structural changes have had a deleterious effect on the critical social institutions within society (Thomas, 1999a). For example, according to Fagan (1998), by 1990, in the U.S. parents were, on average, available to their children 10 hours less per week than they were in 1980 and 40 percent less than they were in 1965 (Thomas, 1999a). Today, this trend is extending to the developing world, such as in Malaysia, where women have entered the workforce in large numbers and parents in general are spending more time away from their children.

As societies continue to materialize and grow economically, they must rely more on a labor force comprised of both men and women for the production of goods and services. This results on added strains and pressure on families and family life. Thus, the primary support mechanism, the hub of the social safety net, the family, is weakened and risks eventual disintegration, as has happened in many Western countries, where divorce rates among married couples is commonly known to be over 50% and where, in the U.S. at least, traditional marriage has ceased to be the preferred living arrangement in the majority of US households (United States Census Bureau, 2005). As the family weakens, it loses its ability to influence, control and shape its young, as both parents direct less attention and energy toward them. This can leave a vacuum in a child's life that is all too easily filled with negative peer group and 'pop' culture influences. If not monitored, negative behaviors will result, dramatically impacting the character of a young person (Beal *et al.*, 2001). Without a restraining and moral value-promoting way of life, a young person can easily be lured into the traps of a lifestyle guided by materialistic and 'spiritually-void' behaviors and goals.

Whether the explosion of social ills in the developing world are mere growing pains or the problems lie much deeper, the current age is seeing an epidemic that is strikingly similar across countries and cultures. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw an increasing trend in both developed and developing nations towards promoting national youth policies and programs through specific government ministries or youth departments. By 1993, nearly 100 countries throughout the world had developed such government ministries or departments (United Nations, 1993). Today, that number is even greater, indicating the universal need to address the declining health and well being of youth.

Despite the energy and resources being spent to make nations more "youth-friendly," policy makers must have accurate and revealing research to understand the depth of problems affecting youth today, and the role of current cultural trends. Thomas (1999) claims that according to research, the three main causes of violence committed by juveniles are: spiritual emptiness, "toxic" society (high prevalence of violence), and family instability. According to Thomas, these three causes are aided by a global 'pop' culture that is hostile toward religion and spiritual values. Veith (1999) further describes today's youth culture as 'anti-culture', pointing out that the prime task of every society is socializing its children. He says the young members of society have to be taught its beliefs, customs and values so that they can take their place in that society as adults. While this is the primary task of the family, Veith reported that the larger society also has an interest in its children turning out right. The problem, according to Veith, is that the values taught to youth by the larger society today work against that socializing process:

> "Today's mass-marketed youth culture is more of an anti-culture. It appeals to the anti-social, destructive, and self-destructive impulses that are bound up in the heart of a child. Today's popular music manufactured for the youth market generally scorns authority, lauds illicit sex, and lifts up pleasure as the only good. In many cases now, it goes even further, wallowing in overt evil" (Veith, 1999, para. 9).

Veith continues, "Our society seems blithely unaware that, in its refusal to acculturate children in a positive way, it is committing cultural suicide" (Veith, 1999, para. 13). Thus, according to many youth experts in the West, the current social and cultural environment is anything but conducive to the health and well being of youth. This, moreover, is the same culture that has made steady inroads since the post-war 1950s and 60s via globalization and mass media such as TV, music and the Internet. According to Carlowe (2007, p. 19),

"The teenage question of the mid-1950s soon became overshadowed by the development of 'youth culture' in the 1960s. Dr Warren says that The Beatles, drugs, sexual liberation, the impact of television and student culture were significant factors."

In the early 1990s, research indicated that by the time the average child in the U.S. left elementary school (approximately 10 years old), he or she had witnessed 8,000 murders and 100,000 other acts of violence on the television screen (Smith, 1993). Ten years later, in one of several major studies conducted by Columbia University and the New York State Psychiatric Institute (U.S.) on the link between television and violence, where researchers studied more than 700 people for 17 years, the results overwhelmingly showed that teenagers who watch more than an hour of television a day during early adolescence are more likely to be violent in later years (Associated Press, 2002). Through this growing phenomenon, the link between youth "anti-culture," and youth social ills becomes clearer.

Youth Development Realities in the New Global Culture

The underlying goal of the state according to classical Western educational philosophy is the development of the 'Perfect Citizen,' which has its roots in the thought and works of Plato. Conversely, according to the classical Islamic worldview, the goal of the state is the development of the 'Perfect Man' (Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, 1998). The fundamental difference in these two traditions, in reference to educational philosophy, illustrates the distinction between a God-centered society and a secular one. With the demise of the last Islamic Sultanate, the Ottoman Empire, at the end of the First World War, the Muslim world has experienced a sharp intellectual decline and subsequent deviation from its classical scholarly traditions. Consequently, it has adopted a worldview toward education that places importance on nation building over the development of intellectually strong, well-rounded individuals. Likewise, much of the world today has been influenced by the Western notion of developing 'good citizens,' rather than 'good human beings.' Developing good citizens, by definition, emphasizes developing 'good workers' to support the economic health of the capitalist

state. According to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (1993):

> "The purpose of seeking knowledge is to inculcate the goodness or justice in man as man and individual self, and not merely in man as citizen or integral part of society: it is man's value as real man, as the dweller in his self's city, as citizen in his own microcosmic kingdom, as spirit, that is stressed, rather than his value as a physical entity measured in terms of the pragmatic or utilitarian sense of his usefulness to state and society and the world" (p. 141).

The Western philosophy toward educational development is consistent with the capitalist worldview, which ultimately ranks and categorizes man according to his 'utilitarian sense of usefulness' (Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas, 1993). In turn, when youth are valued as potential citizens and workers rather than human beings, the spiritual component within them becomes irrelevant. Collectively over time, spiritual values and goals lose their recognition and overall importance to the society and its primarily materialistic goals. Directing the development of youth solely toward the realm of economic success also denies youth their individuality, and the age of youth is a time specifically where youths are trying to discover who they are — a developmentally sensitive period that seeks the answers to predominantly spiritual queries such as "who am I?", "what is my purpose?", "does God exist?", and "what do I want to become?" Thus, the fundamental growth and development of a young person, including spiritual, moral, and intellectual development, especially at such a critical time in life, is undermined (Henzell-Thomas, 2002). As a result, mental, spiritual and physical health problems can result, weakening the state and society as a whole.

According to Syed Muhammad Naquib Al-Attas (in Wan Mohd Nor Wan Daud, 1998), most of the dominant religions in the world have always placed their focus on the development of young people as individuals, as the correct and most effective strategy for building societies of good human beings. Popular global culture, however, is grounded in a state-centered approach, which solely aims to prepare young people to function and adapt successfully to the goals of their respective societies. In this way, educational and socializing objectives are derived from, and seek to strengthen the beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and skills valued and

accepted by the social group. However, as the needs and interests of the society change, the needs and education of individuals must also change according to the circumstances, since 'society' will always receive primary importance above self. Thus, the inherent needs of youth are, although not totally neglected, secondary vis-à-vis adult societal needs and interests, or defined in relation to society, regardless of the degree of moral, intellectual and spiritual degradation the society has undergone.

The impact of this society-centered culture on young people is now evident as nations everywhere are spending millions trying to respond to the damage caused by social ills. More traditional cultures that once valued youth as human beings, regardless of their economic potential, are being replaced by a new unilateral, market-driven culture. The effects of this are evident in Malaysia, where the extent of youths' contribution to nation-building and international economic competitiveness tends to define their needs. Meanwhile, as the public lashes out at young people for being lazy and unmotivated, social ills continue to rise. Are youth really receiving what they need in order to develop into moral, healthy, intelligent and productive human beings? Are we defining what young people need according to proven religious and cultural traditions, developmental needs and sound research or by that which fits within the plan for economic success and international competitiveness? If so, where do these two converge and diverge? These are some of the important questions that are being neither asked nor answered.

Interestingly, the views of youth themselves tell a story that is not entirely consistent with popular perception. In an attempt to understand youth social ills, researchers have begun to enter the world of young people to try to understand them using a variety of research methods. Contrary to the assumptions and claims of policy makers, youth may not be as "anti-tradition" and "anti-establishment" as is commonly believed. According to the United Nations (1998), in general, studies of youth in developing countries reported that young people place more emphasis on family and tradition than on personal achievement. Further, a 1996 global poll included in the Braungart study of 25,000 middle-class high-school students aged 15-18 years on five continents found them to be more similar than different. Personal achievement and a desire "to make something of themselves" was a pervasive value among 80 per cent of the world's youth, and respect for family was strong. The surveys also showed that youths are most concerned about issues concerning family, education and work. Overall, many share similar worries — from fears of illness in the family to worries about nuclear war and environmental destruction (United Nations, 1998). These studies, although not specific to Malaysia, clearly show that popular perception is not always accurate and that we still have much to learn about youths.

Research on youths over the past decade has included important efforts such as defining what 'youth' entails given its variation across cultures, and the determining factors in youth transition to adulthood. The more recent research agenda on youths has expanded to focus on youth needs, in particular as they relate to the transition from childhood to adulthood. As pointed out by Bynner (1997),

> "The youth phase has been described by the psychologist, Erikson (1977) as offering a "moratorium" on adulthood, when experimentation in leisure life especially, enables young people to decide in what direction their adult life should go." He continues, "Youth can therefore be seen as the period of transition between dependent childhood and independent adulthood, during which the family continues to be the main source of continuity and support (Jones and Wallace, 1992; Coles, 1995), while the peer group and 'youth culture' take on an increasingly important role" (Broadening the Perspective section, para. 1).

In his paper, Bynner talks about the influence of the current youth culture as it relates to youth identity development:

> "While international media contribute to the homogenization of youth culture (Brake, 1985) and foster ideas of 'consumer-citizenship' (Jones and Wallace, 1992), they also heighten consciousness of scarcity and unequal access to resources and prompt mobility (Furst-Dilic, 1991). Youth culture and lifestyle can have the positive benefits associated with experimentation and a 'moratorium' on taking the full weight of adult responsibility (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966). They can also be associated with inter-group conflict and may provide the underpinnings for delinquency, drug taking, alcoholism, mental illness and even suicide" (Robins and Rutter, 1990) (Social Construction of Identity, para. 1).

Bynner points out an important aspect of global youth culture which is the contradiction of youth as important players in the global economic machine in their roles as consumers, while simultaneously having limited access to job markets, employment, and policy-formation processes. Such contradictions also stretch into the political and social domains of society as well. Thus, a great deal of confusion results as young people are given high expectations, yet little means to be valued members of society and contributors to the larger community. This contradiction tells youth that they are valued for what they can consume and what they are expected to produce, yet gives them little sense of meaning and purpose in their present period of 'moratorium'.

To get at the core issues surrounding social ills, youth research must go deep into understanding how youths form their identity in this complex age. An important aspect to understanding youth identity is uncovering how youths answer the question, "who am I becoming?" In order to answer this, youths must be able to formulate some sort of life plan, based on conscious choices (Leccardi, 1999). To be able to do this, according to Leccardi (1999), two conditions must exist: 1) an adequate knowledge of the available options; and 2) clear actions-guidance criteria.

There is an important connection between the presence of these two criteria, the role of choice, and the definition of identity. The existence of the above conditions permits a selection of possibilities for youth. Identity, in its turn, is conceived as the result of this selection and of the exercise of choice (Leccardi, 1999). According to Erikson (1968; in Leccardi, 1999), for example, choices and identity proceed together: the way towards identity coincides with the need to make new choices, on the basis of a personal 'system of relevance.' That system of relevance, however, must be guided by actions-guidance criteria. In the case of the religious Muslim youth for example, the criteria is provided by Islam, which provides guidance and purpose in all aspects of life. However, for those without religion, there must be some other actions-guidance criteria to fill the void. If one is not present, the identity development process will be tumultuous and most likely guided by a confused or harmful personal philosophy.

Thus, it is by means of choices, and the self-directed change they imply, that one's continuity is confirmed; that one's being oneself, despite the changing trajectory that leads from the past to the future, is recognized (Leccardi, 1999). According to Leccardi, full knowledge of what is available to youth coupled with actions-criteria guidance, ultimately determines the direction of youth identity through the function of choice. However, it is the confused, problematic nature of the choices and the unavailability of clear guiding principles for so many youth, even those who may subscribe to religion but do not practice it as a way of life, that today – unlike in past eras – give rise to doubts and confusion in youth (Leccardi, 1999).

For those youth that become hooked into pop culture, the process of identity formation can cause confusion, personal unrest or an identity that values materialism and all the comes with it. As society changes and societal norms change, a young person in the process of forming his or her identity, although they may have knowledge of the choices available, may look to 'pop' culture for actions-guidance criteria. Perhaps being weak in religious faith or not strongly attached to the family, the young person might be heavily influenced by negative sub-cultures. As a result, he or she will make choices based on its values. Inevitably, this might lead to life choices that are not made according to religious or spiritual teachings, but according to the superficial worldview of popular culture and 'keeping up with the Jones'', potentially leading to spiritual emptiness and a sense of meaninglessness.

The Substantive Role Research Can Play

Youth researchers are in a very unique and important position. No other profession has more opportunity and objective standing than the research community to elucidate the dilemmas of youth and the challenges they are facing. This is a role that should not be taken for granted, and an opportunity that cannot be wasted.

The hope of research is to build an understanding of our current times and point the way to appropriate solutions for what ails us. Research has traditionally been an instrument capable of transcending politics and personal agendas to help people understand the world better. Thus, researchers must ask tough

questions and go beyond the superficial. The primary aim of research is to seek truth, thus, researchers must rise above political rhetoric and simplified explanations to unmask the unknown and determine what must be done to improve the lives of young people.

As the influence of global culture continues to infiltrate the developing world, the research community must be able to sound the alarm and alert everyone to what is coming. Based on the wealth of research from the West, as has been touched on in this paper, many researchers are beginning to uncover the harm associated with the excessive aspects of global culture.

Globally, the youth research field is seeing a heightened focus on health and health-related issues. Social ills, as threats to young people's overall health and well-being are now seen as a major factor influencing the health of young people. Youth lifestyle and how young people spend their time "in transition" is now being investigated in relation to health and mental health related illnesses. Youth unemployment, also a major concern even among developed nations, is another current major focus of transition research (Russell and O'Connell, 2001).

The transition phase of youth is no longer seen as a 'moratorium' period per se, but is understood as a substantive time in young peoples' lives that has important ramification on their lives as adults. Thus, researchers are delving more and more into the process of 'transition' and how it occurs, not only among the extremes – drug addicts, at-risk youth and the like – but among 'average' youth as well. Shildrick and MacDonald (2006, p. 136) wrote about the British experience in this regard:

> "Empirically, there has been an overemphasis on 'spectacular' music, dance and style cultures as definitive of contemporary youth culture…. As in the 1970s, it is still the cas   e that the majority of young people in Britain don't come near the sort of subcultures/post-subcultures that are described in most, prominent youth culture research."

Understanding transitional factors juxtaposed with youth biographies helps researchers not only understand cultural trends, but how individual young people experience them.

According to Forbes (2006), the current trend in postmodern analysis of popular youth culture is to study how youth attempt to resist dominant meanings and construct their own. Some argue that this type of research into youth subcultures and how they are formed is, in effect, more applicable to Western culture and, arguably, does not easily translate or apply to the Malaysian and other developing world contexts. On the other hand, technology, multimedia and materialistic factors are prevalent in Malaysia as well and are also having a profound effect on the society. New subgroups are popping up all the time (e.g. illegal bike races), and adults are struggling to make sense of the trends. Contemporary young people's identities, claim many critics, are dominated by unstable individualized cultural trajectories that cross-cut a variety of different groups rather than attaching themselves substantively to any in particular. At the very least, youth cultural groupings – even in Malaysia - must still be regarded as diverse, ephemeral and loosely bounded, something that would appear to make research difficult and unpredictable (Hodkinson, 2005). From this vantage point, research on how various elements of modernity are influencing the formation and propagation of different youth subcultures is indeed relevant to Malaysia and one of the major challenges for Malaysian youth researchers.

Directions for Malaysian Youth Research

Along these lines, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)has been active through its engagement in research related to youth culture. UPM's youth development research team has undertaken several projects to reveal the lifestyles and thinking patterns of contemporary Malaysian youth including studies related to understanding youth subculture, their religiosity status, their level of ethnic sensitivity, and benchmarking youth participation in nation building. Research has also been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of selected nationwide youth development programs (Hamzah, 2005).

Basic and Applied Research

Basic research includes evaluation of programs in Malaysia, developing key youth-related indicators; Malaysia-specific youth development and youth work competencies; and benchmarks for youth and youth-related institutions such as the family, schools, community and health systems. Such foundational research efforts would be based on identified needs and gaps, as determined by data gathering efforts and

expertise of youth themselves as well as youth-related professionals and affiliates. Basic research would form an important aspect of a national research arm, such as the Ministry of Youth and Sports' Malaysian Institute for Youth Development Research, and would also inform applied research efforts in more specific, priority research areas. The findings and data resulting from the 'basic research' initiative would provide baseline information for policy makers at all levels in their formulation of youth policies (Hamzah, 2005).

There should also be greater efforts to engage in more qualitative grounded theory and exploratory research to build a knowledge base that is specific to the Malaysian context around these and other issues. Current youth research is still very much at the descriptive level and most studies are quantitative in nature. There is a need to get beyond descriptives toward the development of new models to explain youth cultural trends and socialization patterns.

Applied research comprises more specific youth-related research areas, particularly areas of concern to the nation. Applied research would also incorporate more theoretical modelling and higher-order analyses, rooted in Malaysia-specific descriptive data from the basic research initiative just mentioned. Some examples of applied research efforts would be in the following areas: youth socialization and culture; ICT; inter-ethnic understanding and integration; youth empowerment; youth unemployment; youth entrepreneurship; strengthening of youth organizations; inculcation of spiritual values and ethics; youth health trends and issues; youth and the media; youth culture and sub-culture formation and others. Once the foundations from data gathering and basic research have been established, large-scale applied research efforts could be undertaken. It is in this area where national youth research-focused organizations aim to contribute most to the areas of policy development and technical assistance to government and organizations (Hamzah, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Youth researchers, like the poets of former times, must play the role of storytellers, painting a vivid picture of the state of Malaysian youth. Simply transferring and superimposing foreign models on to the Malaysian context, however, cannot accomplish this. Doing so simply perpetuates the cultural hegemony that is taking place in other aspects of society, and will not yield results that help understand Malaysian youth. Work has to be done from the grassroots and up to build a research-based foundation of knowledge for the Malaysian way of life, culture and people. Thus, research must play the role of storyteller and truth-teller. It must help policy makers understand that the gravity of problems youth are facing threaten our entire way of life and the future of the nation, and that appropriate action must follow.

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