



THE ROLE OF SOCIOLOGISTS IN SOCIETY:
THE CASE STUDY OF MALAYSIAN
UNIVERSITIES' SOCIOLOGISTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

The lack of discussion and ambiguity on the roles of sociologists in a society is very noticeable in sociological literature, even in a developing nation like Malaysia. Failing to recognize who sociologists are, what they are capable of doing and in what area they can contribute to would inevitably limit the opportunity for them to contribute to society. As a means to reduce this sociological gap, this research study was carried out to develop the sociological role pattern played by Malaysian universities' sociologists using the Sociological Role Framework (SRF). In addition, this study analyzed the factors that influenced the involvement of the Malaysian universities sociologists in various sociological roles as well as discussed the perceived roles to be played by sociologists as raised by sociology students. Based on the case study of 106 sociologists from public universities in Malaysia, it is found that the majority of them have been engaging in all three sociological roles, namely action-based, knowledge-based and education-based sociology. 259 surveyed sociology students also outlined similar three categories with more emphasis given to action-based sociology. It was found in this research that sociologists' involvement in sociological roles was contributed not only by pull factors, but also by push factors. These results were summarized using the Push-Pull Analysis Model (PusPA Model). Hence, findings of this study can be significantly used to expand the sociological knowledge, to improve society, to assist the government and authorities, to guide universities, to sensitize fellow sociologists as well as to shape future sociologists.

خلاصة البحث

إن عدم وجود أي نقاشات حول أدوار علماء الاجتماع في مجتمع ما، والضبائية التي تغطي تلك الأدوار، أدت إلى إضعاف الدراسات الاجتماعية، حتى في الدول النامية التي تحتاج إلى تلك الأدوار مثل ماليزيا. ثم إن عدم الاعتراف بعلماء الاجتماع، وعدم تقدير إمكانياتهم، والتغاضي عن تحديد مواقع إسهاماتهم، ضيقت الفرص بشكل حتمي في استغلال الكوادر البشرية التي تساعد على ازدهار المجتمع. وللحد من هذه الفجوة الاجتماعية، يسلط البحث الضوء على نمط الدور الاجتماعي الذي يلعبه علماء الاجتماع، باستخدام إطار الدور الاجتماعي. إضافة إلى ذلك، يقوم البحث بتحليل العناصر المؤثرة على انخراط علماء الاجتماع في أدوار اجتماعية، فضلا عن الدور الذي يتصوره طلبة علم الاجتماع في علماء هذا العلم. واستنادا إلى دراسة 106 عالم اجتماعي في الجامعات الماليزية، تبين بأن الغالبية انخرطوا في ثلاثة أدوار اجتماعية، وهي الارتكاز الاجتماعي على التصرف، والارتكاز الاجتماعي على العلم، والارتكاز الاجتماعي على التعليم. كما أوضحت الدراسة بأن هناك تصنيف آخر مشابه، من خلال استطلاع 259 طالباً في علم الاجتماع، إلا أن هذا التصنيف ركز على جانب الارتكاز الاجتماعي في التصرف. كما تم التوصل إلى أن العوامل التي تؤثر على الانخراط في الأدوار الاجتماعية بين علماء الاجتماع لم تساهم في عوامل الجذب فحسب، بل في عوامل الدفع أيضاً، حيث أوجزت في استخدام نموذج تحليل الجذب والدفع. وبالتالي، فإن هذه النتائج مهمة جدا لتوسيع المعرفة الاجتماعية، وتحسين المجتمع، وإبلاغ السلطات والحكومة، وتوجيه الجامعات، وتوعية علماء الاجتماع وطلبة هذا العلم.

APPROVAL PAGE

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Wan Puspa Melati bt. Wan Abdul Halim

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MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES' SOCIOLOGISTS**

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*This thesis is dedicated to my father, my role model and my source of inspiration,
Wan Abdul Halim b. Wan Othman*

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Alhamdulillah, by the blessing of *Allah s.w.t*, I have managed to complete my dissertation within the time frame planned and without any major obstacles. I would like to take this opportunity to extend my deepest gratitude to individuals who have contributed in my effort to complete this dissertation. First and foremost, I am heartily thankful to my beloved academician father, Wan Abdul Halim Othman for his continuous support socially, psychologically and financially. He has always been my source of inspiration and the light of guidance in both my academic and non-academic livelihood. I am also blessed to have caring and supportive family members and friends, namely Normah Nasruddin, Wan Maya Juwita Wan Halim, Wan Arjunaidi Wan Halim, Wan Arjunawan Wan Halim, Riezal Ross, Dawn Jeremiah, Sofia Adilah Basar, Azuzana Abdul Rahman, Carol Leong, Joanne Ho-Lee, Irwan Kelana, Nurul-Azza Abdullah and Affezah Ali who have collectively been the pillars of my strength – emotionally, socially and psychologically. Having them as my social support system is priceless and have indeed allowed me to get to where I am right now. I also would like to extend my warmest gratitude to my supervisor, Professor Fatimah Daud for her patience, commitment and guidance in my effort to complete this dissertation. My deepest appreciation also goes to staff members from all of the Malaysian public universities who have assisted me throughout my journey of completing this thesis. Their help in providing information on student intakes, identifying sociologists in their institutions, and obtaining data from sociology students, serves as the foundation for this research study. Most importantly, I would like to thank each and everyone of my respondents who have allocated their precious time to not only share their views on this topic but also to share their personal information that are valuable for the purpose of this research study. For those who had also given me advises and recommendations towards both my thesis as well as personal development, your input is much appreciated and will be forever remembered. Hence, I would like to offer my warmest regards and blessings to everyone who has helped me complete this dissertation successfully. *Inshaallah*, your sincerity will be repaid in kindness either this life or hereafter. *Amin*.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

These days sociology is no longer a foreign field of study in the global context. Sociology has set its position in academic institutions, professional associations and the workplace environment. The popularity of sociology as a field, though at varying degrees, can be mainly attributed to the nature of the subject itself – “the scientific study of human society” (Macionis, 2005, p.7). Thus, for those who understand what sociology is all about would tend to view sociology as a beneficial subject that will enable individuals to understand, manage and improve the social world that they live in.

As a quick reference, sociology analyzes the world by looking at various interrelated and interlocking factors, from the point of view of society, economics, politics, religion and education, to name a few. Sociological analyses can also be studied at the macro, meso and micro levels to uncover the general patterns of social organizations or to explore the specificity of individual cases. As a result, sociologists *should* be able to look at any social phenomenon in a systematic and holistic manner and the resultant acquired wide expanse of knowledge can be translated into social action. However, the wide knowledge acquisition also means that sociologists do not concentrate in one domain only but are also divided into various job spheres. One can find sociologists in the academia, governmental bodies, non-governmental agencies (NGOs), local and multinational corporations among others.

Therefore, in the workforce, sociologists are not only prized to serve mainly academic institutions which can reproduce more sociologists or other graduates with

sociological conscience but they are also needed for research or consultation jobs. Though studies on career pathways that sociologists take upon graduation are scarce, some prior researchers have claimed that sociologists may engage in teaching, research and development, management or administration, consultation and correctional work among others (Braude, 1974; Bates, 1967). More specifically, John Gubbay (in Payne & Cross, 1993) in his article “Researching the Sociology Curriculum” has noted that sociology can help individuals to develop themselves through the humanism aspect. Therefore, sociology training should be able to assist individuals to make choices and be responsible for their course of action besides being more liberal towards societal issues. This is because sociology subjects are oftentimes discussed in a critical manner and students are encouraged to be engaged in multiple perspectives.

Their personal development also includes entrepreneurialism, where the sociologically trained students are creative, innovative and competitive so that they are geared towards practical application of the knowledge obtained. Their socio-political preparation includes the students’ ability to be critical about mundane social and political issues where they are not only able to identify the issues at hand but they would also have the skill to inquire, weigh social disputes and critically analyze the social system. Moreover, any sociology curriculum should aim to develop the dynamic leadership of the individuals. Sociology graduates then should not only be confident and goal-driven but are also able to lead and persuade others in the real world.

Gubbay (in Payne & Cross, 1993) has also discussed the reproduction of knowledge and education as the byproduct of sociology courses. Graduates should be able to convey their knowledge and viewpoints in an objective and well-informed

manner. The information can be attained not only through extensive discussion with experts in the field i.e. the lecturers but also through researches that they could carry out using sociological methods learned throughout their course of studies. However, critics may argue about how the sociology courses are designed and conducted in Malaysia and whether or not the eventual outcome is similar to that described by Gubbay (in Payne and Cross, 1993). Without dismissing such a valid concern, this researcher would not include the discussion on the quality of sociological training in Malaysia. This is not the focus of this present research; the issue of quality sociology training deserves an entirely separate study.

Upon reflecting the aims of this research and the ability of sociologists to engage in various sociological roles, one cannot help but to wonder: What are the roles chosen by Malaysian sociologists then? It is in the interest of this study to find out what sociologists do with the knowledge and scholarship that they have accumulated over the years. There has been an on-going debate as to what sociologists *should do* with their acquired vast knowledge of sociology and sociological training. Most commonly, teaching is perceived as the fundamental role that sociologists should take up as they are the ones that can socialize and develop socially conscious citizens as well as continue the legacy of sociology in their nation. In fact, some scholars like Dotzler and Koppel (1999) have highlighted that “The discipline [sociology] *as taken for granted* sees itself primarily as professors teaching sociology” (p.71). Other experts have argued that sociologists *should* mainly focus on enriching and expanding the body of knowledge of sociology (Bates, 1967; Bordieu, 1993) and leave the implementation of change to the people in power, while other experts believe that sociologists *should* move beyond just conducting research alone but use their knowledge of sociology to improve the condition of society (Swan, 1980; Rossi,

1980; Rebach & Bruhn, 1990). Still, there are those experts who believe that a combination of the abovementioned roles is desirable because research and theory development are vital foundations needed for any social action to take place (Ulrich, 1949; Johnson, 1986). Thus, it should be interesting to study the sociological roles that Malaysian universities' sociologists choose to venture into.

Though it will be ideal to study the entire population of sociologists in the various institutions and organizations in Malaysia, it is wise to do so in stages. This research serves as a stepping stone as it studies the entire population of sociologists in Malaysian public universities¹. This starting point is based on the pretext that most Malaysian sociologists have tended to enter the academic world (Sibley, 1963; Wilson, 1966; Banks & Webb, 1977; Hamilton 2002; Abdul Rahman Embong, 2006). Moreover, since sociology departments and programmes in Malaysia are concentrated in public universities, this field setting seems to be the most appropriate starting point. In addition, the flexibility of the academic world would enable Malaysian sociologists to engage in various roles such as teaching, researching, writing, consulting and engaging in community service. Therefore, it is in the interest of this research to identify and analyze the inclination of the roles played by universities' sociologists with the opportunity and flexibility given to them in Malaysia.

1.1 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

1.1.1 Background of the Study: Malaysia and its Society

Critics may question: Why should Malaysia be the main focus of this study? Besides stating the obvious, there is yet no study being done on what sociologists in Malaysia

¹ Though there are twenty public universities in Malaysia, only seventeen are listed here as there are no sociologists identified to be serving the following three universities: University Malaysia Pahang (UMP), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP).

are doing or have done (except their publications). Also, there are *limited* sociological studies on Malaysia as compared to other developed nations. Moreover, Malaysia has many distinctive features that would make this research a unique case by demonstrating the complexity of understanding the sociological roles available in this country. To begin with, Malaysia is a developing country located in Southeast Asia. It houses about 28.3 million people within its 330,803 km² land area (Department of Statistics Malaysia [DOS], 2011). Though Malaysia is a relatively small country, each of the eleven states and the three federal territories has its own culture such as its own unique language, food, religious laws and cultural dances, to name a few. The cultural differences are even more obvious between Peninsular Malaysia and the Malaysian Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak. Hence, such diversity would increase the complexity of the understanding of the Malaysian population.

In addition, Malaysia borders a few countries namely Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia, Brunei and the Philippines which has allowed international migration and cultural integration as well as assimilation. Peninsular Malaysia, once known as Malaya, was colonized by the Portugese and later the British and had Malacca which was one of the famous trading ports in Asia. Thus, the influence of foreign cultures due to both migration and trading activities is still evident to this date. Malaya was also under three years of Japanese Occupation (1942 to 1945). After September 1963, the Borneo states of Sarawak and Sabah joined the Federal Territory of Malaya to become the new founded country, Malaysia. All of these factors then shaped the composition and the cultures of the Malaysian population as a whole even after the country obtained its independence in 1957 from Britain.

Based on the census provided by the Department of Statistics (2011), 91.8% of the Malaysian population are Malaysian citizens while the remaining 8.2% are non-

Malaysian citizens. The racial/ethnic composition of Malaysian citizens can be broken down, according to DOS (2011), into Malays as the majority of the population (67.4%), followed by Malaysians of Chinese descent (24.6%), Malaysians of Indian descent (7.3%) and “Others” (0.7%). Both the Chinese and the Indians were originally brought in by the British colonizers to work in the mines and the rubber estates, respectively. Interestingly, even within these major ethnic/racial groups, diverse sub-groups of people are evident. For instance, the *Bumiputera* category is composed of the *Malays* (the constitutional definition refers to the *Malays* as Muslims who practice *Malay* norms and cultures), the *Ibans*, the *Kadazans*, the *Bajaus*, the *Melanaus*, to name a few. The Malaysian Indian category include the *Tamils*, *Malayalis*, *Punjabis*, *Telugus* and a few other sub-categories who again have a variety of differences in physical features, cultural practices and customs. As for the Malaysian Chinese category, among the sub-categories are *Hainanese*, *Hokkiens*, *Cantonese*, *Teochews*, *Hakka*, among others. And the “Others” category as defined by the DOS (2010) includes Malaysians of the following descent: Japanese, Filipinos, Burmese, Cambodian, Thai, Indonesian, Arab, Italian, French, and the list goes on. Hence, the influence of foreign cultures and the diverse ethnicity, has also inevitably shaped the social conditions of Malaysia and its people.

Though on average Malaysia is indeed a peaceful and harmonious nation, having these diverse groups located within a small geographical concentration causes the presence of social conflicts. One cannot overlook the fact that racial riots like those that happened in 1969 and in 2001 have become part of the Malaysian history (Jayasooria, 2002; Nagarajan, 2004; Puah, 2004; Wan P. Melati, 2006). True, racial and ethnic categories are not the only factors that can be associated with racial riots. Other factors such as the politics, the economy, and the physical environment are

equally responsible for those incidences (Wan P. Melati, 2006).

Moreover, one should also realize that Malaysians are stratified within the political, economic, social and environmental spheres mainly due to their ethnic/racial membership. For instance, the Malays tend to have more political power because of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) Party being the ruling party since Independence. But its majority also tends to have lower economic power as compared to other racial/ethnic groups. In fact, the 30% at the bottom of the economic ladder of the population are reportedly the Malays (Jayasooria, 2002). Thus, the diverse ethnic membership of the nation with varying levels of economic power would also influence the perceptions and actions of the population.

The political development in Malaysia must be considered in order to understand the behaviours and actions of its people. To begin with, Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with democratic voting being conducted every five years. It is recorded that much of the citizens' political awareness became more prominent after the Japanese Occupation with them organizing and forming political allies to gain Independence. UMNO, which was formed in 1956 to represent the Malays then decided to unite with the Malaysian Chinese Association [MCA], which was formed to represent the Chinese to form the Alliance Party in 1952. This union was done in the spirit of gaining Independence from the British colonial master. The Malaysian Indian Congress [MIC], which was formed much later to represent the Indian population together with eight other minority parties representing other indigenous races then later joined the Alliance Party to form the National Front [Barisan Nasional (BN)]. This ruling coalition has been confronted by various opposition parties over time such as the Malayan Communist Party, the Chinese-based Democratic Action Party (DAP), the Islamic Party of Malaysia (PAS), the Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS), the