

The Study of Ethnocultural Empathy in a Pluralistic Society: Exploring Inter-Ethnic Relationships Among Javanese and Chinese Children in Surakarta

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ABSTRACT

This study conducts a qualitative research analysis to examine the levels of ethnocultural empathy among Javanese and Chinese children in a diverse population, encompassing both cognitive and affective aspects as well as the ability to express empathetic thoughts and emotions towards individuals from diverse ethnocultural backgrounds. Data was collected through focus group discussions and oral interviews involving sixteen male and female students from multi-ethnic schools in Surakarta, Indonesia. The findings indicate that participants recognized the importance of empathizing with others as an initial step toward developing ethnocultural empathy. Those who engaged in interactions with individuals from diverse backgrounds demonstrated higher levels of ethnocultural empathy. In the educational setting, both ethnic groups were encouraged to show mutual respect for each other's cultural heritage. The study highlights the pivotal role of empathy in fostering social cohesion, enabling each group to better understand and relate to the circumstances of others.

Keywords: *Ethnocultural Empathy; Javanese and Chinese Children; Cultural Heritage; Cultural Diversity*

1. Background

Indonesia's language diversity, ethnic communities, and religious customs reflect its cultural complexity as a multi-island republic. Diversity is valuable and should be protected, but it can also cause disputes and fragmentation. Diversity disputes in Indonesia are often caused by economic inequality, social inequality, and political dynamics (Taufik, 2019). Indonesia's demographic and sociological differences based on cultural identities cause conflict, psychological distrust, and inhibit cultural communication. These can cause international misunderstandings and conflict.

Inter-group conflict in Indonesia can be seen in the past and possibly ongoing violence between the indigenous Javanese and the Chinese community in Surakarta, Central Java (Osman, Ghani & Alis, 2021). In pluralistic Surakarta, interethnic relationships cause social problems. These difficulties include miscommunication and violence. Multiple disputes have occurred between ethnic groups like Javanese and non-indigenous Chinese. According to Sunarti & Fadeli (2021), these battles began with Surakarta's founding in 1745, showing a long history.

Surakarta has had several socially noteworthy events. These occurrences include the turmoil in Pecinan on June 30, 1745, the Ngawi incident on September 23, 1825, and other clashes and confrontations before Syarekat Islam was founded in 1911. Additionally, Mangkunegaran soldiers clashed with the Chinese community in December 1912; widespread robbery and animal theft targeting Chinese properties between 1905 and 1913; chaos in Jatinom from 1947 to 1948; incidents following the "G 30 S/PKI" event in October 1965; the destruction of shops in Coyudan and Nonongan on November 6, 1966; anti-Chinese sentiment on November 20, 1980; and the Grieving May riot on May 14, Verbal disputes between Javanese and Chinese children, involving ethnic insults, persist. Without proper action, ethnic clashes in Surakarta may return.

These events demonstrate the importance of considering ethnic groups and cultural variety, which might cause problems. Since these confrontations generate a social separation between Javanese and Chinese groups, they can become cultural heritage if managed well. Javanese and Chinese relations in Surakarta have changed little (Rukayah, Vania & Abdullah, 2023). The Chinese minority tends to live in separate social realms from the Javanese majority. Despite living near together, Javanese natives and Chinese in Surakarta society have separate social worlds, according to Riyanto *et al.*, (2023). Segregation is visible in many aspects of society, including education, as Chinese families prefer private schools with mostly Chinese kids. Many Chinese believe they are superior to Javanese, which affects their relationships (Murtyas *et al.*, 2023).

Chinese women are encouraged to marry only within their ethnic group, whereas Chinese males can marry Javanese women. The above circumstances make communication and socialization difficult for Chinese and Javanese children. Javanese and Chinese children often mistake one other due to poor or absent communication, which can lead to physical altercations (Taufik, 2019).

However, several educational institutions have recognized the importance of peace-oriented ideas to promote positive interaction between Javanese and Chinese communities after the "Gray May 1998" events. The greatest impact has been seen in pluralistic schools with regular interaction between Chinese and Javanese students. Surakarta Society United (PMS) also promotes unity between the two ethnic groups by working together to reduce perceived inequities (Probandari *et al.*, 2019). Keroncong and campursari songs, gamelan music, wayang orang, badminton, chess, wushu, barongsai, and yang khim are common artistic and athletic activities. Regular interactions promote social relationships, emotional and cognitive understanding, and empathy. The contact hypothesis states that intergroup contact can reduce negative stereotypes and mutual prejudice under certain conditions, according to Jarvis *et al.*, (2022). Ethnic empathy can reduce prejudice by fostering a sense of shared identity with varied ethnic groups. Empathy is linked to positive behaviour, while a lack of it is linked to negative behaviour, particularly in intergroup relations (Wijaya, 2019).

In conclusion, Indonesia's cultural diversity—languages, ethnicities, and religions—has pros and cons. Considering cultural significance, diversity disputes must be acknowledged and resolved. The historical setting of Surakarta shows the need for positive intergroup dynamics and good communication to bridge the Javanese Chinese gap. Empathy, understanding, and shared identity can reduce prejudice and help heterogeneous societies coexist peacefully.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study outlined in the provided text are:

1. To analyse the cultural and ethnic diversity in Indonesia, particularly focusing on linguistic variations, diverse ethnic communities, and various religious practices.
2. To identify the factors contributing to conflicts and tensions arising from cultural diversity in Indonesia, including economic inequalities, societal inequities, and political dynamics.
3. To examine the historical and ongoing inter-group conflicts in Surakarta, Central Java, specifically between the Javanese and Chinese communities, and to understand their underlying causes and consequences.
4. To highlight the importance of effective conflict management and the promotion of intergroup understanding and empathy as essential strategies for mitigating cultural conflicts and fostering harmonious coexistence in a multicultural society.
5. To emphasize the role of educational institutions and community organizations in promoting positive intergroup relations and peace-building initiatives, particularly through activities that encourage interpersonal interaction and empathy among different ethnic groups.

2. Literature Review

2.1 A Critical Analysis of Ethnocultural Empathy

The field of social psychology has recently begun to explore the concept of ethnocultural empathy. Diverse scholars have employed varying methodologies to conceptualize this term, resulting in a dearth of universally accepted terminology. The terms cross-cultural empathy, empathetic multicultural awareness, cultural role-taking, ethnic perspective-taking, ethno-therapeutic empathy, and cultural empathy have been employed synonymously to denote the concept of empathy within cross-cultural contexts (AL-Jaberi *et al.*, 2019; Al-Jaberi *et al.*, 2020; Aljaberi *et al.*, 2021; Mohammed & Aljaberi, 2023).

The theory of "Ethnocultural Empathy" was formulated by Valdez *et al.*, (2023) as a recent contribution to the understanding of empathy within cultural contexts. Ethnocultural Empathy (EE) is derived from the theoretical frameworks of general empathy and culturally specific empathy. The concept under consideration is characterized as an acquired skill and an inherent characteristic that pertains to specific personality attributes that may exhibit variation among individuals belonging to diverse racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds. The term "ethnocultural" is a compound word that merges the concepts of "ethnicity" and "culture." According to Anand, Bradshaw & Prabhakaran (2020), ethnicity encompasses distinguishing characteristics among various groups, which have the potential to give rise to conflicts. According to Mersha & Beck (2020), it refers to a collective set of societal values, social norms, individual roles within the social framework, and individual strategies for engaging with social and political dynamics present in each society.

The Ethnocultural Empathy (EE) framework typically encompasses three fundamental elements: intellectual empathy, empathic emotions, and communicative empathy. Franks (2020) provides a more detailed explanation of these components in their study.

Intellectual empathy pertains to an individual's capacity to comprehend and appreciate the thoughts and emotions of individuals belonging to diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds. The concept entails the ability to perceive the world through the lens of another individual, encompassing considerations of race or ethnicity (Barabantseva, Mhurchú & Peterson, 2021).

Empathetic emotions: This aspect concerns an individual's capacity to attentively perceive and emotionally connect with the emotions of individuals belonging to a distinct ethnocultural group. Understanding and resonating with the other person's emotional state while considering their racial or ethnic background helps to establish this connection. It encompasses an individual's affective reaction to the affective manifestations of individuals belonging to diverse ethnocultural groups (Jones & Grigsby-Toussaint, 2021).

Communicative empathy is the ability to express ethnocultural empathic cognitions (intellectual empathy) and affective states (empathic emotions) toward people from different ethnic groups than your own. Expression can manifest through either verbal communication or actions.

In its entirety, ethnocultural empathy encompasses the capacity to comprehend and emotionally connect with the thoughts, emotions, and viewpoints of individuals hailing from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds. This phenomenon encompasses both cognitive and affective aspects, along with the capacity to express empathetic thoughts and emotions towards individuals belonging to diverse ethnocultural groups.

2.2 Research Problems and Gaps

The presented research identifies several significant research problems and gaps in the context of ethnic and cultural diversity in Indonesia, particularly in Surakarta. Firstly, there is a need for further research to explore the root causes and dynamics of inter-group conflicts between the Javanese and Chinese communities, delving deeper into historical, sociological, and economic factors that contribute to these tensions. Secondly, while the study mentions initiatives to foster empathy and understanding, there is a gap in research regarding the effectiveness of these initiatives in reducing prejudice and promoting harmonious coexistence. Empirical studies evaluating the impact of such programs would provide valuable insights. Additionally, the research highlights the importance of pluralistic educational institutions, but further investigation is needed to assess the long-term outcomes of such institutions on inter-group relations. Finally, there is a need for research addressing the broader implications of ethnic and cultural diversity in Indonesia, including its impact on national identity, social cohesion, and international relations, as well as potential policy solutions to address these issues comprehensively.

3. Methods

The study included Javanese and Chinese children from Surakarta, Indonesia. These two ethnic groups have always had different views and little contact. The researchers and two research assistants selected four students from each group to form four discussion groups: the Opposition Group (OG), the Interaction Group (IG), the Chinese Majority Group (CMG), and the Javanese Majority Group.

Sixteen 13–14-year-old Javanese and Chinese students participated in the study. Three criteria were used to choose participants by purposive sampling. This study addressed participants' ethnic backgrounds, specifically Javanese or Chinese. The researchers also considered participant engagement in school groups. Finally, no communication hurdles were considered. Participants were divided by ethnicity. The original group (OG) had two Javanese and two Chinese members. The intervention group (IG) also had two Javanese and two Chinese individuals, but in a different ratio. The comparison group (CMG) consisted

of three Chinese and one Javanese. The final group, the Javanese-majority group (JMG), had three Javanese and one Chinese member. The study engaged participants through Focus Group Discussions (FGD) and individual interviews with those who raised issues during the FGDs. Participants were asked about their interactions with people of different ethnicities during the interviews.

The researchers followed Widayat (2022)'s focus group methodology. This method started talks with broad, open-ended inquiries and then covered important themes. Intellectual, emotional, and communicative ethnocultural empathy were discussed in the FGDs. Significant FGD findings were followed up by in-depth interviews. The interview questions sought to understand participants' views on Javanese Chinese relations in Surakarta, their emotional responses to other ethnic groups' hardships, and ethnic differentiation (Astutik & Ramadhoan, 2020).

Data was collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth follow-up interviews. Focus group discussions (FGDs) allowed participants to express their opinions in a group setting, increasing participation and examining multiple perspectives. The complex interaction between collective members provided a multitude of data for analysis. Researchers moderated and facilitated FGDs. Interviews were extensively recorded, transcribed, and analyzed qualitatively.

This study collected data from Surakarta-based Javanese and Chinese youngsters using focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews. Focus group discussions (FGDs) helped participants engage and discuss, while interviews explored topics from the initial group discussions. Researchers moderated the sessions to ensure their smooth progression. All talks were extensively recorded and transcribed for qualitative analysis.

Table 1: Participants

Group	Ethnic Groups	Religion	Age	Gender
Opponent Group	Javanese	Islam	14	Male
	Javanese	Islam	15	Female
	Chinese	Christianity	15	Male
	Chinese	Christianity	14	Male
Collaborative Group	Javanese	Islam	14	Male
	Chinese	Christianity	14	Female
	Javanese	Christianity	14	Female
	Chinese	Christianity	15	Male
Chinese Majority Group	Javanese	Islam	15	Male
	Chinese	Christianity	15	Female
	Chinese	Christianity	15	Male
	Chinese	Islam	14	Male
Javanese Majority Group	Javanese	Islam	14	Male
	Javanese	Islam	14	Female
	Javanese	Christianity	14	Male
	Chinese	Christianity	14	Male

Source: Collated by Author

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The Phenomenon of Empathy: Understanding Emotional Experience and its Articulation

Participants described Javanese and Chinese children using disparaging words in focus groups. Referring to friends by their fathers' names, considered verbal insult in Javanese society, occurred occasionally. It was also noted that Javanese children used derogatory language like "Ciduk" (Cino Ndladuk) or "Cipo" (Cino Koplo) to refer to Chinese people, while the Chinese community used terms like "Jaduk" or "lonthe" (a term denoting prostitution). The discourse also includes very inflammatory jokes, such as "Jekpot" (derived from "rejeke ngepot"), which implies Javanese children's parents are poor (Brown & Rohrer, 2020). The participants understood the negative nature of these exchanges and wanted to avoid such terms. Participants understood how these interactions affected communication. The people understood that making ethnic group jokes was risky and often led to misunderstandings and resentment. They acknowledged that their hilarious remarks sometimes crossed the line, resulting in offensiveness and hatred. The people realized that excessively provocative humor could offend, thus they stopped enjoying it (Barton & Ho, 2020).

Participants worked to develop empathy for others' emotions. The individuals opposed ethnic group discrimination because they knew they would find it unpleasant, according to Nguyen *et al.*, (2020). Regardless of ethnicity, the people felt regret and empathy for those insulted or persecuted. This study shows emotional matching and empathetic concern, a common aspect of empathy. Emotional contagion helps foster empathy by sharing comparable emotions with others (Henderson *et al.*, 2019). During the conversations, participants showed empathy for each other regarding academic prejudice in educational institutions. The overwhelming presence of Chinese persons in top academic positions showed that Chinese children were rated smarter than Javanese youngsters (Yu *et al.*, 2020). These circumstances created a social barrier between Javanese and Chinese. However, several participants did not consider this problem important. Academic success depended on personal progress and effort, not ethnicity (Chen *et al.*, 2020).

This shows that participants understood the inequity of competitiveness and academic accomplishment in educational institutions. Wu *et al.*, (2020) observed that the researchers admitted that student effort, not ethnicity, determined outcomes. Some participants were happy when surrounded by intellectually astute friends, demonstrating their ability to find satisfaction in the achievements of people of different ethnicities. Participants saw the academic performance gap between Chinese and Javanese as caused by individual achievement rather than ethnicity.

4.2 Taking an Empathic Perspective

Sperry, Sperry & Miller (2019) found that imagining oneself in another's shoes boosts self-attributes. Thus, increased self-awareness increases the perceived similarity between two people. It may be more positive to view a group if an individual's self-image is more positive than their assessment of another group and is generalized to include the entire group. Actively engaging with positive narratives or receiving positive information from trusted friends might help develop positive viewpoints. In this study, respondents said their parents' favorable teachings about ethnic groups shaped their views about Javanese people. This study indicated that Chinese participants were impacted by their parents' stories about Javanese aid during "Gray May 1998." These accounts were said to have protected Chinese participants from the disturbance. Positive information can reduce stereotyping and improve perceptions of outgroup individuals and the outgroup, according to Abuhassna *et al.*, (2020). Unfavorable ethnic group stereotypes can hurt public perceptions.

These cases show how much parents influence their children's learning and comprehension. Parents must be conscious of how their narratives and guidance about other ethnic groups affect their children's views of people from different backgrounds. Negative storylines should be limited, and positive narratives emphasized. A Javanese adage advises hiding others' flaws and highlighting their strengths (Kusumo *et al.*, 2020). The first lessons youngsters learn about other people are often from parental accounts of other ethnic groups. Initial imprinted narratives have great power and influence over children's daily lives, especially social interactions. Academic experts have shown that taking a different view of others can help you understand them better than making dispositional assumptions about their behavior. Javanese participants' understanding of Chinese people's material and immaterial losses in Surakarta conflicts or occurrences is examined in this study. This understanding helped them understand why Chinese people are hesitant to befriend Javanese. According to Rajiani (2023), Javanese people have hurt Chinese people. Not wanting to socialize with Javanese people is frequent. Another participant was willing to build ties with Chinese people and explain to them that not all Javanese behave this way. Buunk, Van Brummen-Girigori & Leckie (2021) found that perspective-taking reduces bias, raises social awareness, and strengthens relationships. Perspective-taking reduces prejudice and affects self-perception, leading to consistent and adaptive behavior. This strengthens group bonds and promotes productive teamwork.

Positive encounters help participants comprehend people of different ethnicities. According to a participant, "The appreciation and comprehension of one another are imperative in fostering harmonious relationships," therefore empathy and understanding are crucial to social ties. According to Huda, Mustafa & Mohamed, (2021), reliance promotes accountability and builds connections. Strong interpersonal ties affect how couples see each other, boosting confidence and trust. Increased trust and confidence lead to greater interdependence among couples, creating a synergistic impact that lasts. Simply put, more engagement between people strengthens interpersonal ties, including friendship depth and frequency. Children who get along with varied peers develop trust and confidence in their relationships. They efficiently convey happy emotions to others. One participant said, "My acquaintance from the Javanese culture frequently confides in me about their difficulties; they exhibit remarkable kindness." I believe equality depends on individual traits. Interacting with people from varied ethnic origins increases empathy, according to this study. Numerous studies have shown that empathy for those in need increases the likelihood of people helping them and other group members. This is congruent with Tomasik, Helbling & Moser (2020), who discovered that people who build friendships with people from different ethnicities are less prejudiced. Alfadda & Mahdi (2021) found that close relationships with varied ethnicities increased empathy. Layne & Teng (2022) found that empathic people are more susceptible to peer pressure.

Thus, empathy for a stigmatized group increases the likelihood of helping other members of that group. The participant's statement, "Subsequently, I developed a close relationship with fellow Chinese acquaintances, occasionally providing assistance with their academic assignments," illustrates this. According to Zhang (2019), positive attitudes toward a stigmatized group can foster harmonious relationships, promote cooperation, increase understanding, and reduce conflict. The empathizer's attitudes and conduct toward stigmatized people improve with empathy. This supports the empathy-altruism hypothesis, which states that feeling empathy for those in distress increases the likelihood of helping them and the wider community (Huda, Mustafa & Mohamed, 2021).

4.3 Acceptance of Culture Differences

The Javanese culture, the majority ethnic group of Surakarta, influences other ethnic groups. For instance, the Chinese community uses Javanese in their daily lives. Many Chinese people say they can't speak their original language and use Javanese and Bahasa Indonesia instead. Javanese culture and the dominant group's privilege are highlighted by this. According to Osman, Ghani & Alis, (2021), dominant ethnic

groups play important roles in society, especially when they maintain their social superiority. Political factions that seek equality challenge the majority group's power in democratic administration. Besides language, cultural practices also matter. Javanese people, particularly in Surakarta, have preserved their cultural habits for over a century. In contrast, Chinese people admit to hardly understanding their own culture. Due to Javanese culture's historical prevalence and socio-political backdrop, the folks in issue understand Javanese customs better than they do. Soeharto, the second Indonesian president from 1966 to 1998, passed Instruksi Presiden no. 14 in 1967. This legislation restricted Chinese-descent people from practicing Chinese religion and traditions. Indonesia denied Confucianism official recognition as a religion. Chinese people were originally called "Tionghoa" but later changed to "Cina" and called "Republik Rakyat Cina" (RRC) instead of "Republik Rakyat Tiongkok" (RRT). After the G.30/S/PKI event, in which Chinese people were the main suspects, the regulation was enforced.

Chinese students in Surakarta have had possibilities to study their culture in chosen educational institutions, despite their low cultural understanding and practice. They wear Chinese clothes on Kartini Day. Cultural variety investigation and appreciation are the main goals of these programs. These programs promote cross-cultural understanding and knowledge exchange by exposing Chinese students to Javanese culture and vice versa. Some people believe religion differences create most ethnic clashes in Surakarta. Islam is the majority religion in Java, whereas Christianity is in the Chinese community. However, this viewpoint seems unsupported by evidence. The recent research contradicts the idea that religious differences inhibit Javanese Chinese friendships. The study's participants understood religious differences but didn't think they caused conflicts.

4.4 Awareness Based on Empathy

Empathic awareness involves learning about people of different races and ethnicities. A single focus group inquiry used four Ethnocultural Empathy scale elements to study the theme. "Is there a comprehension of the rationale behind individuals frequently depicting others through the lens of racial or ethnic stereotypes?"

The responders agreed with the question and explained why people use stereotypes. Some interviewees said unfavorable experiences with people from different ethnicities may lead to a negative view of them. The participants themselves liked people from diverse ethnicities. The authors stressed that defining ethnic groups by individual traits is problematic due to their diversity and dependence on individuals. This study suggests that pleasant personal experiences and perceptions affect participants' social awareness and knowledge. Additionally, these positive perceptions include the cohort's collective consciousness and understanding. When a Javanese person likes a Chinese person, it helps them understand the Chinese community. Barabantseva, Mhurchú & Peterson (2021) found that good attitudes towards individuals inside a group can positively affect general sentiments towards the group.

These findings also support Nguyen *et al.*, (2020), who discovered that understanding oneself is the key to understanding others. Recognizing one's personality, attitudes, and behaviors improves empathy and relationships. Self-awareness underpins empathic awareness. To understand and empathize with others, people must first understand and reflect on their own ideas, emotions, and behaviors. Healthy living and empathic consciousness depend on self-awareness.

5. Conclusion

The current study showed that empathy promotes social cohesion strategically. Through empathy, participants understood and experienced the feelings and situations of people from diverse groups. The study found four notable things:

Ethnocultural empathy began with participants' empathy for others' emotions. Empathy helped them connect with and understand people from other cultures and ethnicities. Interacting with people from different cultures and religions increased ethnocultural empathy. Interacting with diverse people seemed to increase empathy and understanding.

Additionally, schools have promoted cultural tolerance. The educators encouraged ethnic Chinese and Javanese cohorts to collaborate, building interpersonal relationships and a deeper understanding of each other's cultures. People who understood and liked other nationalities were more empathetic. Positive attitudes toward other groups improve understanding and acceptance of diverse ideas. Empathy promotes social cohesion and understanding among varied cultural and ethnic groups. Societies may build resilient, inclusive communities by fostering empathy and social and cross-cultural involvement.

6. Declarations

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