



RESEARCHING MORAL AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE ISSUE OF IMPARTIALITY IN DOING PHILOSOPHICAL RESEARCH ON PLURALISM

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Abstract

In the process of conducting a philosophical examination on the conceptualization of pluralism within moral and citizenship education in Malaysia, I was faced with an ethical issue about impartiality. This article considers this issue in the context of my research through my reflections and what I learnt from them about conducting philosophical research on complex and controversial concepts. This article describes issues I faced in my research and the understanding I gained about researching complex and controversial topics in philosophical and other research. It goes on to suggest how addressing this issue in the research process provided an opportunity for myself as a researcher to obtain reflective positioning on the issue of research on such topics. The paper concludes that such positioning provides a reason for researcher to take a more communicative stand when researching topics of a similar nature to obtain a proper understanding of a concept within their research.

Keywords: *researching moral; citizenship education; personal reflection; the issue of impartiality; pluralism*

Abstrak

Di dalam proses penelitian filosofis terhadap konseptualisasi pluralisme dalam pendidikan moral dan kewarganegaraan di Malaysia, peneliti dihadapkan pada isu-isu etis tentang imparialitas. Artikel ini menyoroti isu-isu etis tentang imparialitas dalam konteks penelitian, melalui refleksi pribadi dan apa yang saya pelajari dari hal-hal itu mengenai pelaksanaan penelitian filosofis dalam konsep yang kompleks dan kontroversial. Artikel ini menjelaskan isu yang saya hadapi di dalam penelitian saya dan pemahaman yang saya dapatkan menyangkut penelitian yang bertopik kompleks dan kontroversial dalam aspek filosofis. Artikel ini menyarankan bagaimana cara menangani masalah-masalah yang berhubungan dengan isu-isu etis tentang imparialitas melalui proses penelitian sehingga memberi kesempatan untuk mendapatkan posisi reflektif pada isu penelitian tersebut. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa posisi tersebut memberikan alasan bagi peneliti untuk mengambil sikap lebih komunikatif ketika meneliti topik yang serupa guna mendapatkan pemahaman yang tepat.

Kata kunci: meneliti moral; pendidikan kewarganegaraan; refleksi pribadi; masalah ketidakberpihakan; pluralism.

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A. Introduction

This paper addresses an ethical problem I faced as a researcher in carrying out a philosophical examination on the conceptualisation of pluralism in moral and citizenship education for Malaysia's plural society. The problem is based on my experience in conducting critical inquiry into the concept of pluralism and its related notions. The paper represents my reflection as a researcher in doing philosophical research on the idea of others for adoption in moral and citizenship education for plural society specifically in Malaysia. It also offers a perspective based on this reflection on researching topics that involve notions which raise questions of a similar nature.

Philosophical research here refers to research carried out to find clarity in the meaning of concepts for use in education policy and practice. It is understood as "an exploration of the conceptual schemes embedded in our everyday language in a form of analysis which is 'connective' in the sense indicated earlier, involving the elucidation of philosophically interesting connections and relationships between concepts."¹ Pluralism as used in my study involves the problem of competing claims about what is considered right in moral terms in a plural society. Underpinning this idea is the assumption that plural society refers to individuals or groups who adopt different moral, religious and philosophical stances on moral, morality and moral issues that live together in a particular place.

The paper begins by explaining the background to this paper. It goes on to describe the problem underpinning my research. Next, it elucidates the issue of pluralism in moral and citizenship education in Malaysia and the need to address the notion of others. It continues by presenting my reflections as a researcher on the dealing with the problem of contentious notions in philosophical research such as mine. Finally it expresses a perspective on researching notions of a particular nature or that raise a similar issue in researchers in social science researchers.

1 McLaughlin, T.H. "Philosophy and Educational Policy: Possibilities, Tensions and Tasks". *Journal of Educational Policy* 15 (4), 2000, p.448.

The topic for my Ph.D. began as a personal journey about how I should identify myself and my students in the classroom. This question arose because of the nature of the classroom in many national schools in Malaysia where the students come from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. The idea of "others" in Malaysia where people are often defined by their differences namely their ethnicity and religion made me reflect on the way teachers ought to perceive their students. Should we be looking at them through ethnic and religious lenses?

As a teacher in school and later, as a lecturer at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,² the question continued to be raised in research or in discussions with students. Specifically, it focussed on the issue of how teachers in plural societies should view their students and how far differences should be recognised specifically in their pedagogical practices.

These questions are important and relevant in the context of Malaysia's plural society today as issues on social solidarity and national identity still need to be addressed and are relevant specifically in the role of education in developing our dispositions and attitudes towards 'others'. An editorial comment in a local daily asked how we as Malaysians from different backgrounds ought to perceive 'others' and whether one's racial origins should count in our relationships and activities.³ This question shows that the notion of 'others' requires examination and clarification especially in considering what disposition and attitudes needs to be developed in students that would allow them to deal with their relationship with 'others'.

In fact, research has shown how students in schools and teachers have built their identities along ethnic and religious lines making it difficult to look at people in a non particularistic manner.⁴ Research also suggests that a teachers'

2 One of the large public universities in Malaysia located in Selangor.

3 This editorial appeared in *The Sun* (2007) in light of the criticisms against the revised ethnic relations module for university students, which appeared to have sidestepped the real issues facing the worsening of relations between different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

4 C. Joseph, 'It is so unfair here...it is so biased': Negotiating the politics of ethnic identification in ways of being Malaysian schoolgirls. *Asian Ethnicity*, 7 (1), 2006, p. 53-73.

understanding of ‘others’ may be limited and this state could have implications for the kind of discussion and debate on moral issues that take place in the classroom.⁵ Of course, in the context of moral and citizenship education where the issue of social solidarity and national unity are conceptualised and played out, it became evident that it was necessary to examine how pluralism ought to be defined.

My research examined this notion of ‘others’ in the context of pluralism. However, in doing this research, I was faced with the difficult question of how I could avoid being biased in my views yet maintain a realistic perspective on the issue of ‘others’ without losing sight of what needed to be said – how pluralism for moral and citizenship education in Malaysia ought to be reframed for its plural society.

B. The Issue of Pluralism in Malaysia

My thesis had sought through philosophical means to examine the problem of an inadequate idea of moral and citizenship education in Malaysia, premised on the idea that the current notion adopted in the policy and practice of the subject matter only recognised a person by their ethnicity and/or religion but did not recognise the person as a whole, that is, who they are. It claimed that the idea of pluralism underpinning the present idea viewed the idea of a person from a purely ethnic and religious perspective.

This view, I argued tended to exclude amongst others, those who did not fall into any specific ethnic or religious category for instance those from mixed marriages or those who did not want to be defined in any particularistic manner, that is, by their ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual orientation or those who just wanted to be viewed as Malaysians irrespective of their backgrounds. The narrow view of pluralism adopted had failed to recognise the plurality of identities (Gray). It had also not adequately considered the idea that a person’s identity is dialogically constituted based on

5 N. S. M. Abdullah, “Understanding moral discourse in a plural society: Its importance in the Malaysian context”. Unpublished paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Conference at University of Exeter, United Kingdom, 12-14 September 2002.

the premise that their identities as persons are socially constituted.⁶ This notion of pluralism suggested that the idea of a person adopted was to a certain extent discriminatory in nature to certain members of society because it sought to negate them as persons by defining them purely along ethnic and racial lines and thus limiting their participation (say in discussion or debates) in society.⁷

The central problem of how we as members of a plural society should perceive ‘others’ that underpin this study is not a new problem nor is it a problem for which a non-controversial solution has been found. It is a problem that seems to suggest that if a person comes from a different background they are categorised as ‘others’. ‘Others’ are to be tolerated. However, this categorisation that I refer to raised issues for me in my capacity as a teacher, a lecturer, a researcher and a person. Aren’t ‘others’ the same as us? We may have differences but do those differences suggest that there is no common thread that binds us and that we needed a different set of rules to engage with ‘others’? Is pluralism an issue of coping with ‘others’ or is it an issue of engaging with ‘others’ as persons inclusive of their differences? Is it not important for us to engage with ‘others’ on the basis of a shared humanity?

The problem in Malaysia is that public policy is observed to offer a narrow perspective of others i.e. suggesting that ‘others’ needed to be treated differently. This limited idea of ‘others’ made relationships in the public and private areas of life superficial and distant. For example, living in a plural society such as Malaysia meant you would have at least one friend from a different ethnicity or religion. Constant interaction meant that one would forge relationships with people from different and sometimes varied backgrounds. However, these relationships were somehow restricted though not in an obvious manner but nevertheless there seemed to be a lack of openness on what could

6 C. Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”. In A. Gutmann (Ed.) *Multiculturalism: Examining the politics of recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994. K. A. Appiah, *The ethics of identity*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005. Sen A. “Other People”. British Academy Lecture, 2001.

7 N.S.M. Abdullah, *Reframing pluralism for moral and citizenship education in Malaysia*. Unpublished, Ph. D. thesis, University of London, 2007.

be said and done be it in public or in private. Sincerity in the relationship was lacking. One may question why this was the case but in the context of Malaysia with its uniquely plural take on pluralism and plural society it was hardly surprising that pluralism came to be defined in a particular manner.

The nature and idea of pluralism confronted me with the question of who were these 'others'. In trying to find an adequate idea of pluralism, the notion of 'others' seemed to be a problematic in so far as it seemed to segregate society alienating some while including particular others.⁸

Based on the key question of what was pluralism properly understood, my study analysed pluralism from a philosophical perspective in order to identify the notions that underpinned it. Assuming that a concept of pluralism involves the recognition of 'others' (understood here as people from different backgrounds within the context of plural societies), I argued that in a plural society where there existed competing claims, the real issue faced by these societies is one of which differences to recognise and not the recognition of differences per se. I further argued that it is not enough to recognise differences especially particular differences to the exclusion of others but to understand that the idea of recognition is about recognising the person as a whole inclusive of their differences. Recognition was not meant to divide people into different categories say according to their ethnicity or religion but to unify people by acknowledging and accepting their shared humanity.

This conclusion led to the idea that pluralism ought to be about our relations with others where the relationship should be open and meaningful. In order to have substantive dialogue with others the study suggested that relations with others should allow for full and open participation of 'others' in discourse and debate. This would allow more open and meaningful discussions. People should be able to express their stance on an issue or problem without the need to limit their discussion to what is acceptable or "reasonable"

as defined by a particular community or individual. This disposition, it is argued requires a deep sense of concern for 'others' - one that recognises their full humanity and provides for a fuller accommodation of the different stances that exist in a plural society. It is only by accepting and allowing for these different stances can dialogue across differences be possible. Inclusive dialogue is necessary for society to come together beyond differences. If dialogue is based only on or limited to differences such as ethnicity or religion, the kind of discussion that takes place would be exclusionary to those who may not share the same stance. This is especially so in the context of Malaysia that needed to move beyond an idea of common values to an idea of a shared humanity. The idea of shared humanity is based on a notion that a person is not only defined by particular differences but is brought together by their shared vulnerability as persons. In that sense each and every person is precious and it is this preciousness that we ought to respect. This idea of a shared humanity offered a genuine platform for building relations across the ethnic, religious and cultural divide that had come to define Malaysia.

Of course, the fundamental question I faced, in doing this research, was to do with the notion of pluralism and the idea of 'others' which underpins it. In general, pluralism, multiculturalism and, cosmopolitanism all seemed to address the issue of differences in society at different levels and in different ways. However, for me the problem that my thesis focused on went deeper than the issue of differences. As the researcher, my understanding of pluralism suggested that pluralism was not about tackling the problem of differences. Instead, reframing pluralism raised the question of whether the presence of differences in a person was by itself problematic – was differences the issue - or was the understanding of who a person the central issue that needed to be addressed? Was pluralism about recognising differences in others or was it about recognising the person as a whole inclusive of their differences such as their gender or sexual preferences that may define them as persons?

I came to this research with the idea that pluralism meant more than coping with differences. However, in the context of

⁸ This description of pluralism in Malaysia is taken from my thesis. See Chapter 2 in Surayyah (2007) for a fuller discussion.

Malaysia, pluralism meant that we should see 'others' through a prism. Rather than looking at people for who they are as a person, pluralism in Malaysia seemed to suggest that only a person's ethnicity and religion in defined who they are. In this way, pluralism tended to divide society into Muslim or non Muslims; Bumiputra's or non Bumiputra's;⁹ Malays or non Malays – Malays being the majority and considered the "sons of the soil". This narrow perspective of 'others' raised difficult questions for me about how I should approach the issue of reframing pluralism that existed in Malaysia. Was this need to look at others through the lens of ethnicity and religion something I am obliged to do as a 'Malaysian' – is it the nature of our society? Am I forced to do so because that was the way we did things here, in Malaysia? Or was it a necessary for myself, as a researcher to examine this issue from a 'neutral' perspective?

Approaching this issue from a philosophical perspective, I realised that I needed to examine pluralism as a concept taking into account the context yet not influenced by that context if I was to allow for a clearer interpretation of pluralism. I was also challenged to examine what underpinned my own idea of pluralism. I realised that I needed to reflect inwardly about myself and my relationships with family members, friends, acquaintances and wider society in general, to discover what pluralism ought to mean.

In trying to make sense of pluralism, I found myself faced with the difficult and complicated task of reflecting on my own take on 'others'. First, how should I examine this idea of 'others'? How did I, myself see 'others'? Second, why was the issue of 'others' important to me? Was it a personal issue I had with this idea of 'others' as a result of my relationship be it through marriage and/or friendship or was it a problem faced by my being a member of any plural society such as Malaysia. Was this a problem that reflected in a deeper sense the fundamental issue of any society, that is, an issue of self-responsibility - how far we ought to accept that an individual or community themselves may come to decide on what they consider to be good and correct?

⁹ *Bumiputra* refers to sons of soil which includes Malays and other indigenous groups and tribes.

I was also faced with the question of how I should approach this issue of 'others'? Should I approach the idea of others from a narrow perspective, that is, to do with differences in 'others' or should I examine the idea of 'others' and the notion of pluralism in a deeper sense to find a substantive understanding of 'others' and pluralism? Did I need to be neutral in my approach to the idea of 'others'? Could I be neutral? If I did approach this issue of 'others' in a more open manner, that is to say, if I examined the idea of others without making ethnicity and religion central to a notion of others, did that mean I was being "liberal" in my approach. Would that then be an issue in how other people perceived my research?

Reflecting on what led me to this topic, I found that pluralism is a notion that is surrounded by controversies that involves the notion of the 'other' namely how we ought perceive them. Therefore, if I wanted to discuss pluralism, I had to address in my own mind how I perceived 'others'. Was I prepared to engage with this question? Was my notion of 'others' skewed? Would I be able to identify 'others' without any prejudice? Would my concept of 'others' be coloured by my experiences, interpretations and expectations? How far should these elements come to influence my philosophical discussion of pluralism and the 'other'?

In a plural society or any society for that matter everyone has different beliefs, values and practices although there may be some similarities. However, the question remains whether the existence of those differences make them different as persons? Is there an 'us' and 'them'.

In Malaysia, ethnicity and religion are the key descriptors in every facet of life from school to work to loans applications in Malaysia due to particular public policies that emphasise these two aspects either overtly or covertly.¹⁰ The issue of what ethnicity you are or what religion you profess makes a difference in how you are seen and treated. Sometimes this idea of 'others' occurs subtly; sometimes overtly. The problem with this perception aside from the moral and ethical implications is the idea that there is a

¹⁰ V. Verma, *Malaysia, state and civil society in transition*. Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Reiner Publishers, Inc, 2002.

one correct idea of what is good and that some people are better than others in terms of their values, beliefs and practices. It presupposes that there is no common thread that binds us and that an individual's or community's values are the best. It fails to appreciate the complexity of otherness and pigeon holes people. Such a narrow understanding of people reflects a difficulty with accepting 'others' as humankind. This results in a minimalist relation with 'others' and a restricted engagement in dialogue with them. Engagement is at a purely superficial level: with restricted voices and acceptable answers or answers within a given percept by those in authority. Even friendship becomes superficial in the sense that real issues such as disagreements about values are not dealt with in an open and sincere manner.

This superficial nature of the relationship gives rise to the question of 'others' and otherness and why certain 'others' are more difficult to engage in dialogue than some. Why is there a dichotomy in engagement and relationships? Is the dichotomy real or is it perceived? Is religion a barrier to dialogue or are we the ones that limit our dialogue? Is pluralism restricted to dialogue with reasonable people as Rawls would have it or can it be open to 'others'? Can we have open and meaningful dialogue with 'others'? Is it sometimes the context albeit the political context that restricts dialogue? These are some of the questions that I had to grapple with in doing my study. These questions raised the issue of impartiality in researching a topic such as pluralism and challenged me to critically reflect on the notion of a person.

C. Reflections on Researching Pluralism and the Issue of "others"

In this part, I describe personal reflections on issues and challenges I faced in researching pluralism. What I encountered may be relevant to those undertaking research on the notion of a person and issues to do with identity and differences where a researcher is required to re-examine their own personal stand on these issues.

1. Being Impartial

As a researcher approaching this issue from a philosophical perspective meant I needed to examine the idea of 'others' in a notion of pluralism objectively. Any methodology applied in any research has to ensure that it answers the research questions asked.¹¹ In the case of analytical philosophy, which was the methodology adopted in my study, this meant providing the necessary clarity to identify the problem in the concept of pluralism and the idea of a person that underpinned it. However, I needed to examine whether achieving clarity required me to be impartial in my approach to the questions being asked in the research and what was involved in such a notion of impartiality.

The idea of objectivity involves a notion of impartiality but it is a notion that is wrought with difficulty,¹² being objective in research is about stating what is real with the intention of saying what is true without manipulating what is reality, that is, to say what others want us to say. This involves giving an appropriate description of the nature of pluralism and the understanding of 'others' that prevails.

In the context of a research with a philosophical bent, the notion of impartiality is further complicated due to the nature of the research which requires a great degree of awareness of what is being questioned and how the question is being approached in order to find clarity in meaning. In one sense, the idea of 'others' and the problem of pluralism can be approached as a problem of differences understood in the context of an individual or community. From another perspective, the issue of 'others' in a plural society can be seen as an issue of the individual versus the community: the individual here being a person who does not conform to the values of the community. The latter perspective is particularly evident in the Malaysian context. For me, this idea of the individual as a person suggested that maybe the idea of impartiality involved could be more than just being neutral in my approach to the question

11 T.H. McLaughlin, 2000. "Philosophy and Educational Policy: Possibilities, Tensions and Tasks". *Journal of Educational Policy* 15(4), p. 441-457.

12 R. Pring, *Philosophy of educational research*. 2nd edn. London: Continuum, 2004.

of pluralism in Malaysia. Being neutral here refers to the idea that as the researcher, I ought to be sensitive to issues such as religious differences in the notion of pluralism I was examining.

I found in the course of my research that the kind of impartiality required was not about being up front and sensitive to the issue of pluralism in Malaysia and the problems that surrounded it.¹³ Impartiality here needed to be differentiated from neutrality. Impartiality meant addressing the idea of an individual as a person with an open and sincere mind that is, not focussing on the particular differences such as religion and culture that may define the idea of a person in different ways. In contrast, being neutral would have involved examining the question of a person in a transparent and sensitive manner, that is, maintaining those constructs such as religious and cultural differences and trying to reassure myself that everyone's interests was considered. By maintaining a transparent and sensitive stance, my idea of a person would sit easily within the idea of pluralism currently adopted.

However, the problem with transparency in research is that it involves a surface interpretation of something as opposed to a substantive understanding of what is involved. Transparency is "telling it as it is" whereas openness involves understanding the issue in a fuller sense, that is, not articulating it in a particular manner that benefits or undermines the research. Being transparent and sensitive in approaching the research question may tend to avoid the issue rather than address it. This is because I may sympathise with certain ideals making it difficult to maintain an independent stance in my approach to the issue. This was something I needed to avoid if my research was not to be viewed as "biased". After all, my intention for doing the research based on a broader understanding of the issue rested on the assumption that the problem of pluralism in Malaysia was the lack of a shared humanity. It was not the aim of the research to address the immediate problem of the lack of social solidarity and national unity and finding a basis for consensus amongst the members of Malaysia's plural society. Instead, the problem

¹³ It has been observed that scholarly literature in Malaysia often depends on the ethnic background of the researcher (Haque, 2003: pp. 242).

for the research was examining whether the issue was a lack of consensus.

In the case of my research, being transparent and sensitive may not allow me to make an honest evaluation of the issue at hand, namely the fundamental question of whether an individual's or communities' philosophical, moral and religious values are better than others. I felt it was necessary to be open in examining the issue of 'others', who they are and why we ought to respect them. If I only offered a surface interpretation, I might fail to take into account what may be more important in addressing the issue of pluralism and others, that is, the possibility that we need to accept¹⁴ differences and the conflict in values that comes with it.

In addition to being about openness, the notion of impartiality in research is about communicating – something which involves an important element of sincerity as opposed to sensitivity. There was a need to take a communicative stand in dealing with this topic. Let me explain further.

By being impartial in the research, I was discussing the problem of accepting others - that maybe despite our differences we all share a certain degree of vulnerability as humans. In discussing the problem of vulnerability, I was conveying the meaning of vulnerability from the perspective of a person, that is, vulnerability is not the purview of a particular individual or community. I was suggesting that a person's differences do not by itself define their vulnerability as a human being.

Understood in the context of conveying meaning, a communicative stand requires the researcher to take on the role of mediating meaning without losing what is contained in that meaning. When I conveyed the meaning of others as persons who have a shared vulnerability, I was mediating the meaning without losing the essence of the idea of others and persons – that is others are persons. In this sense, mediating involves taking responsibility for the understanding of others that is to be conveyed by interpreting it in a sincere manner. This is something that being sensitive might

¹⁴ See Abdullah (2007, pp .293) for a more detailed discussion on the idea of accepting mentioned here.

not have allowed me to do. Of course some might argue that being sensitive is important in doing research. As the researcher, I should know I am dealing with issues of ethnicity and religion which may be important to those whom I was commenting on. However, in this research, sensitivity might not have allowed me to capture that responsibility I had as a researcher to communicate the idea of others as persons, something which is necessary in a notion of impartiality. Being sensitive to others might mean ignoring certain things in order to maintain a status quo; something which the research on an idea of others may precipitate because those doing the research may represent a certain group or have certain philosophical, moral or religious beliefs that feel such views (the idea of 'us' and 'them') need to be maintained or sustained. This argument also applies to those who may oppose that view!

The idea of sincerity in a notion of impartiality is important because it offers an element of self - responsibility for what is being said. Although, the idea of sincerity can have bad intentions i.e. sincere in wanting to kill someone or sincere in finding against a certain theory so as to maintain a particular group's status quo, sincerity can be maintained by observing the ethical basis for a research. The ethical basis for the research allows the problem to be interpreted with an open mind. In the context of this research, the notion of a shared humanity provided the motivation for the research.¹⁵

The motivation for a research is an important aspect for any research; more so for a research on the issue of 'others'. As there is no or only minimal empirical basis for the research, the researcher is observing, and understanding what she observes in the form of a critical narrative. Interpreting here requires the researcher to engage with the issue or question to be interpreted. Engaging here refers to the researcher 'being concerned' with the issue raised and its implications. In the context of this research, it meant that as the researcher, I needed to appreciate that the research is about finding a way forward to the perceived problem of others and not about seeking a solution. Also

¹⁵ N.S.M. Abdullah, *Reframing pluralism for moral and citizenship education in Malaysia*, Unpublished Ph. D. thesis, University of London, 2007, pp. 57.

it is about caring enough about the outcome of the research to consider that my assumptions may be wrong. This is about seeing the bigger picture – the possibility that it was a problem that there was no shared humanity.

Ethically, the research required me to be truthful in examining my own biasness and to challenge views which may have come to colour my idea of a person. It required me to be communicative in my approach to the research. More than being impartial in my approach to the question posed in this research that might have made me obliged to keep my biasness from influencing my research, I needed to be open to the notion of differences and the idea of a person which I was considering. This meant including those elements of ethnicity and religion which I may have felt were contributing to the problem of a limited idea of a person and consider that other elements such as difference-blindness may not be useful in defining a person.

2. Challenges

The biggest challenge for me was to confront my own notion of a person. As described in the introduction, I had a particular understanding of who is a person due to my own 'multicultural background' which gave me a plurality of beliefs; some which were reconciled but some that were not. How was I going to attempt the problem of conceptualising pluralism and locating a notion of others in a substantive idea of a person which offered an objective and impartial basis for education without being biased? Interestingly, this was a question that one of my examiners posed to me during my viva.

I found during the course of my research that it was difficult for me to articulate my thoughts on the issue of 'others'. Far from having an unbiased perspective of 'others', I found that I did have prejudices. I found that my own perceptions of 'others' were sometimes challenged by those very differences I sought to accept. I found that there was a dichotomy in dealing with others in relationships – in terms of who they are as persons and how I ought to perceive them.

My main concern was that on examination of my perception towards 'others' such as my friends, there were some friends whom I could relate to as persons without considering their differences but there were also those whom I was forced to consider their differences because those differences had a strong place in defining their identity as persons. This in part could be because of the nature of pluralism in Malaysia which defined a person purely by their ethnicity and religion. In the process of doing this research I came to the conclusion that the problem for me was not the differences themselves but how I could not be open and sincere in my dealings with them. These things limited my relationship with them as friends. For instance, I could not be as open and candid about issues to do with ethnicity and religion and had to limit what said to them thus making the relationship more superficial. This made me define certain people by their ethnicity and religion although I myself did not see them as such. As a result, I was concerned if I could examine this issue of 'others' without prejudice. There was a risk that I could identify with certain individuals or communities better than others while alienating some. I needed to guard against thinking along the lines of ethnicity and religion and focusing on the problem of pluralism as more fundamentally embedded in the issue of a shared humanity. Engaging continuously and confronting the issues frankly in my mind allowed me to be open about my thoughts on the problem of pluralism particularly the limited idea of a person that exists in public policy and practice of education in Malaysia.

This where I found that the idea of a communicative stand on research, that is, research which moves beyond neutrality to being open and sincere about the problems and challenges of the research, useful in helping me weave my way through the very difficult and contentious topic of pluralism and the idea of a person.

D. Conclusion

This article has attempted to show that philosophical research into topics such as pluralism especially when it is contextually based can have implications for the research and how the researcher approaches the issue being studied.

This aspect of research is often overlooked especially in philosophy. Maybe philosophy is supposed to be something that we engage with at a distance. However, as my chapter has shown it is not possible if we genuinely want to address philosophical issues in particular contexts. From a wider perspective, the implication of what is discussed in this chapter as it pertains to my research and research in similar areas suggests that research has to be communicative and requires open and sincere engagement with the issue being researched.

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