INTRODUCTION
CHAPTER I

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In the concise Colombia Encyclopedia, the word “Culture” is defined as “a way of life of a given society passed down from one generation to the next through learning and experience”. Culture implies every aspect of life from the way people behave with one another to the natural environment. It includes beliefs and values as well as assumptions and perceptions. People’s behaviours, without them realizing it, stem from culture and cultural values. (Jonomay Lambert et al. 1994). Therefore, culture includes almost every aspect of human existence – food, clothing, language, physical features, values, beliefs and attitudes.

Many modern industrialized societies are multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious. Although immigration is likely to have been responsible for the cultural or ethnic diversity, it may go back many such generations.

The problem faced by subgroups within a community may be of multifactorial causation. The evil of racial discrimination, religious differences in addition to possible ethnic or cultural variation may be some of the causes for such problems. ‘Culture’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘religion’ all concern features that involve group characteristics that define values and
styles of life. Group characteristics may lie in living conditions including poverty, employment opportunities, education, housing policies etc. Cultural influences may be important in peoples’ attitude to different indication of possible psychopathology.

Malaysia is an example for such a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious society wherein people of Chinese, Indian and Malay race live harmoniously. Although the pre-adolescents share a common geographical and political arena, the distinct differences in the form of marital quality and child rearing among these ethnic groups have differentiated them in terms of their adjustment patterns, perception of their family environment and behavioural patterns with regard to the academic and adaptive spheres.

Thus, five major areas of social functioning that serve these needs can be listed as: (1) the political sector’s public goal is to govern and protect us; (2) the economic sector’s is to provide us with goods and services; (3) the religious sector’s is to minister to our spiritual needs; (4) the educational sector’s is to teach us skills to prepare us for life and work; (5) the family’s is to produce and socialize children and provide its members with companionship. Obviously, these activities are not carried out by individuals working in isolation, instead, society’s needs are met by the
institution of people in groups. Thus, institutions can be seen as a relatively stable configuration of values, norms, statuses, roles, groups, and organizations that provides a structure for patterning human behaviour to meet the social needs that exist in a particular area of activity. (Norman Goodman et al. 1982).

Cultural diversity exists among societies in part because of the ecological factor, the adjustment of human beings to their environment. In other words, cultural diversity occurs in part because societies adapt differently to the practical problems of survival.

Finally, cultural diversity stems from the existence of groups that are somewhat separate from the larger culture. These groups participate in the larger culture – they may speak the language, work in regular jobs, eat and rest like others and so on. But, despite this participation, these groups have some ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving that set them apart from the dominant culture. These groups – known as sub-cultures and counter-cultures – are more prevalent in large, complex societies.

A sub-culture is a group that is part of the dominant culture but differs from it in some important aspects. One of the clearest illustrations of a sub-culture is an ethnic minority concentrated in one location, such as San
Francisco's China Town. Early Chinese immigrants brought much of their native culture with them to America and have attempted to retain it by passing it from generation to generation. Although, Chinese residence of China Town has been greatly affected by American culture, they have retained many cultural patterns on their own, such as language and family structure (Jon M. Shepard, 1984).

The discussion of cultural diversity may have left the impression that there are no cultural similarities from one culture to another. This impression is false. Anthropologists, in attempting to identify the common denominator of cultures, listed seventy-odd cultural universals, or general cultural traits, thought to exist in all known cultures. These include athletic sports, cooking, courtship, division of labour, education, etiquette, funeral rites, family, government, hospitality, housing, incest taboos, inheritance rules, joking, language, law, medicine, marriage, mourning, music, obstetrics, property rights, religious rituals, sexual restrictions, status differences, and tool making. When each of these universals is examined more closely, the similarity among cultures become even more apparent. For example, funeral rites in all cultures include display of grief, ways of disposing of the death body, and rituals involving the supernatural. Just because societies share a cultural universal, however, does not mean that they will express it in the
same way. Quite different ways of handling the same general problem are usually developed by each culture. The biological similarity shared by all humans helps to account for the presence of cultural universals. Since children must be born and cared for, if a society is to survive, some type of family structure must exist. Groups that have deliberately eliminated the family – such as the Shakers – have disappeared. Since people become ill, there must be some sort of medical care. Since people die, there must be funeral rites, mourning, and inheritance rules. The birth of babies requires some form of obstetrics. Since food is necessary, cooking must exist. A list of how human biological similarity influences culture could go on.

Finally, ‘cultural universals’ exist because of societies face many of the same problems in maintaining social life. If a society is to survive, certain social provisions must be made; new members must be socialized, goods and services must be produced and distributed, property of the death must be passed on, means of dealing with the supernatural must be devised, tasks must be assigned, work must be accomplished (Jon M. Shepard, 1984).

Malaysia being a country where cultural diversities and similarities co-exist harmoniously among the three ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese and Indians is the most striking feature of its social matrix. A social minority exists
when a significant number of culturally or racially alien people are permanently included within a dominating (and usually much larger) cultural system. The co-existence of two distinct cultural systems implies two sets of associated values, beliefs, social expectations, institutional systems and approaches to social relations. Such a situation calls for a social adjustment in which the minority, usually the less powerful group, but not necessarily in the numerical minority, makes most of the social and cultural change. Since all cultures contain mechanisms for sustaining and transmitting their values, there is resistance in both groups to the adaptive process. Resistance tends to be maximum when the cultural differences are greater, and to decline and disappear when the differences have become imperceptible as a consequence of the adaptive process.

Cultural differences between the minority group and the dominant group with which they live may run the entire gamut of the social order. There may be two unique languages, different technological levels and orientation, different kinds of basic social and institutional organizations, different and opposed value systems, and different culturally approved life styles.

It is important to recognize that the minority group phenomenon is a fundamental part of the development of large social systems. Though
formed initially by territorial displacement of a large number of people belonging to one ethnic group, the displacement may be abrupt or gradual, rapid or traumatic. When minority groups develop by voluntary immigration, it is often in response to an economic situation where new resources or better job opportunities are available. A language barrier will be removed at first on the basis of a limited vocabulary and some failure of mutual understanding, but a sufficiently specialized vocabulary is soon established to permit work to go on. (Gene F. Acuff et al. 1973). Malaysia probably is one of the countries in the world where such smooth amalgamation of the three ethnic groups can be viewed in practice.

Recent studies state that inter-personal harmony is the keynote in East Asian thinking (Moore, 1967; Rosenberger, 1992). It is a theme derived from Confucian philosophy, which teaches that truly meaningful existence is conceived only in relation to others (Bond & Hwang, 1986). East Asians are less disturbed by cognitively dissonant situation (Heine & Lehman, 1997), and are less likely to believe that behaviour should align with private attitudes (Kashima, Siegal, Tanaka and Kashima, 1997), and are less critical of incongruent acts displayed between private and public situations (Fu, Lee, Cameron, and Xu, 2001). The ability to spontaneously detect and align the self to the subtle expectations of different social situations is considered a
critical social skill in East Asian cultures (Choi S.G., 2000). Well-adjusted people, for instance, have a sense of self-worth that requires less affirmation from external sources (Crocker and Wolfe, 2001). The above studies perhaps reinforce the fact that the peaceful co-existence is a reality in Malaysia.

Harmony among the cultures is undoubtedly an important factor for experiencing higher values of co-operation, co-existence etc. which are reflected in the stability of the basic unit of society – the family. Different ethnic groups with their unique cultural practices have their distinct values expressed in belief systems and are exhibited in different behaviour patterns of its members. Therefore, the more we understand the uniqueness of ethnic group and culture, the more we understand behaviour patterns of different members in a culturally blended society.

There are three major ethnic groups, namely, Malays, Chinese and Indians, constituting the population of Malaysia and each of these ethnic groups have their unique cultural style of family practices and social customs. Child rearing is a family oriented phenomenon which is directly related to behavioural pattern of children. School is an institution which plays a very important role in meeting not only the educational but socialization need of the child.
Malaysia being an inter-racial country – the school reflects a healthy mixture of children coming from all the three ethnic groups.

Sub-cultural comparison within the same culture is required to study in depth the unique cultural style of family practices and social customs. Such studies facilitate our better understanding of the different cultures. Sub-cultural homogeneity has unique components in their value systems. This uniqueness give rise to a variety of social learning practices within a culture and such variety can sometimes also make it difficult to define a single culture of Malaysia unless we look into sub-cultural components within the same culture. Some of the sub-cultural components to be reviewed are different demographic variables such as groups defined according to race, sex, ethnic origin, place of residence, socio-economic status, educational status, religious affiliation, political beliefs and so forth.

The racial membership tends to assign the child to a sub-culture of socialization experiences. This set of cultural influences on personality development has attracted a particular interest recently because of its contingency to delicate social and political issues. Unfortunately, the study of racial differences in child development is clouded with confusion and ambiguity.
According to Pareek et al. (1970), “the child’s orientation towards his/her parents, peers, school and him/herself, in terms of the satisfaction he/she derives from his/her interactional relationship with these significant others and him/herself”.

Just as the year is divided into seasons, so too human life can be divided in stages – infancy; childhood; adolescence; early, middle and late adulthood and old age. Unique experiences owing at specific points in the life of children make them in many ways different. The period between adulthood and childhood is particularly dangerous and vulnerable stage in the development of an individual personality. Adolescence is not only a period of storm and stress but also of possibilities and promises. Influence of hormonal changes, physical and sexual maturation and variety of emotional factors are also specific to adolescence.

Pre-adolescent is the age group between 9-12, where a growing child is not yet exposed to many of the above said issues of adolescence and yet has sufficient cognitive development where integration of information about oneself and the outside world could be observed and explained. At this age, a child develops the ability to formulate hypothesis and explanation of concrete concepts. For a smooth development of a child’s transition
into adulthood, it requires a strong foundation to make the period of adolescence a pleasant experience.

Some of the important factors which can strengthen a good pre-adolescence period are a stable family environment which follows a good quality of marital life among parents, which is reflected in child rearing practices. This in turn, directly reflects on the adjustment pattern of the given child.

Hence, there is a need to study the pre-adolescent adjustment and perception of family environment among the children in Malaysia. Since there is sparse literature in the given area, it may be a potentially fruitful avenue for research in this direction.