Working With Plantation Communities:
A Reflection of Social Issues

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Abstract

The plantation industry in Malaysia is aggressively expanding over the past decade driven by global demands for palm oil as a food staple and more recently bio fuels. The rapid growth in the industry is heavily dependent upon high labour and workforce. Such intensity has carried out social impact on the communities including plantation workers, small holders and their dependents. Therefore, this paper will outline what appear to be never ending issues impetus social problems. Ethnic conflict, fighting, gambling, alcohol abuses are only a few issues that call for immediate multi-action plan from all involved stakeholders. Those issues can be the causes as well as the effects. The contributing factors form a chain reaction to the whole social dynamics in the plantation's climate.The main aim is hence to breach the gap between industries, practitioners, and academicians in order to develop the competencies of the next generation social workers. They can play their roles in tackling the social issues, taking into account the different contexts and environment.

Keywords: social issues, plantations, estate communities, cause and effect

Introduction

For a few decades, plantation industry is one of the big industries that contribute to the growth of Malaysia economic. Malaysia depends on market expansion as most of its exporting the product. Now the world is experiencing a critical shortage of oils and fats in view of growing population, growing of economic and bio-fuels demand. Thus it causes the plantation industry to become one of the sectors that offer a large number of occupations working at the estate since the plantation industry in Malaysia is aggressively expanding. However, the problems related to the employment of workers in estate plantation are numerous. Social problems are one of the problems that keep rising in number which brought vary problem such as alcoholism, gambling, fighting and other issues in the estate community.

Social Issues in Estate Plantation

Social problems, known as social issues, affect every society either it is big or small. Even in relatively separated, rarely populated areas, a

group will face social problems. Part of this is due to the fact that some members of a society living close enough together will have conflicts. It's virtually impossible to avoid them, and even people who live together in the same house don't always get along seamlessly. On the whole though, when social problems are mentioned they tend to refer to the problems that affect people living together in a society, for instant alcohol abuse. Alcohol problems have different seriousness from mild to life threatening and the worse is when it becomes alcoholism. Alcoholism is a further known as the problem with alcohol. It refers to excessive or problematic use and it is also known as the over-consumption of alcohol drink or beverages which it is uncontrollable used.

For people with alcoholism, drinking becomes the primary medium through which they can deal with people, work, and life. Alcohol dominates their thinking, emotions, and actions. They are preoccupied with drinking, deny their own addiction, and continue to drink even though they are aware of the dangers. Over time, some people become tolerant to the effects of drinking and require more alcohol to become intoxicated, creating the illusion that they can "hold their liquor." They have blackouts after drinking and frequent hangovers that cause them to miss work and other normal activities (Peckham, 1998). This cause is parallel with the working conditions in the estate plantation that used bone-breaking energy and high mental of workers which lead to stress life and they will release it with drinking more alcohol to get drunk. However, too much alcohol can influence a person to do things he

would never even think of doing if he were sober. Collins (1982) explored the relationship between alcohol consumption and criminal behavior. He concluded that there is sufficient evidence to justify the inference that alcohol is sometimes causally implicated in the occurrence of serious crime.

Gambling problems are another social problem among the workers in estate plantation. With general purpose of winning fast money or something value weather material goods. Usually, it is betting of money or betting on something that is worth for an event with an unexpected output and with the general purposes of winning fast money or something value weather material goods or something else. In the Canadian context, gambling problem has been defined as "gambling behaviour that creates negative consequences for the gambler, others in his or her social network, or for the community" (Ferris & Wynne, 2001). There are many factors of gambling problems as the gambling addiction is considered an illness similar to alcoholism or chronic compulsive disorders. It can begin at an early age and often is inherited from family members. There may be a genetic component in compulsive gamblers in which people from families with a history of gambling, often over generations, may be at risk. Other than that, chronic gamblers may be insecure, immature with a refusal to behave responsibly. As in the estate communities, gambling may give bad social impacts which lead the worker to have financial problems and indebtedness. They may spend their wages on behalf to fulfill their finance to play the game. Next, it leads the worker to commit a crime as it

found that pathological gamblers commit more crimes in order to finance their playing.

Social Issues and Coping Strategies

Many factors influence the coping strategies of handling the workers' social issues of the different cultural backgrounds. These difficulties are compounded when different cultures, each with its own set of attitudes, values, beliefs and assumptions of how to negotiate and communicate, collide. Gudykunst, et al., (1996) discusses the concepts of "high-context" and "low-context" cultures. In high context cultures, such as Indonesia and Malaysia cultures, where the meanings of gestures and the unspoken message is very much embedded within the context in which it is spoken. Low context cultures (such as the German, Scandinavian and American cultures), on the other hand, depend more on the spoken word and less on the situation in which the message was given (Gudykunst et al., 2002; Salleh, 2005).

Another relevant theory is Social identity theory (SIT) which was developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979) to understand the psychological basis of intergroup discrimination. Social identity theory suggests that people identify with groups in such a way as to maximize positive distinctiveness; groups offer both identities (they tell us who we are) and self-esteem (they make us feel good about ourselves). This quest for positive distinctiveness means that people's sense of who they are is defined in terms of 'we' rather than 'I'.

Method

This article presents an analysis of five in-depth interviews of five plantation executives' experience on working in five different oil palm plantations in Sarawak. Each interview was qualitatively and manually analyzed involved searching recurring themes across a data set (Braun & Wilkinson, 2003, p. 30). For the purpose of this study, the thematic analysis was driven by a few particular analytic questions. In this case, the themes we identify, code, and analyses were an accurate reflection of the content of the entire data set in the interviews. Themes or patterns within data were identified in a theoretical or deductive or 'top down' way (Boyatzis, 1998). The analysis was driven by the researchers' theoretical or analytic interest in the area, and is thus more explicitly analyst driven. For the purpose of this study, themes are identified at a latent or interpretative level, an attempt to theorize the significance of the patterns and their broader meanings and implications (Patton, 2002, often in relation to previous literature. The researchers identified and examined the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data. Rubin and Rubin (1995,p. 226) claim that analysis is exciting because 'you discover themes and concepts embedded throughout your data'. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. In conclusion, thematic analysis has been utilized because the area of investigation is new and the focus of study is social issues in estate plantation.

Data Analysis

The analysis process starts when the investigator begins to notice, and look for, patterns of meaning and issues of potential interest in the interviews. The endpoint is the reporting of the content and meaning of patterns (themes) in the data. Analysis involves a constant moving back and forward between the entire data set, the coded extracts of data that we are analyzing, and the analysis of the data that we are producing. The writing began with the jotting down of ideas and potential coding schemes, and continues right through the entire coding/analysis process. Analysis is not linear but a recursive process where movement is back and forth needed throughout the phases. Having identified the need for research into the subjective interpretations and personal experiences of manager and assistant managers handling the social issues in the estate plantation, the thematic analysis appealed to us because it is accessible and theoretically flexible approach. Two major themes emerged during the analysis.

Results

The participants in the study are a manager and assistant managers working in two main companies of oil palm plantation in Sarawak. They came from four concentrated areas of estate plantation including Sri Aman, Betong, Miri and Bintulu.

The current study revealed that the commonly reported cases arose in the estate lingered upon the different background of TKI (Tenaga Kerja Indonesia) in particular the different ethnic groups, alcohol abuse, gambling and fighting. Other than the common reported social issues, another emerging theme is on the coping strategy of the assistant managers and manager in the state.

Theme 1: Common Reported Cases

Ethnic Conflict

All of the participants associated social problem in the estate is due to the different ethnic group of where the workers come from for example, Bugis, Bima, Lombok, Makasar, Timur and Sambas. They claimed that the workers' sense of patriotism is high and always support only people who are from the same ethnic group. Malik said:

> "Their attitude towards each ethnic group is strong, if there is an Imam who is Bugis, the rest won't follow because they want an imam of the same ethnic group"

Shah also thought that ethnicity is also a cause of major arguments among the workers:

> "Some still carry the same mentality they have from their original places whereby there are no strict rules and law. It took years for the workers to get use to our law"

The study indicated that due to the different races, ethnic group, the workers are always subdivided into their own clan and any dispute will trigger further arguments and fighting among the different groups. For example, Suhaili and Leonard identified that such racial prejudice is very common among the new workers, who had only been here for a couple of years. A very simple gesture or a simple cause can trigger a

huge dispute and fighting and to an extend killing each other.

Fighting

Key sub theme judges to be an important social problem in the estate is fighting among the workers. Participants shared their experience of handling a mild case of fighting to the serious case of fighting. All participants have cases referred to the police and the consequences will be the deportation of the worker in their original country.

> If it is a small case, we will call them in the office and interrogate. We will advise. (Suhaili)

> The reason can be a small matter, a friend went to the canteen and the other friend simply left because he's driving a tractor, so throw a stone to the friend and then quarrel. (Malik)

Participants claimed that fighting can occur from the simplest thing like waiting for a friend to a major thing like cutting a finger and involving weapons like *praying*, knife and sickles.

> A heavy case will be referred to the on-duty security and they will lodge a police report. (Malik)

While considering a fighting issue, most participants believed that it may start from being drunk. Drinking will lead to arguments and then this will lead to more people involve and get into a fight. A serious case will definitely be referred to the police and they will be deported. According to Shah, after involving in a fight, the workers could not be back into the estate because it will cause hatred among other people and may cause revenge.

When they are under alcohol influence, things will become more complicated. (Shah)

In addition to the different ethnic group, all participants highlighted the drinking habit or alcohol abuse by the workers is one of the major social issues in estate plantations.

Alcoholism

Across interviews, all participants attributed the social problem in the estate plantation is due to the drinking problem of the workers. Although most of the workers are Muslim and it is prohibited to drink in the estate, the workers can get the supply from the outside. And although it has been made a serious offense to drink in the estate of the company, many workers manage to get the supply and drink excessively. They reported that the drinking problem is peak after pay day:

> *The common case is drinking problem. Especially in Sarawak, the culture is different and the workers can get supply easily from local people.* (Shah)

> Normally it all started with being intoxicated… once they are intoxicate, they started to argue, fight and nag and then things become very serious. (Malik)

> I would say that the fighting started with the drinking. (Suhaili)

A recurrent theme in the interaction with the participants in this study indicated that alcoholism is indeed a cause and factor for serious criminal offense in the estate plantations. Dispute occurs after the arguments may lead to serious fighting and then to a serious police case.

Gambling

One of the most consistent findings in this study is the problem of gambling among the workers. This is reported to be one of the top three cases reported on the estate. Just like alcoholism, gambling has beenpeaked during the pay day and a few days after. Shah's expression is a solid evidence of his experience handling the issue in the estate.

> We will request the security to patrol more often during pay day time. The workers know about this and they will find a spot where no other people know about it. (Shah)

> Sometimes they gamble just for fun and sometimes they do it to get fast cash. (Adam)

Both Shah and Adam expressed their frustration of never ending cases of gambling even though they highlighted the company's policy against alcohol and gambling at every morning master, the cases still reoccur. For gambling cases, the participants reported that their tackling strategy is mostly by giving warnings and reminder.

Theme 2: Coping Strategies

Clearly for the participants, handling the workers is indeed a very challenging thing especially for their own safety. They always believe that the best approach to tackle the issues with the workers is by being modest, not too harsh and not too soft. Malik used an interesting term to describe his way:

> *We must know how to tackle the issues. Must know how to cubit tiup (give and take). (Malik)*

According to Malik, his experience of handing the worker's problem is mainly by making them their friends and at the same time, the workers still respect him as a boss. Shah also thought that c*ubit tiup* is the best approach because no matter what happened, Shah indicated that the workers will still recognize who their boss is even though they are very angry at that time. Leonard claimed that:

> *If we are good, the workers will respect us. (Leonard)*

Across interviews, all participants agreed that they will advise, persuade the workers first and if they need the security to interfere they will call the security and normally once it reached the security it will become a police case. The current study revealed that the participants are quite fragile in term of their safety in the estate plantation, nobody is perfectly sure and confident of their safety. They were all saying that in handling the issues among the workers, at the end of the day it goes back to their safety. The price they have to pay when they handle and manage the workers' problem are their own safety and their own lives!

> Bertawakal dan berserah ajak (submit to God), have to be brave to carry yourself in the estate. (Malik)

> Ajal maut di tangan Tuhan (life and death is in God's hand). I'm earning a living for my wife and kids. Most important thing is we do justice to them. We take care of them, they will take care of us. (Shah)

> We tried our best, we are doing this for the company to increase the company's productivity and performance. We treat them nicely, if we don't have workers we'll be in trouble. (Leonard)

> We will be very strict when it comes to the company's policy, we can be very firm with our decision for example, give them warning, suspension from work for a week and worse, sending them back home. (Suhaili)

The study indicated that the best way to handle the workers is by being strict and firm but at the same time they must be reasonable and exercise some flexibility.

Discussion

The finding in this study indicated that the main issue isconflict and fighting among the different ethnic groups. The workers are said to clique among their own ethnic groups and will favor their people with utmost support. The participants highlight the favoritism among the same ethnic group is common to theextent when there is a fight among certain groups, the same members from other places will come to the estate to support their group member. This explained the precaution to not bring back the fighting people into the estate because the case will become a serious and bigger car. Normally, the fighting cases will be referred to police and the immediate action will be the deporting of the worker. According to Tajfel and Turner (1985), people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort. In this study, the workers relate to other members of the same group in an interpersonal manner and personal relationship exists between them. Social identity theory suggests that people identify with groups in such a way as to maximize positive distinctiveness;

groups offer both identities (they tell us who we are) and self-esteem (they make us feel good about ourselves). The finding of the current study supports element of this theory. The workers express in-group favoritism with other members of the same ethnic groups.

Much of the literature discusses alcohol as giving the negative social impact in estate plantation communities. The majority of the workers appeared to consume alcohol after pay day. This is the time when they can afford to buy and spend for alcohol. The easy access to get a supply from outside the estate increased the number of people into alcohol excessive consumption. The alcohol can affect one's hormone level and if the person is intoxicated, their coordination and judgement become impaired. Impaired judgment can lead to tragic events such as fighting among the workers in the estate communities. This finding supported by Collins (1982) who explored the relationship between alcohol consumptions and criminal behaviour. They found that alcohol abuse is associated with an increased criminal offense including fighting, burglary, rape and assault.

Gambling appeared to be another social problem among the workers in the oil palm estate plantations. The findings revealed that apart from drinking alcohol, gambling is another avenue for 'having fun' after pay day, during the weekends and after work. They often engaged in gambling in a place unknown to the authorities to ambush. It is apparent that the worker's general purpose is to win fast money or something valuable including material goods which drive them to bet and for something they think as worth it.

However, chronic gamblers will give bad social impacts in the estate communities because of financial problems and indebtedness. Hence, as access to funds become limited, many resorts to illegal activities including theft. The finding is parallel with Ferris and Wynne (2001) who found that gambling behavior creates negative consequences for the gamblers and others in his or her social networks or for the community.

Other than common reported cases, the study revealed a significant coping strategy of handling the issues among the workers. The term is called "cubit tiup" or give and take. For the manager and the assistant managers, handling the workers is not like command and order. They tended to deny that they way they handle the workers is like what happened in an army. All participants agreed that the best way to handle the worker is not to be too harsh and too soft. If the approach is too harsh both parties will bear the consequences including safety of the management people and the workers may become more rebellious. If the approach is 'too soft', the workers may have no respect towards the management and this may cause further difficulties in handling the workers. The participants claimed that some psychological approach has to be used to deal with the workers in order to have a win-win situation. The management has to remind the workers on the alcohol and gambling policies from time to time. It is clear that alcohol and gambling are prohibited in the estate plantation.

The emerging themes of commonly reported cases including the ethnic conflict, alcoholism, fighting, and gambling, and the coping strategies are interrelated and multifaceted. We would highlight that the social issues arose out of culturally-based differences in context and expectations. The managers and assistant managers appear to use an integrating style in dealing with social issues including the "cubit tip". However, the finding indicated that by learning certain strategies and becoming aware of various factors that influence the process, the manager and assistant managers succeed in overcoming the social issues in the estate.

Other than that, such social problem involves huge amount of expenditure in order to reduce it. The company needs to organize such a campaign or program to make workers aware and caution about how these problems can affect their lives and their working career. Other than that, the consequences of terminating worker will result in the increasing of recruitment expenditure. This is due to recruitment of new worker involves job interviewing and training program. All this activity required a huge amount of money to organize it. Besides that, after the termination the company needs to return them back to their country because the workers are under the responsibility of the company. This is very costly. And if there is a termination, there should be a recruitment of new workers to increase the workforce.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the research, several conclusions can be derived. It is found that the commonly reported cases reported to the

manager and assistant managers are cases related to the ethnic conflict that lead to arguments and fighting. Other than that, alcohol-related problems and gambling are also top of the lists. Another emerging theme includes the coping strategy adopted by the participants in handling the former social issues. The effect of social problem to the economic is the lack of work force. This is due to many of the workers had been taken to disciplinary action such as termination of workers. The consequences of terminating the workers will decrease the labor force or input cost, therefore when the labor force decreasing, thus the productivity also does not decrease nor the schedule of work also needs to be altered in order to stabilize the workforce. Thus, the social problem really affects the economy at large and the curbing of the social issues is deemed necessary. In other words 'prevention is better than cure'.

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