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Influence of Interethnic Contact on Interethnic Attitudes of Malay and Chinese-Malaysian University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

Although interethnic contact is expected to contribute towards positive interethnic attitudes, it is not clear how much interethnic contact contributes towards interethnic attitudes in contexts where there is "no real majority," such as Malaysia. The data for this study come from a self-administered survey involving 379 Malay and 381 Chinese-Malaysian university students in large public universities. As predicted, interethnic contact contributes significantly towards regarding different ethnic groups positively. Although the effect is small, it holds for both ethnic groups. The present findings improve the generalizability of the predictions of contact theory regarding interethnic attitude, which have been mainly observed in studies conducted in the Western world, as well as extend the theory beyond the majority-minority and host-immigrant contexts.

Key words: Interethnic contact, interethnic attitude, Malay-Chinese Malaysian relations

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Introduction

The multiethnic setting in Malaysian universities offers a unique opportunity to test the influence of interethnic contact on interethnic attitudes. Previous studies on majority-minority relations, which were mostly conducted in the Western world, have generally equated the majority with the host or the dominant group. Departing from the common understanding that the majority is necessarily the dominant group, the present study focuses on the Malays, the indigenous people known as *Bumiputera* ("sons of the soil"), who are the majority in Malaysia, but are not dominant in the economic sphere. The Chinese-Malaysian, on the other hand, although constituting a minority in the overall population, commands a "majority voice" in the economic sphere.

Despite this economic disparity, Malaysia has been successful in managing the challenges of a multiethnic society and has enjoyed a relatively stable political existence since the ethnic clashes of 1969. The effort to maintain and further improve interethnic relations in this country is not over and will never be over, as new challenges have emerged in tandem with Malaysia's progress and the increase in its citizens' democratic freedoms. A series of reports on ethnic relations that appeared in several mainstream papers in November 2006 testifies to the importance of the issue (see e.g., New Sunday Times 2006). The Malaysian government aims to further improve the numerous mechanisms that have been in place to promote interethnic contact to further improve interethnic relations and solidarity in the country. Promoting and strengthening interethnic integration is an important national goal in all of Malaysia's five-year national development plans.

Contact theory postulates that interethnic contact should lead to improved interethnic attitudes when the contact occurs in a favorable environment and on an equal-status basis (Amir cited in Berryman-Fink, 2006). The multiethnic environment in Malaysian universities offers an excellent opportunity for youths to develop and strengthen positive attitudes towards their peers from different ethnic groups. This is because interaction among students of various cultural and religious identities should occur on an equal basis. To enhance interethnic contact and relations, Malaysian universities actively promote and emphasize collaborative learning in their curriculum and co-curricular activities. Students also learn about the cultures of the various ethnic groups and ethnic relations in the country in a prescribed interethnic relations course, which is normally taken in the first year.

The present study examines interethnic contact and interethnic attitudes in institutions of higher learning. It tests the influence of interethnic contact on interethnic attitudes, by controlling for the possible confounding influence of interethnic socialization during primary and secondary school and at the place of residence. Other controls include age, gender, and socio-economic status. Based on the argument that the effect of interethnic contact may differ across societal groups (e.g. Griffiths & Nesdale, 2006), the present study examines the influence of interethnic contact on the interethnic attitudes of Malaysia public university students from two major ethnic groups—Malay-Malaysian and Chinese-Malaysian.

Ethnic Relations in Malaysia

Malaysia, as a young nation, is about five decades old. The Malays constitute around 63.0 per cent of the population and the Chinese some 25.0 per cent. The rest of the population consists of Indians and other ethnic groups (Government of Malaysia, 2006).

The Malays, Chinese and Indians are the main ethnic groups in Malaysia, with the Malay to non-Malay ratio being about 60:40. However, Baharuddin (2005) argues that, in a strict sense, there is no real majority or minority in terms of Malay-Chinese relations in Malaysia. This is because, although the Chinese-Malaysians are the minority, they dominate the economy, while the Malays, who are the minority in economic affairs, have the majority voice in the political sphere.

To understand interethnic relations in Malaysia, it is useful to look briefly at its history. Malaysia (formerly the Federation of Malaya) began with a large immigrant population. The colonial rulers instituted policies favoring a massive immigration of Chinese and Indian labor, primarily to meet the labor needs of the colony, to the point of radically and permanently altering the original demographic profile of the Malaysian population. More importantly, as pointed by Furnivall (1956), the colonialists had instituted a divide-and-rule policy that resulted to a social order segmented by ethnic and custom. Each ethnic group holds to its own religion, its own culture and language, and its own ideas and ways. In the economic sphere, there is a division along ethnic lines. Economic disparity has grown as Malaysia progressed during the early post-war years, and the economic disparities emphasized ethnic and cultural cleavages. This economic divide is still an issue after almost five decades of independence (Sriskandarajah, 2005).

Prior to independence, Malaysia had its share of ethnic strife (Baharuddin, 2005). In addition, Baharuddin (2005) found, a clash between Malays, who were perceived as being on the side of the Japanese, and the anti-Japanese Chinese spread to involve Malays and Chinese who neither supported nor opposed the Japanese. Socio-political instability because of labor unrest was another challenge. The Communists were behind the labor protest, led by the illegal Malayan Communist Party, which was a Chinese-dominated organization. The colonial government was forced to proclaim a State of Emergency throughout Malaya in 1948, which lasted for 12 years. Malay-Chinese relations were tested during this period. Fortunately, the majority of the Chinese decided to support the government against the communist insurgency. Baharuddin (2005) also mentioned that another significant historical incident for Malay-immigrant relations during the initial period of the Emergency was the opposition of the Malays to the Malayan Union idea, a political project which benefited the immigrant population and had been proposed by the colonial government. From a group threat theory perspective (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004), such a proposal represented a political threat to the indigenous people, and was hence opposed. The proposal was aborted and replaced with a federal government under the Federation of Malaya scheme.

In spite of the religious and cultural differences among the various ethnic groups, much progress has been made in Malay-non-Malay relations. This is partly attributed to a social contract that was instituted in the federal constitution (Mohd Noor, Lee Abdullah, & Omar, 2004). The most significant aspect of the contract was the agreement by the indigenous peoples (the Malays) to grant citizenship to the immigrant communities. This changed the character of the nation from one that originally belonged to the Malay to one that also belonged to the Chinese and other ethnic groups. The non-Malays now shared political power with the Malays. In return for being granted these political rights, the immigrant communities agreed to special economic privileges for the Malays, given their disadvantaged position. This constituted the political, economic, legal and moral foundation for the distributive justice policies of the country. Although

the Chinese and other immigrant groups were granted the right to educate their young in their mother tongue, Malay was accorded the status of the official national language. While there is freedom of worship, and all communities are free to practice their respective religious beliefs and customs, Islam is accorded the status of the official religion of the federation.

In coping with a multiethnic society, ethnic-based politics was not outlawed (Baharuddin, 2005). As a result political parties have generally turned out to be ethnic and/or region-based. The emergence of ethnic-based political parties arguably aggravates the existing ethnic cleavages. Nevertheless, harmonious interethnic relations have been made possible through the sharing of political power. This is conducted through a grand coalition of parties representing the major ethnic groups. The approach taken was inclusive, empowering all ethnic groups by giving them a share in decision-making and a say collectively in charting the future of the country. Ethnic interests are therefore moderated within the coalition, a formula which has thus far achieved consistent success (Baharuddin, 2005; Mohd Noor, Lee Abdullah, & Omar, 2004; Sundram, 2004).

The failure to address the income disparities between the various ethnic communities was cited as the primary reason for the ethnic riots in 1969 (e.g., Sundram, 2004). Thus, in response to the ethnic riots, the government announced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1970. The NEP had two prongs, namely "poverty eradication regardless of ethnicity" and "restructuring society to eliminate the identification of ethnicity with economic function" (Sundram, 2004). Aided by measures embodied in the NEP and other initiatives, the gap between the Malays and other ethnic groups has decreased in numerous areas of the economy. While this ethnic affirmative action policy has brought positive results, some, particularly the non-Malays, still view it negatively. While Malaysia's affirmative action policies based on ethnicity may have been vital in ensuring ethnic harmony, it is not clear whether they should continue (Sriskandarajah, 2005). He argued further that pursuing NEP-style policies may exacerbate ethnic tensions and resentment among the non-*Bumiputera* communities. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, despite of the positive results from the implementation of the NEP, the Malays still lag behind in the economic sphere compared to their Malaysian-Chinese counterparts. This holds true at the time of this writing. Sriskandarajah (2005) reported that despite the reduction in income disparity since 1970, the mean income of the Malays still lags behind the national mean and is well behind the Chinese mean.

In addition to economic restructuring and the redistribution strategy, education was another key instrument used to create harmonious ethnic relations in the country. Many social scientists and educationists have argued that the education system is an important agent of interethnic socialization and multiculturalism (see e.g., Soen, 2002). The argument is that, through education, a common national consciousness, mutual understanding and respect, cultural/religious awareness and sensitivity, and regard for the fundamental rights of all can be fostered. Accordingly, contact and interaction in all social institutions, including educational institutions, is required for managing a plural society. In realizing the goal of solidarity among the various ethnic groups, the Malaysian government has instituted various policies and programs to promote greater interethnic contact and interaction in all social settings. Contact across ethnic groups theoretically facilitates familiarization with other cultures, and in turn promotes cross-

ethnic understanding, sensitivity, and accommodation, as purported by Social Contact Theory (see e.g., Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Lopez, 2004).

Interethnic Contact and Interethnic Attitude

Social Contact Theory holds that increased interaction produces familiarity that leads to acceptance (Valenty & Sylvia 2004). In the realm of interethnic relations, many have argued that interethnic contact fosters a positive attitude, support for integration, and a decreased perception of hostility (see, e.g., Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Lopez, 2004; Pettigrew & Troop, 2000; Stein, Post, & Rinden, 2000; Ward & Masgoret, 2006). The information that one gains and learns from interethnic contact leads to more knowledge about and more accurate perceptions of the other group. The contact hypothesis also implies that greater direct contact leads to smaller differences in attitudes between groups (Schalk-Soekar, Van de Vijver, & Hoogsteder 2004). Nevertheless, many concur that certain conditions should characterize the contact in order to achieve these positive effects (see, e.g., Antonio, 2001). These include the equality of status of all participants, cooperation and the pursuit of common goals, and institutional support. Antonio (2001) argued that the educational institution setting appears to be one in which each of those conditions can possibly exist. However, the effects of contact on attitude vary depending on the nature, quantity and quality of interethnic contact.

Research on the contact hypothesis and the consequences of interethnic contact have found mixed support for the positive effects of contact, although a larger proportion of studies support the contact hypotheses (see e.g., Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Lopez, 2004; Nesdale & Tood, 2000). Differences and weaknesses in measurement may be one possible reason for the inconsistent findings. In spite of extensive research on intercultural contact, a gap exists in the literature. Firstly, most of the studies take place in the West. Secondly, previous intercultural contact studies focus predominantly on the attitude of a majority towards a minority group, as demonstrated by Halualani et al. (2004). On a different note, Nesdale and Tood (2000), in their review of the literature, concluded that much of the supporting research has limited external validity for two reasons: a) researchers experimentally manipulate the group members belong to, and b) the interethnic contact often lacks realism and is usually brief. Another important issue which needs consideration and further examination is the argument that the effects of intercultural contacts may differ across societal domains. Breugelmans and Van de Vijver (2004), for instance, observed a range of attitudes towards multiculturalism in Netherlands, while Pettigrew and Troop (2000) reported a greater effect size for interethnic contact for the majority compared to the minority, group in the United States. Similarly, Dovidio et al. (2000) argued that the effect of intercultural contact may be weak or different for members of ethnic minority groups.

Social scientists have also recognized that attitude is influenced by more than direct contact (e.g., Lopez, 2004; Stein, Post, & Rinden, 2000). Contextual effects, including but not limited to education level, social-economic status, and intercultural socialization experience during adolescence, are possibly implicated in interethnic attitudes and ethnic relations. Thus, the possible influence of these variables needs to be controlled for when examining the relationship between interethnic contact and interethnic attitude.

Research Question and Hypothesis

In Malaysia, the policies and programs introduced to manage interethnic relations have provided political and social stability over the last five decades. Nevertheless, a recent

opinion poll on ethnic relations by the Merdeka Center (2006), which surveyed Malaysians aged 20 years and above, found that, while Malaysians were generally quite happy with their ethnic relations, ethno-centric views, mistrust and misunderstanding remain quite prevalent. The Chinese were more guarded in their interethnic relations compared to other ethnic groups. Although all ethnic groups were equally robust in their endorsement of the national identity, there was a strong opinion that ethnic identities and cultures had to be preserved.

In addition to concern over the distribution of economic and political resources, the availability of new communication technology and the appeal of increased democratic freedom has resulted in a greater awareness of the ethnic, religious and linguistic rights of Malaysians regardless of ethnicity. This in turn placed the current climate of ethnic accommodation at risk (Sriskandarajah, 2005). Others have observed that ethnic polarization, which has plagued public universities for a long time, is not about to go away (see, e.g, Kum Hor, 2006; Mohd Noor et al., 2005). Despite Malaysia's considerable economic progress and advances in avoiding serious interethnic conflict, there are signs that ethnic accommodation is under threat or that interethnic relations are under stress (Sriskandarajah, 2005). Hence, it is vital that continuous efforts are made to improve the quality of cross-ethnic socialization to maintain interethnic harmony and solidarity, alongside regular assessments of the state of interethnic relations.

Based on the literature reviewed above, the present study is argument that interethnic contact should contribute towards positive interethnic attitudes. While support for the positive effect of contact on attitude has been observed in a number of studies, such research has taken place mainly in the Western world and largely focused on majority-minority relations. Empirical studies from outside the Western world are very limited, except for a very few (e.g., Kim et al., 2003). In addition, support on the relationship between interethnic contact and interethnic attitude is less evident. Although interethnic contact is expected to contribute towards positive interethnic attitudes, it is not clear how much interethnic contact contributes towards interethnic attitudes in "no real majority" contexts, such as Malaysia. Furthermore, it is not known if there are differential effects of interethnic contact between Malays and non-Malays. Finally, disaggregate analysis on the influence of interethnic contact on the interethnic attitudes of Malays and Chinese-Malaysian is lacking.

Drawing on the above arguments, it is hypothesized that interethnic contact is a significant predictor of interethnic attitudes in Malaysia, where there is "no real majority." The present study also addresses the question: Is there a differential effect of interethnic contact on interethnic attitude? The present analysis focuses on the Malays and the Chinese-Malaysian, the top two ethnic groups in term of population size.

Methodology

The research reported here is part of a cross-sectional national study on ethnic tolerance among youth and adults. The present report focuses on interethnic contact and the interethnic attitudes of Malays and Chinese-Malaysian studying in Malaysian public universities. The data was collected using a survey instrument specifically designed for the ethnic tolerance study. A self-administered questionnaire was distributed to students in randomly selected classes in four Malaysian universities. Participation was voluntary. The data was collected between March and May 2005. The questionnaire was in Malay and took approximately twenty-five minutes to complete.

Sample

There were 379 usable Malay responses and 381 Malaysian-Chinese responses. In terms of demographics, the age of the respondents ranged from 19 to 25 years, with an average age of 22.1 years (SD=1.35) for the Malay sample and 21.3 (SD=1.82) for the Chinese-Malaysian. There were more females than males (66.4 per cent males and 33.6 per cent males in the Malay sample, and 57.6 per cent females and 42.4 per cent males in the Chinese sample). A majority of the Malay sample (88.8 per cent) attended national schools for their primary and secondary education. However, among the Chinese-Malaysian, a majority (53.7 per cent) attended national-type schools for their primary and secondary education. A national-type school is ethnic-based in which the medium of instruction is in one's mother-tongue. In the case of Chinese national-type schools, the medium of instruction is Chinese. In national schools, on the other hand, the medium of instruction is the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. A majority of the respondents were raised in a mixed community, with most of their parents living in multiethnic neighbourhoods (64.8 per cent and 76.6 per cent for the Malay and Chinese samples, respectively).

Instrument

Each respondent's interethnic attitude was measured with a series of seven statements formatted as 5-point Likert scales. The statements asked how willing they were to accept the view/opinion as expressed in the statement, ranging from "not willing to accept" (1) to "very willing to accept" (5). In the analysis, the five-point scale was recoded into a three-point scale (1= less willing to accept, 2= willing, 3=very readily willing to accept). A higher score on the scale indicates a greater willingness to consider or accommodate the viewpoints and rights of individuals from different ethnic groups. In other words, the measures tapped how non-ethno-centric the respondents were in their interethnic relations. The scale is unidimensional with an acceptable level of reliability (Cronbach's Alpha of 0.71). Table 1 summarizes the means, standard deviation and factor loading of the scale items.

Table 1. *Means and Standard Deviation of Interethnic Attitude Items*

Item	Mean (SD)	Factor Loading
The need of other of different ethnicity must be given due consideration in implementation of development programs.	2.27 (.666)	.63
Only members certain ethnic group can contribute towards national development.	2.12 (.933)	.64
Poverty is an ethnic-based social problem.	1.84 (.895)	.55
The right of an individual must be respected at all cost regardless of his or her ethnic origin.	2.43 (.629)	.67
Only certain ethnic group is well suited for police or army work in ensuring safety and security of the country.	2.29 (.866)	.64
The provision of equal opportunity to all Malaysians must be the top priority of the government.	2.31 (.708)	.54
The satisfaction of all the ethnic groups affected in or	2.11 (.676)	.54

by a community development initiative must be seriously and adequately addressed.		

Note. A higher mean on the 3-point scale indicates a greater willingness to consider or accommodate the viewpoints and rights of individuals from different ethnic groups.

Interethnic contact was measured by two items. Respondents were asked how many friends they had from different ethnic groups (0=none, 1= a few, and 2=many). "A few" in this study is defined as less than 10; while more than 10 is the definition used for the category "many." They were also asked how frequently they interacted with friends of different ethnicities in the last month (1=no interaction, 2=seldom, i.e. 1-3 times a week, 3=frequent, i.e. 5-6 times a week, 4=very frequent interaction, i.e. every day). The interethnic contact score was computed by multiplying the score for the two items. The score's possible range was 0 to 8, with a higher score meaning greater interethnic contact. The interethnic contact scale achieved an acceptable level of reliability (Cronbach's Alpha of 0.70).

In addition to gender, socio-economic status and age, the level of interethnic socialization during childhood was also used as a control variable. This was measured using two items: type of primary and secondary school attended (mono- or multi-ethnic) and interethnic mix of parents' residential location (mono- or multi-ethnic).

Results

Linear regression was used to test the prediction that interethnic contact is a significant predictor of the interethnic attitudes of Malay and Chinese-Malaysian university students, controlling for the influence of interethnic socialization during childhood. The present analysis focused on finding support for the prediction across both ethnic groups, as well comparing the magnitude of the effect of interethnic contact.

In order to gain a better understanding of the findings, Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics on the key variables for both samples. It reveals that both the Malay and Chinese samples had a favorable interethnic attitude (the mean value for the Malay sample is 14.48, while for the Chinese sample, it is 14.96— both are slightly above the theoretical mid-point), and both do not differ in their level of interethnic attitude. Both samples also had a substantial level of interethnic contact, with an overall mean of 5.5. From a maximum possible score of 8, the Malay sample had a mean of 5.45 and the Chinese sample had a mean of 5.18. As Table 2 summarizes, the difference in the level of interethnic contact between the Malays and the Chinese-Malaysian is statistically significant (t= 2.87, ρ= .004).

Table 2. *Means and Standard Deviations by Ethnic Groups*

Variable	Ethnic Group Membership		T-value (Sig. level)
	Malay (n=379)	Chinese (n=381)	
Interethnic attitude	14.84 (3.062)	14.96 (3.338)	.461 (.645)
Interethnic contact	5.45 (1.317)	5.18 (1.406)	2.867 (.004)
Interethnic socialization during secondary	.12	.54	-15.048

school (dummy=mono-ethnic based school)	(.315)	(.499)	(.000)
Interethnic socialization at parent home (dummy=mono-ethnic based residence)	.35 (.478)	.23 (.423)	3.853 (.000)
Socio-economic status	4.64 (2.167)	4.05 (2.042)	4.016 (.000)
Age (year)	22.09 (1.346)	21.52 (1.819)	5.324 (.000)
Gender (dummy=male)	.34 (.473)	.42 (.494)	-2.683 (.007)

Note.
Standard deviations are presented in parenthesis.
Higher values correspond respectively to more favorable attitude, higher interethnic contact, and higher socio-economic status.

Both the Malay and the Chinese-Malaysian samples were also significantly different in terms of interethnic socialization background during adolescence. More of the Chinese respondents lived in multi-ethnic communities compared to the Malays (Malay= .65, Chinese= . 77, t= 3.85, ρ= .000). However, although a majority of the Chinese samples came from a mixed community, slightly more than half of them attended national-type schools, where the medium of instruction is Chinese. On the other hand, only 12.0 per cent of the Malay sample attended ethnic-based schools (t= -15.05, ρ= .000). For Malays, these schools are religious-based schools. The Malay sample differs significantly from the Chinese sample with regards to age, gender and socio-economic status, as shown in Table 2. There were more male Chinese respondents in the Chinese samples, and they were slightly younger than the Malay sample. Still, the Malay sample was comprised people of slightly higher socio-economic status.

Hierarchical regression analyses then were conducted separately for each ethnic group. It was hypothesized that interethnic contact would be a significant predictor of interethnic attitude for both samples. Table 3 summarises the results. In the first step of the regression analysis (Model I), only interethnic contact was entered. The findings revealed that interethnic contact was a significant predictor of interethnic attitude, although its contribution is rather small. Interethnic contact explained 2.3 per cent (F [1,378]= 10.49, p= .001) and 2.9 per cent (F [1,380]= 10.04, p= .000) of the variance in interethnic attitude for the Malay and the Chinese-Malaysian samples respectively. A similar positive significant relationship was observed for interethnic contact, when age, gender, socio-economic status, and interethnic socialization background were included in the regression analysis (Model II). The R-square value slightly increased in the Model II. The Model II explained 5.5 per cent (F [6,373]= 3.59, p= .002) and 7.7 per cent (F [6,375]= 4.43, p= .000) of the variance in interethnic attitude. Among the control variables, only age was significantly related. It was a negative relationship, implying that older respondents had lower interethnic attitude scores.

Table 3. *Regression Results Predicting Interethnic Attitude, Controlling for Selected Demographic Variables*

Variable	Ethnic Group Membership			
	Malay (n=379)		Chinese (n=381)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Interethnic contact	.158 (.001)	.157 (.002)	.176 (.000)	.144 (.006)
Inter-ethnic socialization during secondary school (dummy=non-mixed school)		-.012 (.891)		-.049 (.343)
Inter-ethnic-socialization at parent home (dummy=mono-ethnic residence)		-.024 (.642)		-.074 (.136)
Socio-economic status		.046 (.373)		.105 (.052)
Age		-.143 (.005)		-.098 (.064)
Gender (dummy=male)		.053 (.301)		-.106 (.033)
Adjusted R^2	.023	.055	.029	.077
F value	10.492 (.001)	3.599 (.002)	10.045 (.000)	4.432 (.000)

Note. Standardized coefficients are presented.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings reveal several important insights on interethnic contact and interethnic attitude in multiethnic university settings in Malaysia, and provide further empirical evidence of the impact of interethnic contact on interethnic attitude. In terms of interethnic attitude, the results suggest that in general, Malay and Chinese-Malaysian students are accommodating in their ethnic relations. An item-by-item analysis of the interethnic attitude scale clarifies that many respondents regard respecting the rights of other ethnic groups and taking into account the problems and needs of other ethnic groups as important. Many respondents also acknowledge the role and contribution of each ethnic group in national development, and hold that no ethnic group should be treated as second-class citizens. They also recognize that social issues such as poverty are cross-ethnic issues. The favorable attitude towards others from different ethnic groups among the Malay and the Chinese-Malaysian probably suggests that the perception of group threat is weak.

With regard to interethnic contact, contrary to reports of segregation or ethnic polarization in Malaysian public universities (e.g., Kum Hor, 2006), the present analysis found that students do engage in interethnic contact quite substantially. The percentage of those having no friends of other ethnic groups is very small—less than 3.0 per cent, suggesting that interethnic friendship is common among the university students. The finding could also be interpreted as reflective that the students realize the importance and

need of cross-ethnic ties. The results here contrast with the results of the Merdeka Centre's (2006) opinion poll, where 22.0 per cent of the slightly more than 1000 respondents surveyed reported having no friends of different ethnicities. Thus, it seems that university students are more likely to have a wider span of interethnic friendship compared to the general population. Greater opportunity for intercultural contact and interaction on campus probably explains the difference. While cross-ethnic friendship is quite prevalent in the university setting, the extent of cross-ethnic interaction varies, from less frequent (50.2 per cent) and frequent (21.6 per cent) to very frequent (9.8 per cent). It is not known what factors account for the difference. As a limitation of the study, the present analysis did not look into the nature and qualities of cross-ethnic ties and the factors that predict interethnic contact.

The results demonstrated that interethnic contact does contribute significantly towards a positive attitude of different ethnic groups (Kum Hor, 2006; Mohd Noor et al., 2005), although the effect is small (less than three percent). Although the effect of contact on attitude is small, the finding corroborates the positive effects of contact on attitude under conditions of equal status and a cooperative environment. More importantly, the present findings improve the generalizability of the contact theory's predictions for interethnic attitude, which have been mainly observed in studies conducted in the Western world. This study also extends the theory beyond the majority-minority and host-immigrant contexts (e.g., Dixon & Rosenbaum 2004; Lopez, 2004; Pettigrew & Troop 2000; Stein, Post, & Rinden, 2000; Ward & Masgoret, 2006).

While the present analysis lends support to the hypothesised positive effect of contact on interethnic attitude, interethnic contact explains only about five and eight percent of the variance in interethnic attitude for both ethnic groups respectively. This was evident even after taking into account interethnic socialization during childhood, age, and socio-economic status. Surprisingly, interethnic socialization during primary and secondary school is not a significant predictor. This could either mean that interethnic socialization is not correlated with interethnic attitude in actuality, or that the measure used did not tap interethnic socialization as intended. Even though studying in a multiethnic-based school provides greater opportunity for contact and interaction with other of different ethnicities, it cannot be assumed that it is the case.

Another important limitation of the present analysis is that it is not clear how interethnic contact influences or shapes interethnic attitude. A more comprehensive analysis informed by multiple theoretical perspectives is needed. Economic, cognitive, and socio-psychological factors, including the perception of government policies, need to be included in future analyses of the effect of interethnic contact on interethnic attitude, and in turn, interethnic solidarity.

All in all, the current study demonstrated the generalizability of the contact hypothesis, beyond those often times studied culture of the west. Drawing on this positive finding, present policies and programs for fostering interethnic contact need to be further enhanced. Finally, as the challenges of managing a contemporary multiethnic society that is growing democratically are getting more complex, a more comprehensive, integrative, and robust analysis needs to be carried out. This will help us better understand how interethnic contact shapes interethnic attitude, in particular, and what the predictors of tolerance and solidarity are in multiethnic societies in which there "is no real" majority.

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