

**WORKPLACE INTER-ETHNIC INTERACTIONS  
IN A FAULTLINE SOCIETY: THE CASE OF MALAYSIA**

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**Presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree  
of Doctor of Philosophy at Royal Holloway, University of London**

**August 2017**

## Declaration of Authorship

I, Seyyedali Ziaei, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: *Seyyedali Ziaei*

Date: 16 August 2017

## **Acknowledgement**

I owe the deepest gratitude in completion of this thesis to my supervisor, Professor Alice Lam, whose steadfast support, unwavering patience, and vision helped me through the most difficult stages of this study. I would also like to thank my advisor Professor Fiona Moore, my Malaysian supervisor Professor Khalil Md Nor, and my examiners Professor Chris Smith and Professor Ruth Simpson whose kind points guided and enriched my work.

I would like to extend my thanks to all my interviewees who trusted me enough to shared their heartfelt stories, enabling this study.

Finally, I would like to thank my family for their support throughout this journey and beyond.

## Abstract

Through the lenses of social identity theory and the faultline model, this study explores: (i) the attitudes of individuals towards inter-ethnic interaction in a society with deep ethnic faultlines, and; (ii) How these attitudes influence the patterns of their formal and informal interactions at workplace/study environment. Faultline model predicts the exacerbation of categorisation in case of alignment of multiple diversity aspects. Ethnicity, depending on the context, takes on multiple meanings and in the Malaysian context of this study, is linked to religion, language, culture, and a history of socioeconomic status and political allegiance.

Based on 51 semi-structured individual interviews in healthcare settings in Malaysia, it was found that while formal interactions followed hierarchical lines to a great extent, informal interactions were characterised by attitudinal orientations of individuals. Three categories of such attitudes were identified as resistance, tolerance, and transcendence. The first and third categories exhibit clear negative and positive attitudes towards diversity, respectively. The second and largest category is signified by ambivalent, indifferent, and neutral attitudes towards ethnic diversity.

The likelihood of positioning in these categories was linked to several factors: relative size of the ethnic group, socio-economic positioning, religiosity, and earlier inter-ethnic socialisation opportunities. The relative importance of these factors vary between the different ethnic groups. As for their numerical majority, Malays were more likely to lack early inter-ethnic socialisation. This was found to be the main predictor of diversity attitudes of Malays. The social stereotypes of rich, intelligent, and capable resulted in the perceptions of ethnic superiority among some of the Chinese interviewees. A sense of unfair treatment- mainly resulting from affirmative action policies- added to this feeling to negatively affect the diversity attitudes of the Chinese.

Indians, as the smallest major ethnic group in Malaysia, and the one with neither the backup of the affirmative action policies nor the economic networks of the Chinese are usually marginalised and viewed as the lower class group associated with crimes.

This position has resulted in a profound sense of unfair treatment among them. The extent of this feeling was linked to the socioeconomic background of the individuals and influenced their diversity attitudes. This points to the role of socioeconomic status in defining the nature of one's social experiences and attitudes.

In organisational settings, the availability of an individual's ethnic peers interacted with the diversity attitudes of the person to shape their interactional patterns. These patterns ranged from assimilation and out-grouping to sub-grouping and withdrawal. Moreover, religious barriers, mainly through limiting commensality, were found to play a prominent role in inhibiting inter-ethnic socialisation. Nonetheless, this research has shown that even in a society segregated along ethno-religious lines, hybridity is very much present and individuals do interact across social boundaries. The tolerant behaviour exhibited by the majority of the interviewees is similar to the pragmatic cosmopolitanism Southeast Asia is historically known for.

Overall, the diversity attitudes and interactional patterns observed in this study reflect the dynamic interplay of macro-level societal dividing forces and micro-level individual tolerances and flexibilities in multi-ethnic Malaysia. This research calls into question the theoretical implications of the faultline model at the macro-level by showing that even in the case of very salient, accessible, and aligning identities, individuals from an ethnic group generally do not identify along a single line.

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# Chapter One: Introduction

## 1.1 Research background

Human beings are social animals by nature, says a quote attributed to Aristotle. As social beings, humans have lived in groups, tribes, nations and other social categories which have served their physiological as well as social needs. With the increased mobility of people around the globe and increasing diversity in modern societies, conflict and social problems also arose between the different categories. Understanding and helping to alleviate these problems have taken the attention of many scholars in the fields of relational demography, social psychology, sociology, psychology and politics, among others with different foci including race, gender, age, experience, and educational background.

The first three dimensions mentioned above are examples of surface-level diversity, the latter two of deep-level. The extensive body of research and literature on diversity issues has adopted various angles of analysis, ranging from competition for resources to religious and ideological conflict. A certain strand of research and theory that has had considerable success in explaining and predicting diversity issues is known as social identity approach, which focuses on cognitive processes in individuals that satisfy the needs for an understandable social world and a positive self-esteem. The theoretical foundation of this approach was formed by the social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and complimented at the individual-level of analysis by the self-categorisation theory (Turner *et al.*, 1987).

Later, Brewer (1991) introduced optimal distinctiveness theory to help explain the motivational factors involved in the social categorisation process, Hogg and Mullin (Hogg and Mullin, 1999) suggested the role of uncertainty reduction as a function of categorisation and group membership. As the theoretical depth of social identity approach grew, it dominated the strand in social psychology in studying relational demography in organisations and societies. However, it could not satisfactorily explain why the two main effects of social categorisation, in-group favouritism and out-group derogation, did not always take place when categorisation happened. This was

explained by Branscombe *et al.* (1999) by highlighting the role of social identity threat, in the absence of which social categorisation does not lead to out-group bias.

The activation of a possible social categorisation over another, or its salience, is based on the relative accessibility of that category, its comparative fit, and its normative fit (Turner *et al.*, 1987, Turner *et al.*, 1994). In other words, a social category should be cognitively available and contextually meaningful for the categorisation to take place. The faultline model posits that if a number of social categories overlap and align together, the result would be increased salience of the resulting categorisation (Lau and Murnighan, 1998). The faultline model, which has attracted a lot of attention and is supported by a number of theoretical and empirical studies (Thatcher *et al.*, 2003, Bezrukova *et al.*, 2012, Thatcher and Patel, 2012), has two major implications. Firstly, it points to the importance of considering the collective effects of diversity aspects. Secondly, it highlights the scenarios with a medium level of diversity and a small number of distinct social categories as potentially the most problematic ones.

This leads to the focus of the present study on ethnic diversity as a type of diversity that signifies multiple faultlines under certain conditions. Ethnic diversity, depending on the social context, can range in meaning and importance from a nominal, rudimentary factor to the tip of an iceberg of genetic make-up, cultural heritage, language, religion, socioeconomic status and so on. In the latter case, ethnicity is no longer a nominal factor, but a multi-layered boundary. Therefore, following the logic of the faultline model, it would be a salient aspect of categorisation and a major fissure. Although the majority of available literature have operationalised the concept of faultlines at the meso-level and in a quantitative way, the basic principle of nested differences does not impose such a restriction and can be applied at the macro level of analysis.

Social identity approach and the related theoretical viewpoints view diversity, especially demographic diversity as mainly problematic and something to be controlled and tolerated. Some scholars, on the other hand, have argued that although diversity might create communication inefficiencies and conflict, its positive effects through increased informational diversity and larger pool of talents and

experiences offset and outweigh those negative effects (Gruenfeld *et al.*, 1996, Phillips *et al.*, 2006). This perspective is the theoretical basis of the business case for diversity (Wright *et al.*, 1995, Robinson and Dechant, 1997, Herring, 2009). While social identity approach explains negative attitudes to diversity, the informational diversity perspective can help explain positive diversity attitudes.

These two theoretical views, although seen as two opposite poles at times, discuss different aspects of the same phenomenon and thus might be considered as complementary rather than competing. This idea is crystallised in the form of Collaboration-Elaboration Model by van Knippenberg, de Dreu and Homan (2004) according to which, diversity potentially has both positive and negative effects. Negative effects stem from social categorisation and the subsequent identity threat and the resulting process losses; positive effects are the product of elaboration of diverse task-relevant information between diverse group members.

Diversity effects in organisations have been extensively researched in the form of organisational demography, with the focus on outcomes such as conflict, cohesion, and performance. However, crucial processes such as knowledge sharing and learning are dependent on group interactions in the first place and these interactions are determined, at least partially, by the social categorisations at the workplace. Interactions between individuals of different ethnic backgrounds are signs of crossing social and symbolic boundaries created by the ethnic categorisations. The ability of individuals to cross the boundaries created by these lines should not be taken for granted and is dependent on the permeability of the boundaries as well as individual traits and experiences.

On the basis that multifaceted ethnic diversity in faultline societies make ethnic boundaries less permeable, this research sets out to explore the effects of societal ethnic faultlines on the attitudes of individuals towards interactions with ethnic groups other than their own. To study of the interplay of macro- and micro-level factors in diverse settings, the Malaysian and in particular, Peninsular Malaysian society provides a suitable environment in the way of clear ethnic lines and the overlap with religious, cultural, historical, and socioeconomic ones. With the backdrop of this

particular Malaysian ethnic diversity, this study sets out to examine how individuals vary in their attitudes towards inter-ethnic diversity in a faultline society, and how these attitudes influence the patterns of their interactions in their organisational groups.

## **1.2 The research objectives and questions**

This research aims to explore how ethnic diversity affects relational dynamics in diverse organisational groups. More specifically, it seeks to understand how ethnic identifications of group members, shaped by the ethnic relations in the broader society, affect the interpersonal interactions in the groups. Social identity view suggests that individuals form groups and subgroups based on their social (in this case ethnic) identity; and this grouping shapes their communication and affiliation patterns. In organisational settings, these identity groups exist separately from work groups.

In transition from a classic plural society to a multicultural one, ethnic divisions in Malaysia have not meaningfully diminished. Ethnic identification remains high, national identification remains low, and ethnicity is still a pervasive and primordial aspect of one's life. With the ethnicity of an individual linked to their religion, mother tongue, culture, official status in the country, and the preferential treatment that they get in public sector education and jobs, ethnicity is a salient and meaningful social reality for Malaysians.

Although the legacy of a plural society means that the occupational and educational competition and interface between the different ethnic groups is still relatively low, the question is how do individuals from different ethnic backgrounds socialise, interact, and work together in diverse organisational work groups. At the macro-level, there is little to bring different Malaysian ethnic groups together other than marketplace interaction. Divisionary forces, from ethnic-based political parties to economic disparity push them apart. Even with the introduction of inclusionary measures at the society, lack of political will and the ethno-religious zeal inhibit deeper integration between Malaysian communities.

While the macro-level picture is that of division and distance, little is known about the interpersonal level of ethnic dynamics. As part of their jobs, individuals need to and do work together with people from all backgrounds. The main question is how do individuals navigate the ethnic social boundaries in their relations. Do they suffice to the minimum interaction required for the task performance or do they go further and develop personal relations? This leads to the first research question:

RQ1: To what extent does ethnic identity form the basis for informal group affiliation in organisational settings?

Ethnic identity is a social construct and influenced by the history, socioeconomics, and narratives of the society in which they develop. As per the different meaning developed for each ethnic group in Malaysia, the question would be whether there are differences between ethnic groups in inter-ethnic interactions. Therefore,

RQ2: Is there a difference between inter-ethnic interactions of individuals based on their ethnic backgrounds?

And,

RQ3: Are there different identity dynamics influencing the attitudinal orientations of individuals from different ethnic backgrounds?

Based on the social make-up of ethnic identities, it is stated that there are a number of constituent elements to these identities such as religion, language and culture. In an ethnically diverse society, individuals are going to be different along some of these lines. On the other hand, when individuals work together in an environment, there is a good possibility that they share some individual experiences and characteristics. Of all the similarities and differences, it is important to know what the factors are that help or hinder inter-ethnic interactions. Therefore,

RQ4: What are the factors that bring individuals together and help them interact across ethnic boundaries?

And,

RQ5: What are the factors that hinder inter-ethnic interaction among individuals and prevent ethnic boundary crossing?

At an exploratory qualitative study, one can ask a large number of questions from various angles. In this study, the most important questions are asked above, but they are not by any means all the possible ones. However, the objectives of the study that help converge different questions and findings are formed by a desire to understand the underlying dynamics of inter-ethnic interaction in a deeply ethnically divided society. More precisely, the objectives of this research are to explore:

- i) The attitudes of individuals towards inter-ethnic interaction in a society with deep ethnic faultlines, and;
- ii) How these attitudes influence the patterns of their formal and informal interactions at workplace/study environment.

### **1.3 Significance and contribution**

The field of diversity research is a well-trodden path with a great variety of methods and results. However, it has been for the most part dominated by quantitative research and laboratory experiments. While these types of research form the backbone of diversity research field, they have limitations in depth of the results they can achieve and completeness of pictures they can draw. While quantitative research is limited in scope of the findings to the factors considered in the research design stage prior to the data collection and analysis, social laboratory experiments lack certain elements that make real-world comparisons plausible.

The initial formulations of the social identity theory and self-categorisation theory were based on findings from laboratory experiments, mainly in the form of minimal group paradigms in which individuals were randomly assigned to groups formed based on trivial criteria and tested on the basis on positive attributes and rewards they considered for the other groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1979, Tajfel *et al.*, 1971, Turner *et al.*, 1987). The research by McCormick and Kinloch (1986) collected data by observations of actual customer-client racially diverse situations, which were then

quantitatively analysed. Studies by Espinoza and Garza (1985) and Hornsey and Hogg (2000) were based on laboratory experiments. The well-known study by Tsui and O'Riley (1989) was also based on survey data and quantitative analysis.

More recently, studies by Kochan *et al.* (2003), Sacco and Schmitt (2005), and Greer *et al.* (2012) have studied the effects of ethnic diversity using quantitative studies. There are a number of studies adopting a qualitative approach to study the diversity effects, such as Congalton *et al.* (2013), Warikoo and Deckman (2014), Braunstein *et al.* (2014), producing more in-depth analyses. Research on organisational diversity has studied several contextual factors in this relationship including occupational demography, industry settings, and team interdependence (Joshi and Roh, 2009); the impact of the larger societal dynamics, however, has rarely been discussed. Organisations do not operate in vacuum and the society-wide dynamics inevitably trickle down to organisational life. This research aims to partially fill this gap by exploring the effects of one such factor, societal faultlines, on group interactional dynamics.

Apart from Malaysia, South Africa (Dixon and Durrheim, 2003), Fiji, and India (Eriksen, 2001) can be considered ethnically segregated faultline societies. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, there has not been any in-depth qualitative research in social identity stream published which focus on these societies. With the exception of a number of studies in Turkey, Israel, Taiwan, and China, qualitative diversity research diversity research has been limited to majority-white social settings, mainly in Western European or Northern American contexts which are socially significantly different from Eastern societies.

Considering differences in important cultural and social factors such as power distance, individualism, and liberal or traditional values, it would be theoretically enriching to explore these dynamics in Asian diverse settings. Considering the increasing economic significance of Asia, it will also help inform organisational practices of companies looking to extend their operations to Asia. The Malaysian context is significant as not only it signifies ethnic faultlines, it also provides a different balance of political and economic power with respect to ethnic groups. Unlike



Western societies, political and economic power in Malaysia are not concentrated in the same ethnic group and this has important implications for the identity of these ethnic groups.

By applying the concept of faultlines to the social identity approach, this research helps better understand the dynamics of inter-ethnic interaction in socially-segregated settings. It is expected that societal faultlines reinforce ethnic identifications and divisions, leading to rigid interactional patterns concentrated around one's own ethnic group and aversion to inter-ethnic interactions beyond mere necessity. The researcher also predicted problems with psychological safety of individuals from minority ethnic groups as a result of limited opportunities social interactions and belonging in the work groups.

This research applied a qualitative approach based on semi-structured interviews, which were conducted in private healthcare industry settings in Malaysia. The theory-informed thematic analysis of the results shows the resilience of social categories but not their rigidity. In a relatively unexpected outcome, a large number of interviewees showed hybrid ethnic identities. This outcome is partially explained by the extended optimal distinctiveness model that proposes a drive in individual for an optimal point between uniqueness and similarity. This effect was seen in the largest ethnic group, which is not only inherently diverse, but also too big to provide optimal distinctiveness.

The research also shows three categories of individuals characterised by significant differences among their diversity attitudes and behaviours. These categories are 'resistant' which view diversity as a threat, 'tolerant' who display ambivalent orientations, and 'transcendent' who view diversity as an opportunity. The presence of the three categories suggests that social identity and faultline theories on their own are inadequate for explaining the significant variation in the diversity attitudes and behaviours at the individual level. Other theoretical perspectives such as optimal distinctiveness theory, hybridity and contact theories are needed for understanding the sources of variation and fluidity. It was also found that based on their population proportions and ethnic identity make-up, different ethnic groups may take different

routes to each attitudinal category. The numerical representation of the ethnic groups at work units, in turn, influenced the coping mechanisms applied by the individuals. These include sub-grouping based on secondary criteria for the majority ethnic group members, to out-grouping for the relative minority group, and assimilation or withdrawal for the absolute minority ethnic group members.

In conclusion, by taking a faultline view on ethnic diversity in Malaysia, this research offers a different and in-depth, albeit limited look into the identity dynamics of a segregated Asian society. The results propose a more nuanced view on diversity attitudes from positive/negative dichotomy to transcendent/tolerant/resistant spectrum, which allows for neutrality, ambivalence, indifference, and hybridity. Finally, this research shows that the early socialisation of individuals in diverse environments, such as mixed schools and living quarters, has important effects in their interactional patterns later in life.

#### **1.4 Structure of the thesis**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Following the introduction, Chapter 2 presents a review of the relevant literature on ethnic diversity and theoretical viewpoints on its effects, including concepts of identity threat, ambivalence, and optimal distinctiveness. The faultline model is introduced to explain the view of ethnic diversity as signifying potential multiple faultlines. This chapter concludes with a review of empirical findings on the effects of diversity in groups.

Chapter 3 presents a discussion on the context of this study. It provides a chronological discussion of factors that have resulted in the current form of ethnic diversity and segregation in Malaysia. This forms the social background of ethnic identities and inter-ethnic dynamics that are later discussed and analysed. This chapter is important as it highlights the crucial factors in inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia that can act as social and symbolic barriers.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the discussion of the research methods which were adopted in the research to study the research objectives. It details the rationale of choosing a

qualitative approach to the study of phenomena that are not easy to formulate and contain in bounded quantitative ways. Then, the semi-interview method is discussed as the appropriate method of data collection considering the individual level of analysis and the need for privacy in order to collect in-depth data. This chapter also discusses the choice of healthcare setting as one in which trust and cooperation are absolutely vital for delivering services to clients. The choice of interviewees, which was done in a purposeful way and the choice of data collection sites, which followed initial findings, are explained. Finally, this chapter includes the interview guide and the data analysis process.

Chapter 5 presents the three categories of inter-ethnic interactional attitudes developed in this research by focusing on the informal interactions of individuals. These categories of resistant, tolerant, and transcendent attitudes show individual variation in the way diversity is viewed and interactions in diverse environments regulated. These attitudes are influenced by ethnic identifications of individuals, their earlier socialisation opportunities, and their socioeconomic background. The role of commensality as an important means of socialisation that is affected by the religious restrictions and how individuals, based on their interactional attitudes navigate these boundaries. It is discussed how interactional attitudes of individuals interact with the representational proportions of their ethnic groups at the workplace to determine the patterns of their social interactions. These patterns range from sub-grouping to out-grouping, assimilation, and withdrawal. It was also observed that temporal factors moderate these patterns and individuals with a long history of co-working are better prepared to develop amicable relations.

Chapter 6 discusses the patterns of formal interactions of individuals in organisational units. Firstly, as per the different nature of organisational life in education and work spaces and the insufficiency of the collected data, only two of the three research sites are included in this analysis. Secondly, although the formal interactions in work units mostly followed the hierarchical lines as expected in a highly regulated industry such as healthcare, a number of factors affects how individuals perceived the diversity conditions in their workspaces and this in turn had implications for their work relations and intentions for their future work lives. These factors include the diversity of

organisational management structure, sense of fairness of promotions process, and work motivations. Finally, observations on the effects on workplace interactions of two spatial effects are, namely the fast pace of life in a metropolis and the availability of commensal spaces at the organisations are discussed.

Finally, chapter 7 presents a discussion of the findings of this research, reviews the observations made, theoretical conclusions derived, and directions for future research. Based on the three attitudinal categories and corresponding interactional patterns discovered, it was concluded that the initial predictions on the nature of inter-ethnic relations were not accurate. Although societal faultlines did result in insular and resistant attitudes, this was limited to a minority of interviewees. The majority of interviewees showed pragmatic tolerant behaviour and some went beyond that and transcended the ethnic boundaries. At the workplace, these attitudes influenced the social interactions of individuals with their colleagues.

It was observed that the fast-paced life in the largest city in the country, where many of the inhabitants were born in other regions and return during holiday periods negatively affected their ability and motivation for social interactions. Moreover, having a canteen located at the workplace that offered space for commensality over food which all colleagues can partake, seems to help improve the workplace inter-ethnic relations. While this research did not find enough empirical evidence for these two effects, they are worth mentioning for their possible value for future research. Future research would also benefit from studying different industry settings, especially where routines are less important, requiring continuous on-the-spot problem solving.

Future research should also look into the gender effects on interactional dynamics in diverse settings. The female-majority sample in this research experienced a sudden increase in responsibilities after marrying, which reduced their available social time, limiting their informal after-hours interactions. Interviews with the small number of male respondent hint at possibility of more free time to attend one's hobbies for a male sample, while at the same time suggest stronger social barriers as a result of more extensive set of religious roles and responsibilities.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter starts by defining concepts surrounding the field of diversity studies and in particular ethnicity and ethnic diversity. The theoretical perspectives pertinent to diversity effects are then discussed and categorised and the empirical research backing each perspective presented. Building on the concept of demographic faultlines, ethnic diversity is then put forth as a complex construct that requires in-depth definition and analysis. Finally, the last section positions the study within the reviewed literature and makes clear the adoption of social identity perspective as the theoretical lens in this research.

Diversity has been studied as group-level differences in a wide variety of demographic characteristics such as gender (O'Reilly et al., 1998), race/ethnicity (Riordan and Shore, 1997) and age (Pelled, 1996a) as well as non-demographic traits such as affect (Barsade et al., 2000), network ties (Beckman and Haunschild, 2002), and values (Jehn et al., 1999). Diversity can also be viewed as differences in surface-level factors such as age, gender, and race, or deep-level traits such as beliefs, attitudes, and conflict resolution styles (Milliken and Martins, 1996, Shaw and Barrett-Power, 1998).

Correspondingly, similarity/attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971), social identity perspective (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), and informational diversity perspective (Gruenfeld et al., 1996) predict the effects of diversity based on type of diversity and its effects on different group processes and outcomes. Although the aforementioned theoretical viewpoints on diversity might predict disparate effects for group diversity, they are in agreement on that diversity can instigate creativity and innovation via increasing the pool of information and knowledge available to the units as well as increase conflict and division, causing process losses. They, however, view the balance of these two divergent effects differently as resulting in a net loss or gain to the groups.

Attempting to partially explain the largely inconsistent results of diversity research, Harrison and Klein (2007) encourage differentiating between diversity forms and discourage against bundling together the diversity traits that are of very different natures as it could dilute the effects of different types of diversity and lead to inconclusive or inaccurate results. Moreover, certain forms of identification, e.g. ethnicity and gender, sometimes called master statuses, form a more meaningful and entrenched identities that frequently override personal characteristics and role identities (Stryker, 1987).

Ethnic diversity, depending on the context, can be linked other diversity forms such as lingual, religious, and socioeconomic. This means ethnic diversity is by nature complex and should be understood as such and not be bundled together with other diversity forms when a deep understanding of its dynamics is intended. Hence this research takes ethnic diversity as the single independent factor, trying to understand its social contextual meaning together with its inherent connections to other factors. The next section presents a discussion on the meaning of ethnicity and how ethnic diversity is viewed in this research.

## **2.2 Ethnicity and ethnic diversity**

While it might seem intuitively acceptable to categorize the diversity traits as surface- and deep-level, one can logically think of possible relationships between them, especially in case of master statuses. In case of ethnicity, being of a certain background can probably result in receiving a certain type of social treatment during one's childhood, which in turn has an impact on the personality of the individual. In a short critical article, Eagly and Chin (2010) highlight this problem, calling the dichotomy provocative and stereotypical. If personality (deep-level characteristics) and race/ethnicity (surface-level characteristics) are two completely separate areas, does national (or regional) culture mean anything? Although disputed, extensive predictive and descriptive capabilities of cultural dimensions' theory by Hofstede (1980) are hard to completely refute. The moment we agree the notion of national culture bears some truth, the old dichotomy starts to lose ground.

Shaw and Barrett- Power (1998) address this issue in their conceptual work by differentiating between the two sources of diversity: readily detectable and underlying attributes, and further dividing the underlying attributes into two types. One is cultural values, perspectives, attitudes, beliefs and conflict resolution styles that are closely related to readily observable attributes. This type is significantly related to nationality and ethnic origin. The second type of underlying attributes is based on socioeconomic and personal status, education, functional specialization, and personal expectations. This group is less related with race/ethnicity and is more associated with the psychology and background of individuals.

In many social settings, there are also socioeconomic divisions between ethnic groups such that two people at the same age, but from different ethnic backgrounds, might have gone through very different social experiences. Religion can also be connected to ethnicity, but act in a different way, having a two-way relationship with ethnicity such that they reinforce and revitalise each other (Mitchell, 2006). Through its effect on value construction and even schooling systems in the form of faith schools, religion can act as a set of symbolic boundaries that act as tools to make sense of the social world and define reality. It is this varied and entrenched nature of ethnicity that necessitates special attention to its underlying meaning and operationalisation.

There is a subtle but important distinction between the two concepts of ethnic identity and ethnicity. As Phinney (1992) advises, ethnic identity should not be mistaken for ethnicity as the first includes the necessary identification of individuals with an ethnic group whereas the second might be just an inherited label. Obviously, it is of paramount importance in the present research to focus on the perceptions of individuals as the social actors. After all, individuals' behaviour is driven by their self-identifications and not necessarily by a nominal factor assigned to them. However, this is not to say that ethnic identity and ethnicity are completely separate notions. Individuals may accept, modify, challenge, or reject their ethnic group affiliations. To the extent that ethnic categories are salient and their boundaries impermeable, ethnicity would correlate to ethnic identity and here, ethnic diversity is viewed through the lens of ethnic identities.

Among the clearer definitions of diversity is that offered by Harrison and Sin (2006: 196) which sees diversity as 'the collective amount of differences among members within a social unit.' Two important points can be inferred from this definition. Firstly, diversity is defined at the collective-level as the distribution of differences in an attribute among members of a unit (Harrison and Klein, 2007). Secondly, diversity is meaningful in a social setting and as such, it requires the perception of difference from the social beings in that setting. In other words, unperceived differences do not constitute meaningful diversity.

Ethnic diversity (together with racial diversity) is possibly one of the most widely used and still least clearly defined concepts in organisational literature. In an almost primordialist study on ethnic conflict, Vanhanen (1999) discusses ethnic diversity without explicitly defining it; sufficing to equate it with the diversity of ethnic groups. Alesina and La Ferrara (2005) find two ways of defining it in the economic literature: one that equates ethnic groups with census categories such as white and black; and another that is based on lingual and cultural differences. In a highly cited work on diversity and work group cohesion, Harrison, Price, and Bell (1998) debate the effects of ethnic diversity (among other forms of organizational diversity) without any attempt to define it; sufficing to derive it from ethnic/racial background as White, Hispanic, African American, Asian, and Native American in one sample and White, African-American, Hispanic, and Other in the other. These were based on self-report from the respondents as to which pre-defined category (African American, Native American, Asian, Hispanic, and White) they belonged to.

Yang and Konrad (2011) also discuss 'racioethnic' diversity extensively, but do not find it necessary to offer any explicit definition of the term. They calculate it for each organisation based on the categories White, Black of African origin, Bi-Racial or multiple minority backgrounds, Asian/Filipino/Middle Eastern, and Other from the responses to a Workplace and Employee Survey (WES) in Canada. It is clear that these categories capture race (and to a much lesser extent ethnicity) at face value. Uslaner(2010) uses census categories as well, thus discussing race rather than ethnicity. Pitts and Jarry (2007: 3) offer a definition of ethnic diversity as 'a social-



psychological phenomenon based in a sense of 'likeness' and 'otherness'; however, they then go on to use the census-based categorisation without questioning them.

There seems to be an implicit consensus equating ethnicity with race, considering it a physiognomic, surface-level factor. However, such a simplistic view hampers the more nuanced considerations of ethnicity and ethnic identity. As Zagefka (2009) discusses in her critical article, simple, prescribed categories are not able to account for subjective self-identification of individuals. A better approach, as Brown (2007) advocates, is to elicit participants' identifications as expressed by themselves in an open-ended manner. Not only reducing the possibility of methodological error, this also takes into consideration the composite nature of the construct of ethnicity.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ethnicity as 'the fact or state of belonging to a social group that has a common national or cultural tradition.' Academically, the concept of ethnicity has received much more attention in anthropological and sociological/ social psychological literature than organizational studies. Schermerhorn (1970:12) views ethnicity as 'a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood.' Weber et al. (1978) define ethnic groups as those people who ascribe to an idea of a common descent as a result of perceptive similarities in physical, cultural, or historical aspects. Horowitz (1985) describes ethnicity as a sense of belonging to a particular group- based on racial, lingual, religious, among others - often with emotional connotations.

The thoughts as to how ethnicities come about, however, are more divergent. On one side of the spectrum, primordialists profess the authenticity of ethnic groups and assert that they are more-or-less clear-cut boundaries between ethnic groups, come about and a result of identifiers such as common culture, historical experiences, or extended kinship/race; and that these boundaries are often immutable (Shils, 1957, Geertz, 1963, Geertz, 1973). On the other side, constructivists emphasise the socially constructed nature of ethnicity, that it is often initiated, manipulated, and transformed by social actors in time (Barth, 1969, Haas, 1986, Brubaker, 2004). While

the view of ethnicity in this research is mostly in line with the constructionist view, it is sympathetic towards Barth's (1969) and Bayar's (2009) suggestion that not necessarily the roots and formation, but post-formation perception and persistence of ethnic boundaries are somewhat primordial. Perhaps the most agreeable stance is that ethnicities are circumstantially constructed but endure after being formed, and that while they may contain elements of race, but are not akin to race.

The exact roots and meaning of ethnicity are usually not as big a concern for individuals as the feeling of relatedness and belonging they feel towards it. If we are to understand the effects of ethnic diversity in action, the focus should be directed towards an understanding of ethnic identity as linking individuals to the larger social groups. Ethnic identity is seen by some researchers to be one of the multiple identities of an individual (Brewer, 1991). However, individuals usually have a fairly clear and stable idea of who they are. Hence, the concept of having multiple identities might be counterintuitive and imprecise. Therefore, in line with Brubaker and Cooper (2000) and Hale (2004), I would refer to the word 'identity' as the set of relatively stable and enduring identifications of individuals in relation to the social world or what Hale calls their 'social radar' (2004: 463).

In this sense, this research would be discussing ethnic identification rather than ethnic identity. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) argue, this choice of lexicon allows the researcher to analyse a category of practice without reifying it. Therefore, it is possible to explore the social effects of categorisations based on myths (which is usually the case with ethnicity as Zagefka (2009) suggests) while not believing in its authenticity. However, the researcher is not adopting purely constructivist approach to identity here; the focus on identity is directed on the harder and fairly persistent aspects which imply being identical across situational and temporal lines, hence being true to the meaning of the word 'identity' (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). Such identifiers include- among others- gender, religion, and nationality as well as ethnicity, as being identified and identifying oneself with an ethnic group.

Ethnicity is usually more than a solitary factor for it is commonly linked to language, religion, nationality, and socioeconomic status. A person is born in an involuntary time

and place and into an ethnic group- normally coming from the parents' backgrounds- about which they had little choice. Ethnic identity is indeed constructed, but at the level of social category; individuals are automatically signed up for it and opting out is usually a difficult if not an impossible task. In the developmental stages of their lives, the ethnic background is likely to have a central role in making up the identity and worldview of a person. Put in Berger's (1966) terms: 'One identifies oneself, as one is identified by others, by being located in a common world. This initial effect has been found to be quite persistent later in the later stages of life. McPherson, Lovin, and Cook (2001) found that the social homophily on the basis on race and ethnicity starting half-way through elementary school, maxing up in the high-school and mostly remaining high thereafter.

This section reviewed the concepts of ethnicity and how ethnic identity constitutes an important part of the identity of individuals. As mentioned earlier, ethnic diversity is viewed in this research through diversity of ethnic identities and ethnic identities are complex constructs that need to be understood contextually. This will be done later in chapter 3 as the Malaysian research context is reviewed for the history, formation, and current state of ethnic identities in that society. The next section discusses different theoretical viewpoints as they predict positive, negative, or relative diversity outcomes as well as the empirical evidence in support of each view.

### **2.3 Diversity effects: theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence**

This section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on the effects of diversity in organisations. In abundance of the literature on diversity and identity issues, this review will aim to centre around the ones that directly involve ethnic diversity or are relevant to the theories that do so. This review is organised in three parts. First, the view that diversity leads to positive outcomes through increased pool of knowledge and hence improvement to creativity and innovation potential of the organisations is discussed. This view, often referred to as information processing and decision-making perspective, is the basis for the business case for diversity and has its roots in the work

of Hoffman and colleagues (Hoffman, 1959, Hoffman and Maier, 1961) and Triandis and colleagues (Triandis et al., 1965).

This is followed by a section on the literature that predict negative outcomes for diversity as a result of process losses through increased conflict and reduced communication and cohesion. This view is based on the work of Byrne's (1971) similarity/attraction paradigm, and Tajfel and Turner's social identity perspective (1979). Although the central variables in these theoretical viewpoints are varied and different in nature, they all revolve around process losses as a result of diversity, something that the more optimistic group of literature mentioned acknowledge, but assert that will be more than compensated by eventual gains.

While mediators and moderators have been considered early on in diversity research, the inconsistency of empirical research and the failure to provide conclusive evidence in favour of the positive or negative views has led to an increase in the literature allowing for the possibility of a more complex relationship between diversity, contextual factors, and desired outcomes. The review of this third group of literature includes factors such as time (Sacco and Schmitt, 2005), nature of the group task (Harrison et al., 2002), organisational strategy (Richard, 2000), organisational culture (Chatman et al., 1998), and aggregate effects of diversity patterns (Lau and Murnighan, 1998).

### **2.3.1 Diversity as beneficial**

This view of diversity emanates from the research by Hoffman (1959) and Hoffman and Maier (1961) on small group heterogeneity suggesting that groups diverse on personality types have access to a wider range of knowledge and perspectives and found evidence in the form of the ability of the diverse groups to come up with higher quality solutions. Following this research stream, Triandis and colleagues found that dyads with diverging attitudes showed more creativity in problem solving (Triandis et al., 1965). This was the beginning of what Cox, Lobel, and McLeod (1991) call 'value in diversity hypothesis'.

Hoffman, Harburg, and Maier (1962) suggested that conflict was the main process variable mediating between diversity and performance. Damon (1991) and Levine, Resnick, and Higgins (1993) also linked problem solving improvement in diverse groups to cognitive conflict in the way of differing perspectives. The primary rationale here is that diversity leads to interactions among individuals with different skills, perspectives, knowledge, and networks, which should result in more thorough considerations of problems at hand and thus in higher problem-solving potential (Mannix and Neale, 2005).

Empirical research has been partially supportive of this perspective. Nemeth (1986) found that group diversity and being exposed to alternative minority views can enhance creativity. Bantel and Jackson (1989) found that the diversity in terms educational background and expertise of top management teams of banks was linked to more innovation of the banks. Similarly, Wiersema and Bantel (1992) found that in a sample of Fortune 500 firms, the propensity of undergoing strategic change correlated with the educational background divergence of their top management teams, highlighting the role of cognitive diversity. McLeod and Lobel (1992) found that while ethnically diverse group do not produce more original ideas, they produce better quality ones. Bunderson and Sutcliffe (2002) also found that while diversity in fundamental functional backgrounds of top management teams led to communication difficulties and lower performance, diversity in narrow, personal specialisations led to better interaction and information-sharing.

Apart from a focus on higher echelons of organisations, the abovementioned studies are also similar in seeking to formulate cognitive diversity via functional proxies such as tenure, experience, and education (Pitcher and Smith, 2001). To extend this view to more surface-level demographic factors, one needs to be able to assume a strong enough connection between the visible traits and underlying factors to use one as a substitute for the other. The in-depth analysis by Lawrence (1997) concludes that this notion, also known as the congruence assumption, cannot be generally true. Nonetheless, some empirical research has attempted using this assumption under certain conditions. For example, in a laboratory experiment on a sample of 135 Anglo-, Asian, African, and Hispanic American students, McLeod et al. (1996) found that

heterogeneous groups outperformed the more homogeneous ones in a brainstorming task the nature of which called for knowledge of different cultures, and therefore, favoured ethnic diversity.

The study by Watson, Johnson, and Zgourides (2002) affords a different view of dynamics of diverse groups. In this study, a sample of 828 students in the form of learning teams worked together for a period of four months to complete a project. Watson et al. (2002) observed that the emergence of leaders in the diverse teams was based on solving interpersonal differences whereas in non-diverse teams the leaders came forth to organize tasks. This difference persisted though the lifetime of the groups, indicating the perceived importance of issues in the teams, and suggesting a limitation for short-term diverse groups. Nonetheless, the more homogeneous groups reported experiencing self-orientation among members and team commitment issues. By the end of the lifetime of the groups, diverse teams had outperformed their more homogeneous counterparts. A study by Hartenian and Gudmunson (2000) found that ethnic diversity of employees was positively related to company earnings and profits; such an effects was not observed for company ownership by minorities or otherwise.

The results of a study by Herring (2009), using data from 506 U.S. business organizations, also revealed a strong and significant relationship between racial diversity of employees and four performance measures, namely sales revenue, number of customers, market share, and profit relative to competitors. Analysing data on the innovative performance of about 14,000 Danish firms over nine years, Parrotta, Pozzoli, and Pytlikova (2011) found a positive relationship between educational and skill diversity and ethnic diversity with the innovative capabilities of the firms they studied. They also reported that these diversity effects are pertinent only to white-collar occupations. The results of a social laboratory experiment by Phillips, Northcraft, and Neale (2006) suggest that groups diverse on surface-level characteristics might have an edge when it comes to discussing unique information as per the legitimacy afford by the initial perception of differences whereas more homogeneous groups would be more inclined towards conformity.

Yet not all empirical research supports the view of diversity as beneficial. Jayne and Dipboye (2004) investigate the business case for diversity extensively and find that diversity does not necessarily lead to higher group performance nor is it guaranteed to improve the talent pool. Overall, it appears that positive effects of diversity depend on the situation, but generally a diverse workforce is more beneficial if higher flexibility and creativity is required (Jayne and Dipboye, 2004). Similarly, Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin(1999) find that diversity in functional background increased the disagreement and discussions on the group task which can potentially lead to better outcomes, but racial diversity resulted in increased emotional conflict.

A meta-analytic of 13 studies by Bowers, Pharmer, and Salas (2000) found small positive, but not significant results for the relationship between gender, ability level, and personality diversity and performance. Another meta-analytic study of 24 publications, focusing on highly- and less-job related diversity found no relationship between diversity type and cohesion or performance. Finally, in a meta-analysis of 108 studies on diversity and performance, Stahl et al. (2010) find that cultural diversity results both in process losses and process gains as it reduces social integration and cohesion and at the same time increases creativity. It has been made clear so far that while the value in diversity hypothesis deserves merit, the positive relationship between diversity and desirable organisational outcomes are not consistent nor straightforward.

### **2.3.2 Diversity as detrimental**

The basic idea that proximity of characteristics such as attitudes, values and beliefs breeds, and is strengthened in return by, interpersonal attraction is the main tenet of Newcomb's social attraction theory (Newcomb, 1961). This effect, for which Newcomb (1961) found evidence in the form of friendship patterns of college students and their similar attitudes, forms a push towards preferential communication with similar others and avoidance of disagreement caused by dissimilar ones (Rosenbaum, 1986). Byrne's (1971) similarity-attraction paradigm extended the concept further by noting that individuals not only feel more attracted to others with similar attitudes,

but also rate them more favourably. While similarity-attraction paradigm explains interactional dynamics via deep-level traits, some researchers have found that consistent with the traits view of demographic diversity, surface-level differences can be proxies for deep-level diversity (McGrath et al., 1995).

Pertinent to ethnic diversity, Triandis (1959, 1960) found that culturally-diverse groups suffered lower interpersonal attraction and more communication problems compared to culturally homogeneous groups. Townsend and Scott (2001) also suggest that while race does not directly influence deep-level attitudes, it affects it through influencing the life experiences that shape them. The resulting homophily limits individuals' social worlds and shapes the information they send and receive, others they interact with, and social experiences they earn, even early-on at school. In a study on school students in a biracial setting in the U.S., Shrum, Cheek, and Hunter (1988) found that one-third of the cross-race friendships expected by chance vanished in the first three years, eventually getting to one-tenth of the randomly anticipated level by the middle school, where it levels.

Mollica, Gray, and Trevino (2003) found effects of homophilous network-building among MBA students at the beginning and during their course, with the effects being stronger for ethnic minorities. Goins and Mannix (1999) also found that in the absence of prior acquaintance, voluntary selection of project team members followed patterns of demographic homophily. According to McPherson, Lovin, and Cook(2001), racial and ethnic homophily creates the strongest social divide, followed by age, religion, education, occupation, and gender. While the similarity-attraction paradigm leaves open the possibility of development of deeper understanding among individuals by time and hence interpersonal attraction moving towards deep-level traits, a study by Jackson et al. (1991) found that these traits were not ones that could be socialised and learnt over time, but fixed qualities such as prior experience or education.

The focus of the similarity-attraction paradigm on dyadic relationships means that it has limited explanatory powers in social category cases such as when individuals express desire to membership in groups prior to any interaction with their members (Tsui et al., 1992). This is a void filled by the social identity perspective, form of the



social identity theory by Tajfel (1978). By introducing the concept of social identity as 'the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership' (Tajfel, 1972:292), he describes how, through the process of social categorisation (Turner, 1975), individuals tend to form groups on the basis of some contextually meaningful and salient factor to improve their self-esteem and preserve and reinforce a positive identity.

An immediate result of this process is the emergence of in-groups and out-groups (Carte and Chidambaram, 2004). As a result, individuals would regard in-group members more positively than out-group members, assuming out-group members as less appealing to interact with, possibly even prior to any actual interaction (Messick and Mackie, 1989, Loden and Rosener, 1991). As per the theoretical emphasis of social identity theory, it was limited in principle to intergroup relations, applied mainly to major social categories, and thus could not explain intragroup social behaviour.

To account for this weakness, self-categorization theory was developed as an intra-group extension of social identity theory (Turner et al., 1987). Self-categorization theory describes how social categorization results in prototype-based depersonalization of group members and thus, acting as a basis of group behaviour cognition (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Prototype is a rather vague and context-based cognitive manifestation of group membership feature. An important function of prototype is to maximize the differences between and minimize the differences within groups to attain a highly desired distinctiveness.

Although a truly landmark theory, the social identity theory does not convincingly explain the roots of intergroup behaviour. Tajfel and Turner (1979) emphasise on the role of the natural quest for positive self-esteem as the motivational drive behind group behaviour. Although derogating the out-group in a favour of the in-group (as a kinship group) might have had survival values in primitive human societies competing for scarce resources, it does not sound completely plausible in a modern diverse society, especially in an economically diverse society (Alesina and La Ferrara, 2005).

Moreover, the studies showing the urge to keep the marginalised group identities by their own members was a major blow to the initial motivational reasoning of social identity theory (Brewer, 1993). The answer to this question was given in the form of the natural urge of individuals to feel certain about themselves and the world surrounding them in order to feel in control of their lives; categorisation with similar individuals brings about this much-needed certainty so the groups formed are valuable points of reference for their members.(Hogg and Mullin, 1999, Hogg and Terry, 2000).

Diversity traits are often categorized based on the level of observability as surface-level and deep-level (Milliken and Martins, 1996). Surface-level diversity is defined as the differences in group members based on characteristics that are readily detectable and easily recognized. These characteristics are usually biological and reflect in physical features of the beholder, such as age, gender, and race (Harrison et al., 1998, Shaw and Barrett-Power, 1998), are easily observable, and generally immutable (Jackson et al., 1992). Deep-level diversity, on the other hand, signifies differences in more personal, covert characteristics such as beliefs and values, attitudes and conflict resolution styles (Shaw and Barrett-Power, 1998). These attributes are more difficult to spot and they require time and interaction to become salient.

While social identity perspective deals with mostly involuntary, category-based memberships, these are not the only bases of identification. Identity of individuals is also formed in part by the more individualistic spaces one occupies in the society such as one's job as an engineer or one's family relationship as a mother. These are explained under the identity theory (Stryker, 1987) that views self as a social construct of multiple identities that individuals have in relation to the society, and the feedback that they receive for satisfying (or otherwise) of those roles.

The identity of an individual, therefore, can be said to consist of collective category identification and individual points of reference. However, Brewer (1991) suggests that two different identifications cannot be salient at the same time and therefore proposes concentric circles of social identities around a personal identity, implying the relative salience of social identities in social contexts. Moreover, Hogg et al. (2004),

assert that personal attributes have much less influence on group processes than social identities.

The salience, and activation of social identifications is based on their chronic and situational accessibility and structural and normative fit (Oakes, 1987). At any certain time, the salient identification is the most important one as it is the most likely to drive the individual's behaviour (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Not all identifications have the same chance of becoming salient though. Hale (2004) argues that some identifications become 'thicker' when they affect the individuals' life experiences in more ways, or as he reports from Sacks (1992) when they somewhat determine a person's fate. This describes categories and points of reference that are more frequently and more meaningfully invoked such as gender and ethnicity, also known as master statuses (Stryker, 1987). Even among master statuses, ethnicity (or sometimes race) is thicker than gender as it is also linked to categorical differences in income level, social status and relative number (McPherson et al., 2001); the same is not equally true for gender. Although there is general consensus that ethnicity and gender are more likely to dominate the identification of individuals for being chronically salient and normatively meaningful, identities are malleable to contextual changes, not only in salience, but also in the form they take (Hogg et al., 2004).

Numerous empirical studies support the predictions of social identity perspective. Starting with the dyadic superior-subordinate relationships, Tsui and O'Reilly (1989) found that dissimilarity in demographic characteristics was linked to lower evaluation of subordinates by superiors, lower personal attraction for subordinates felt by superiors. Moving to group-level, Tsui, Egan, and O'Reilly (1992) reported finding a correlation between workgroup racial diversity and psychological attachment to the group.

Bacharach, Bamberger, and Vashdi (2005) reported that increase in racial diversity of workgroups beyond a tipping point reduced the number of supportive relations between dissimilar peers; this effects was, however, moderated by the existing support climate. In a study of 111 organisational work teams, racial diversity of teams, as well as racial dissimilarity of team members and leaders were found to be

negatively related to team effectiveness and effectiveness, and evaluation of the teams by the leaders (Kirkman et al., 2004). Riordan and Shore's (1997) research on a predominantly female sample showed that racial composition of the groups affected the attitude of individuals towards their work group such that all of the racial groups considered (white, Black, Hispanic) exhibited lower commitment to their group when they were in an absolute minority.

A study of 144 student project teams by Harrison et al. (2002) found that both surface-level and deep-level diversity have a significant negative effect on team social integration, which in turn negatively affects task performance. Social integration is defined as representative of several factors including peer satisfaction, cohesion, and team experience joy. Lingual differences (i.e. English vs. Japanese vs. Spanish) were also found by Ford and Chan (2003) to be one of the most prevalent factors impeding knowledge sharing in groups. One might argue that having a common second language solves this issue, but the results of a study by Luring (2009) on knowledge sharing in a multinational workforce in a diverse organization suggests that a lingua franca is not a sufficient solution. The main findings of Luring (2009) were hampering of communication, interaction, and knowledge sharing by diversity despite initiatives taken by the organization management and despite a high literacy in a common second language.

In a study on 365 sales teams in a Fortune 500 company, Jackson and Joshi (2004) found that consistent with social identity perspective, performance was negatively related to tenure diversity, gender diversity, and ethnic diversity. Similarly, a study of the public school districts in the state of Texas in the US showed a negative relationship between the ethnic diversity of teachers and students' performance (Pitts and Jarry, 2007). These studies support the notion that diversity results in process losses, leading to lower performance.

A number of studies discovered the importance of temporal factors in the relationship between diversity and group outcomes. Harrison, Price, and Bell (1998) found that the passage of time diminished the emotional conflict resulting from racial diversity, that gave way to task-related conflict and salience of deep-level diversity. Price et al. (2002)

also support the idea that as time spent interacting and collaborating in teams increases, the effects of demographic diversity are reduced. This is in line with Watson, Kumar, and Michaelsen's (1993) observations that although homogeneous student project groups enjoyed better processes and performance, the differences were evened out by the end of seventeen-week period. Finally, Sacco and Schmitt (2005) found that in a sample of young restaurant staff, demographic dissimilarity between employees and their units resulted in higher turnover risk for them, and although the passage of time remedied this condition, it was likely that they would have quit the job by then.

Yet some other studies have arrived at the conclusion that diversity does not have a direct effect on performance or the positive and negative effects cancel each other out. In a meta-analysis of the research on cultural diversity and group performance, Stahl et al. (2010) suggest process gains such as enhanced creativity and process losses such as increased conflict, lower social integration and communication difficulties as group diversity effects. A large-scale field study on the effect of gender and racial diversity on business performance by Kochan et al. (2003) found no significant effect to be consistent over the four large firms they studied. In one of the cases, appropriate human resources practices mitigated the negative effects of the racial diversity, while the presence of a competitive organizational culture exacerbated them. Using data from the U.S. banking sector, Ely (2004) found no significant correlation between race, sex, tenure, or age diversity and process or performance of teams.

Among reports of positive, negative, or non-significant relations between diversity and group outcomes, a number of studies call attention to asymmetrical effects present in these relations. Tsui et al. (1992) carried out a large-scale study on 151 work units, including manufacturing and hospital units, and found that consistent with the social identity perspective, but contrary to common research focus, gender and racial majority groups (i.e. man and whites) exhibited negative reactions towards diversity. Knouse and Dansby (1999) also found what can be called optimal diversity levels, below which gender and racial diversity is tolerated and encouraged, but above which the majority would feel uneasy and the group would suffer process losses.

Asymmetrical effects for diversity were also found by Kurtulus (2011) with regards to functional areas. More specifically, she found that racial diversity had negative effects in operations and distributions teams while positive- though non-significant- effects in sales teams.

The social identity and self-categorisation theories have formed the basis of a social psychological perspective that has emerged as the dominant theoretical viewpoint on diversity effects in organisations. Rather than being discredited, subsequent research has help add to and compliment this perspective. It has become increasingly clear, however, that to achieve an in-depth understanding of diversity effects in organisations, the group processes and how they are affected by contextual factors are indispensable. The next section discusses the literature on societal and organisational factors that are shown to impact diversity dynamics in important ways.

### **2.3.3 Contextual diversity effects**

While the innate need for certainty helped explain the motivational mechanism behind social categorisation, it did not sufficiently account for such intergroup behaviour as in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice. If an individual has already achieved the level of certainty psychologically needed, why would they exhibit the bias against the others? It does not require substantial optimism to reject the idea of automatic bias against out-groups; In his seminal work, *The Nature of Prejudice* (1954), Allport suggested that while 'hostility toward out-groups helps strengthen our sense of belonging, but it is not required', and that 'what is alien is regarded as somehow inferior, less "good", but there is not necessarily hostility against it' (Allport, 1954: 42).

Branscombe et al. (1999) draw a convincing picture by positing that social identity threat and not social categorisation per se is the reason behind out-group bias and hostility. Although previous research has shown the role of preserving high collective self-esteem in this process, out-group derogation did not take place in the absence of the threat, nor did it enhance collective self-esteem in such conditions (Branscombe

et al., 1999). Howard (2000) suggests that as individuals seek positive self-evaluation, they will tend to evaluate their social group positively and so react against groups that pose a threat to it, and not all the different ones.

Being associated with a stigmatised ethnic group in an ethnically diverse society normally poses a greater threat to the identity of the individual as compared to supporting a third-league football club. The logic is that although individuals might prefer not to reveal a threatened identity of theirs in some situations, to the extent that the relevant characteristics of those identities are immutable, the categorisation and subsequent threat are inevitable. Nonetheless, recent research found out that members of lower status groups tend to justify the status quo if they perceive it as unstable and are heavily invested in their group identities, i.e. when there's hope for a more positive group identity in future (Owuamalam et al., 2017).

Relevant to social identity threat, a study by Phinney, Jacoby, and Silva (2007) based on developmental theory found that among first-year college students, a secure ethnic identity acted as a platform upon which the positive diversity attitudes were developed. Threat to one's social identity is also linked to the concept of ambivalence in the experience of cultural and ethnic diversity. According to van Leeuwen (2008), an initial experience of culturally unknown, breaks down the position of the body of accepted, embodied and unproblematic knowledge which is referred to as common sense (Geertz, 1992, Taylor, 1995), In doing so, it invokes both the feelings of fear and disgust, as well as those of meaning and delight (Van Leeuwen, 2008). After the initial process of familiarisation, these affects mostly settle into indifference. However, the way these feelings are eventually interpreted by the individuals is based on the perception of threat to one's personal or social identity or well-being. Prejudice, according to Allport (1954:281),

*... (unless deeply rooted in the character structure of the individual) may be reduced by equal status contact between majority and minority groups in the pursuit of common goals. The effect is greatly enhanced if this contact is sanctioned by institutional supports (i.e., by law, custom or local atmosphere), and provided it is of a sort that leads to the perception of common interests and common humanity between members of the two groups.*

This, known as the contact hypothesis, is the basis for intergroup contact theory (Pettigrew, 1998). While Allport (1954) asserted that the benefit of intergroup contact would incur only under the conditions of equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and structural support, Pettigrew (1998) suggested that these conditions are beneficial, but not necessary. In reality, these conditions are hardly present and as Tajfel and Turner (1986) mentioned, it is often the case in societies that an accepted status hierarchy exists which cannot be easily removed or replaced.

Later research, a meta-analysis of which was carried out by Pettigrew *et al.* (2011) showed that inter-group contact, with the exception of involuntary and threatening contact situations, does result in reduced prejudice, and that this effect often extends to other social out-groups as well. Pettigrew *et al.* (2011) also suggest that sufficient in-group/out-group distinction is imperative to realise the positive effects of intergroup contact. This is in line with the optimal distinctiveness model of social identity (Brewer, 1991) which explains psychological mechanism behind the social categorisation process in the form of two opposing needs of individuals for simultaneous similarity and differentiation (or inclusion and distinctiveness) such that categorisation occurs at the level of a category that is not too large to dilute the sense of inclusion, and not too small to affect the differentiation urge (Leonardelli *et al.*, 2010).

Based on this rationale, Brewer (1999) argues that contrary to common wisdom, perceived interdependence and need for cooperation among highly differentiated social groups (e.g. in the form of a common goal or a common threat), can in fact intensify intergroup conflict and hostility, the reason being the disruption of an optimal identity that is dependent of clear in-group boundaries. In a laboratory experiment, Homan *et al.* (2008) found empirical evidence for this view as they observed that individuals' openness to experience in teams with salient sub-groups resulted in positive group outcomes through information elaboration; the same effects were not present in teams without salient sub-groups.

A research by Timmerman (2000) on diversity dynamics in basketball and baseball teams confirmed Thompson's (1967) suggestion that the nature of the task moderates



diversity effects. The research found that as the degree of task interdependence increases, more cooperation and interaction is necessary to perform it, increasing the salience and influence of diversity and causing conflict. This is particularly interesting as this situation is precisely when diversity might increase performance. Another finding of Timmerman (2000) was the effect of group size on conflict in diverse teams such that members of smaller teams had more frequent interaction and thus more conflict.

Nonetheless, organisational practices are shown to be able to ameliorate diversity dynamics in teams. Chatman *et al.* (1998) conducted a laboratory study simulating organization settings on 258 MBA students and found that organisational culture moderates the relationship between demographic diversity and performance. They reported a functional antagonism between self-categorization based on demographic characteristics and self-categorization based on organizational membership, concluding that a collectivistic organizational culture can make the latter salient, mitigating the negative effects of demographic diversity. Another study found that a growth-oriented strategy and diversity affirmation by the organization moderated the relationship between racial and gender diversity and performance (Ely, 2004).

A theoretical development that intends to bring together several distant theories on diversity effects together on the basis of faultline mode is the categorisation-elaboration model (CEM) by van Knippenberg, de Dreu and Homan (2004). Building on the effect of comparative fit, normative fit, and cognitive accessibility that determine the level of salience of categories and hence what categorisation takes place, the CEM model contends that diversity potentially has both positive and negative effects. Negative effects stem from social categorisation and the subsequent identity threat and the resulting process losses; positive effects are the product of elaboration of diverse task-relevant information between diverse group members.

While the traditional views on diversity, including social identity approach, have focused on the studying the variety or disparity of a certain trait, the more recent faultline approach, takes the diversity research a level higher by exploring multiple types of diversity from the perspective of their collective rise to salience (Thatcher and

Patel, 2012). Introduced by Lau and Murnighan (1998), it likens demographic characteristics of individuals in groups to faultlines in the earth's surface which are of little significance in the absence of external forces, but provide opportunities for fracturing. Based on the faultline model, it is concluded that if multiple diversity dimensions align, they can become more accessible and fit, and develop superimposed effects that are greater than sum of effects of individual characteristics. Moreover, the faultline model suggests an Inverted-U shape effect for diversity and conflict where low and high levels of diversity are potentially less problematic than medium diversity settings as moderate levels of diversity provide the best opportunity of faultline forming.

A simple example of faultlines concept is a group of four people, two of them black and the other two white. Faultline model differentiates between the two scenarios where the group is composed of two black females and two white males, and when it is composed of a black female, a black male, a white female, and a white male. The first scenario, according to faultlines model, constitutes a strong faultline, which is considerably more conflict-prone than the first. This is conceptually similar to the earlier discussion by Deschamps (1977) who found that the opposite pattern, cross-categorisation, weakens the salience of categorisations. While the faultline model is originally a work in the social identity tradition, subsequent related research has been from diverse theoretical bases and has studied faultlines along different criteria. Early and Mosakowski's (2000) laboratory experiments on group faultlines based on nationality confirmed that the performance in moderately diverse teams were at a disadvantage in the long run.

Developing a measure to calculate group faultlines based on gender/race/age combination, Gibson and Vermeulen (2003) found that moderate faultline strength appearing in very homogeneous and very heterogeneous groups exhibited more favourable learning behaviour than groups with strong faultlines and moderate levels of diversity. Another quantitative study by Thatcher, Jehn, and Zanutto (2003) found that groups with medium faultlines experiences less conflict and better morale and performance than very diverse groups with little faultline strength or groups divided into 2 homogeneous sub-groups with high faultline strength.

Another study by Lau and Murnighan (2005), confirmed the potential of demographic characteristics such as ethnicity and sex to form the basis of categorisations in groups. Choi and Sy (2010) conducted a social laboratory experiment on 62 groups and found that demographic faultlines increased relational conflict, which in turn was negatively related to organisational citizenship behaviour and group performance. A study by Jehn and Bezrukova (2010) showed that dormant faultlines (potential, based on members' characteristics) can be activated by environmental activators working in the direction of the divisions. A recent study by Meyer, Schermuly, and Kauffeld (2016) on demographic and personal trait faultlines and subgroup size found that members of the teams with strong faultlines and of the larger sub-group within the team were more likely to exhibit social loafing, a reduction of motivation for collaborative work.

Faultlines has been so far mostly measured by their strength and operationalised at the meso-level (Thatcher and Patel, 2012), but the concept of nested or cross-cut differences does not impose such a restriction. Ethnic diversity, depending on the social context, can range in meaning and importance from a nominal, rudimentary factor to tip of an iceberg of genetic make-up, cultural heritage, language, religion, and socioeconomic status, to name a few possibilities. In the latter case, ethnicity is no longer a nominal factor, but a multi-layered boundary. This research, then, proposes that ethnic diversity in ethnically segregated societies can be seen as representative of multiple divides that form a faultline, making ethnicity chronically salient and the basis of automatic categorisation, the effects of which would trickle down to the organisational units.

This section reviewed the literature on the conditional effects on the relationship between ethnic diversity and organisational group outcomes. It has been argued the intergroup contact help reduce conflict and prejudice between social groups, although it is affected by conditions of threat to group social identities. Initial phases of intergroup contact can also be characterised by ambivalence that in time, subject to conditions of identity threat, can lead to indifference, animosity, or delight. An organisational culture supportive of diversity and promoting equal status interaction is also shown to moderate this relationship. The dual-edged nature of diversity effects is summarised in CEM model as leading to categorisation of social identities as well as

elaboration of ideas and the interaction of these effects determining group diversity outcomes.

Finally, the faultlines model was discussed as drawing attention to cumulative effect of multiple diversity aspects beyond the sum of their individual effects, arguing that the structure of diversity should be given attention as an important part of the nature of diversity in a social group. The next section concludes this review by presenting the predictions drawn based on literature on the dynamics of inter-ethnic interaction in diverse organisational units in an ethnically segregated society. As per the focus of this study on individual-level interaction in the workplace, the next section will focus on dynamics of interpersonal interaction in organisational groups.

## **2.4 Group dynamics: psychological safety and trust**

This section looks into the ways in which ethnic diversity can affect interactional dynamics in groups. Following Berger and Luckmann's (1971) social constructivist argument, focusing on studying groups in a society without considering the larger societal dynamics would be tantamount to missing the bigger picture, including the social causes of the observed phenomena. Therefore, the conceptual framework of this research intends to explore how larger societal realities would have an impact on the interactional dynamics in the organisational groups. More specifically, how wider social relations between ethnic groups, acting through ethnic identification of individuals, affect the atmosphere of groups.

Being embedded in their environments, organisations are not stand-alone systems and hence, their 'employees come to the organization with heavy cultural and social baggage obtained from interactions in other social contexts' (Scott, 1992: 20). Brief, Butz, and Deitch (2004) go further to say that, especially on racial matters, organisations mirror their environments. Empirical evidence is provided in the form of results showing that white employees who live closer to black communities and perceive more interethnic conflict where they live, exhibit more negative diversity attitudes at work (Brief et al., 2005).

Most organisational literature has applied a rational system approach to analysing organisational dynamics and that might not always be able to explain the behaviour observed (Bunderson and Reagans, 2011). The often-neglected factor is that individuals, as humans, are emotional beings and feelings of injustice and a historical memory of conflict can affect their behaviour and as Nonaka, Toyama, and Konno (2000) state, the cultural, social, and historical factors are with individuals when they interpret information for meanings in interactions. Seeking to capture the emotional factors in group interactions, this research goes beyond the rational system approach and includes social psychological dynamics such as trust, psychological safety, and power relations. This is in line with how social identity approach views social category memberships as 'that part of an individual's self-concept which stems from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership' (Tajfel, 1981: 255).

The majority-minority relations in societies are often characterised by power imbalances. The foundation of many conceptualisations of power is Weber's definition of power where it is linked to the probability of a person's ability to achieve a goal in spite of resistance (Weber et al., 1947). According to Lukes (1974: 27), 'A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests.' A can be an individual or a collective; however, there are differences in the nature of individual and collective power. As Benton (1981) elaborates, individuals own power as part of their nature, and this power is more or less generally distributed.

Social power, on the other hand, is possessed with the help of social relationships and networks, and obtaining and controlling means of production and social media. Relevant to the social power is the notion of exercising power not only by means of coercion but also by controlling and manipulating the interests and demands of the lower-power groups so that issues and dissatisfactions are not surfaced (Bachrach and Morton, 1963). Lukes (1974) also reminds us that power might be exercised through the embedded bias in the social structure of institution and groups.

Organizational groups do not exist in vacuum and are affected by the social realities existent in the wider society (Scott, 1992). Foldy, Rivard, and Buckley (2009) suggest

that relations in ethnically diverse groups are governed by power disparities pertinent to ethnic groups. Power differences in the society are carried by the members across organizational borders and reflected in organizational group processes as well. The authors argue that as race and ethnicity are primary categories used to understand and make sense of the environment, stereotyping and bias happen subconsciously and thus colour-blindness is not an option. As a result, ethnically diverse organizational groups naturally recreate power asymmetries of the larger society. The resulting dynamics can impede the participation and contribution of minority group members by causing identity threat in minority/underrepresented groups, leaving them with choices of overt conflict, or physical or psychological withdrawal from the group.

Threat to one's social identity, the perception that one would be let down and discriminated against because of one's racial or ethnic background disrupts one's psychological safety. Psychological safety is argued to be central to cooperative behaviour such as feedback seeking, sharing information, experimentation, and seeking help (Edmondson, 1999). Ho (2006), however, suggests that left unattended, the relationship between psychological safety in a team and the team's diversity would likely be negative.

Branscombe et al. (1999) note that although individuals might try to conceal their stigmatized group identity to avoid the disadvantages, some evident features such as gender and race are immutable and those individuals would probably be categorised as such. If the individual does not identify with the category, his/her individual identity is threatened by being force-categorised into a category she/he is unwilling to, leading to disturbed psychological safety for them. If the individual indeed strongly identifies with the disadvantaged group, the threat to the dearly held values of the ethnic group also affects the psychological safety of the individual.

Psychological safety in a group is characterised by mutual interpersonal trust, respect, and belief in others' competence and good will. With psychological safety in place in a team, members would perceive it to be safe to take interpersonal risks such as admitting to a mistake or asking for help, and thus learn and share knowledge with

other group members. In the absence of psychological safety, group members will at best resort to indirect methods such as abstract conversation to put forward their points; the level of psychological safety in a group affects the interactional dynamics among the members.

Ely, Padavic, and Thomas (2012) examined the team performance in racially diverse situations where the settings included power asymmetries and stereotypes about the minority groups' competence in certain tasks. The results showed that minority group members' perception of an unsupportive atmosphere, leading to defensive or apathetic behaviour, is the sufficient condition for a negative relationship between diversity and team performance. Ely et al. (2012) suggest that this phenomenon is generalizable for settings with an identity group-based diversity dimension and a task-related negative stereotype attached to it.

Relevant to power relations and affected by them is interpersonal trust defined as 'the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of the words, actions, and decisions of another' (McAllister, 1995: 25). A more widely accepted definition is offered by Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995:712) as 'the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control the other party.' McAllister's definition is a general characterisation of trust, which can be based on information in that the trustor chooses whom to trust based on evidence and reason, or founded on affect and interpersonal emotional bonds, or both.

Mayer and colleagues' framework, on the other hand, emphasises the cognitive side of trust. They suggest that trust is the willingness to take risk on the basis of the one's perceptions of ability, benevolence and integrity of the to-be-trusted individual (Schoorman et al., 2007). Mayer et al. (1995) acknowledge that diversity poses a challenge to cooperation in the workforce as the role of interpersonal similarity and mutual attraction in facilitating cooperative behaviour is limited and thus trust is of paramount significance in diverse groups. Trust by definition involves relinquishing some power to the trusted partner and renders the individual vulnerable to some

degree. With an inferior level of power in interpersonal relationships, the underpowered party is unlikely to make the balance worse for itself by giving even more power to the other side, i.e., to trust.

Other factors in perceiving trustworthiness of a party is the belief that they have good intentions towards the individual and do not care only about their personal gain (are benevolent) and that they adhere to a set of principles that is also acceptable for the trustor (they have integrity) (Mayer et al., 1995). McAllister (1995) suggests that ethnic similarity and expected cultural connection increases the chances of development and maintenance of trusting relationships. Different ethnic groups usually have different cultures that entail different value systems. In this way, ethnic diversity, via cultural dissimilarity, can lead to different principles of adherence and the perception of lack of integrity. However, educational and professional systems of training and regulating constitute a common platform for co-workers to behave and make sense of others behaviour. In this sense, professional value systems replace or modify cultural values.

Power asymmetries and identity threat prepare the group atmosphere for emotional conflict, which relates to the lack of compatibility between individuals and results in hostility, tension, and lack of patience and trust in interactions. Task-related conflict, on the other hand, is the outcome of different personalities and viewpoints on the task at hand (Simons and Peterson, 2000). While a degree of task-related conflict is constructive and necessary for group learning, emotional conflict is often destructive (Carte and Chidambaram, 2004). Emotional conflict can simply be the result of the surface-level diversity in groups, but under conditions of power asymmetry and social identity threat, it is not just an incompatibility problem and has farther-reaching effects as it disrupts the psychological safety of the members of the group (Staples and Zhao, 2006).

Informal, identity-based organisational networks which exist parallel to formal networks are as important in the actual workflow of the units as the formal ones (Stephenson and Lewin, 1996). Studying interactional dynamics in organisational networks, Zboralski (2009) found that communication frequency enhanced



communication quality. In other words, one develops better relationships with individuals with whom one interacts the most. It can be said that trust and psychological safety are the foundations of such cooperative interaction as asking for help from a colleague, working mutually on a task, or contributing one's experience to co-workers. Inter-ethnic relations at the larger society as well as organisational factors impact these dynamics and determine interactional patterns of diverse organisational units.

## 2.5 Conclusion

Based on the studies reviewed in this section, it can be concluded while there has been extensive research in the area of diversity effects, results are not conclusive, with positive, negative, null, contextual, and moderating/mediating effects suggested and supported. Social identity perspective, which has been the dominant force in studying demographic diversity effects in organisations, predicts process losses through conflict in diverse groups. Similarity/attraction paradigm, as well, predicts positive outcomes for homogeneous groups, but with a focus on deep-level diversity. The theoretical view contrary to the social identity perspective views diversity as a source of informational richness, which although causes some process loss, ultimately has positive effects in the groups.

However, with the development of recent theoretical viewpoints such as faultiness and CEM model, the empirical results show more promise of converging to a theme where structure of diversity, the context of groups and the nature of task receives more attention. As per the multifaceted nature of ethnic diversity, this research proposes that it should be studied on its own and not in conjunction with the other forms of demographic diversity. While previous research has highlighted the importance of the context, the contextual factors studied in the literature has mostly been of organisational, task-related parameters.

This research looks for the sources of the phenomena under investigation in the broader social structure (Abrams, 1999), seeking to relate macro-level societal ethnic realities to meso-level organizational settings and interpersonal interactional relations

to provide a better understanding of social dynamics of ethnically diverse groups. Being true to the nature of social identity tradition (Tajfel, 1981a, Hogg et al., 2004), I look into the interpersonal dynamics from the view of collective, social identity of individuals, though at the same time keeping in mind that as per the professional nature of the occupations involved in this study, individuals likely to strongly identify with their professions as well.

Social categorisation creates symbolic boundaries, grouping people and creating a feeling of likeness among them (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). However, if widely agreed and thus strengthened, these boundaries can move on to develop a more coercive character, limiting interactions between groups and turning into social boundaries; far from hypothetical and far more divisive and resilient than the former. Boundaries can be based on different dimensions and differ in how permeable, visible, or rigid they are (Lamont and Fournier, 1993), but they all create distance. Based on a theoretical prediction that ethnic identity in an ethnically segregated society would be actively salient at any time, this research aims to study how peers of different ethnic backgrounds navigate these boundaries, equipped with varying degrees of trust and psychological safety.

The notion of ethnicity during Bosnian conflict was linked to religion, in apartheid South Africa to race, and to language and culture in Turkey's Kurdish conflict. Consider a hypothetical society where ethnicity is a strong determinant of people's religion, the language they natively speak, and their physiognomy. In this case, there are boundaries aligning together and creating a situation where ethnicity can constitute a very strong faultline. Based on the concept of faultlines, it can be hypothesised that diversity potentially constitutes a bigger problem in oligo-ethnic diverse settings than in 'melting pots' as per the lower possibility of cross-cut among the identificatory categories in the former. The next chapter is a historical and socioeconomic discussion on why Malaysia is one of the few such societies.

## Chapter Three: Ethnic Faultlines in Malaysia

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion on the current state of ethnic identification and segregation in the context of Malaysian society, where this study was carried out. The aim is to provide a rationale for considering the context of this research, Peninsular Malaysia, a faultline society. The aim of this study is to produce theoretically meaningful results which are useful to understand the dynamics of ethnic diversity in a wide range of situations, not only its original context. Therefore, understanding the specifics of what makes Malaysia a suitable case would assist in drawing theoretical parallels and similarities as well as important points of departure with other social contexts.

Explaining the structure and nature of ethnic diversity in Malaysia is not possible without reference to history of the country, during which large-scale migrations and political changes shaped the identity of the nation and its peoples. As such, this chapter is organised chronologically. The first section introduces the historically accepted origins of Malaysia in the form of Malacca sultanate and its social settings. Following this period, the colonial era that has a major role in the demographic change of the Malayan society and the emergence of a plural society is discussed.

The 1945-1970 period that marks the end of WWII, independence, and introduction of affirmative action policies was a volatile era for Malaysia that saw its formation, ethnic cooperation, and the fall of consociational politics is the topic of the fourth section. These are, by no means, exhaustive accounts of all the rich trove of events, but only a roadmap to understanding the foundations of the recent state of affairs. The residual effects of these periods are evident in the social make-up of Malaysian society today, with national narratives originating from the early days of Malacca sultanate, to remnant of ethnic segregation and preference policies of colonial era and longstanding socioeconomic effects of affirmative action policies of the 1970s.

The fifth section explores the contemporary state of ethnic affairs in Malaysia including inter-ethnic contact and trust, ethnic identities, and the issue of increasing

religious polarisation to complete the picture of social boundaries between Malaysian ethnic groups. Related to religious boundaries, the sixth and final section introduces commensality as an important means of social interaction which can be limited by religious culinary codes and restrictions. It is worth mentioning that I focus on the three main ethnic groups in peninsular Malaysia only for the reasons of brevity and limitations of time and resources and in way overlook the existence and significance of the other ethnic groups. Moreover, when using the words 'Chinese' and 'Indian' in this report, unless explicitly mentioned, I refer to the Chinese and Indian communities and individuals from Malaysia.

### **3.2 Pre-colonial era**

Most accepted accounts trace the history of Malaysia to the foundation of the city and sultanate of Malacca (or Melaka) in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, although civilizations existed in Malaya prior to that point. Being located at the crossroads of Indian, Arabia, and the Far East, the region has historically had a diverse population. The account of the first Chinese settlers in Malacca goes back to the time of Ming dynasty in China which sent out trade missions to South Asia (Hall, 2006). Indians and Arabs are known to have arrived in Malaya long before that, mainly as traders. Although their history is not as well documented as the Chinese immigrants, the history of Malacca certainly accounts for their presence since the early days.

When in 1414 the founder of Malacca, Parameswara, converted to Islam and adopted the title Muhammad Iskandar Shah, a new chapter in the history of Malaya opened (Winstedt, 1948). Most of the Malay populace followed their ruler and converted. Until early 16th century, what was to be known as Malaya later, consisted of a number of Malay sultanates. Malacca and Kedah, as important trading ports and being located on the important trade routes, were fairly diverse societies. However, the early traders and craftsmen who decided to settle in those areas, mostly Arabs and Indians, but also Chinese, adopted the language, culture, and ways of life of locals and were generally integrated in the society.

The creolized Chinese and Indian communities came to be known as 'peranakans'. Peranakan refers to locally-born persons of other cultures (Lee, 2013, Ansaldo *et al.*, 2007). Peranakan Chinese are referred to as Baba (male) and Nyonya (female) today, residing mainly in Malacca and known for their hybrid language and culture. The Muslim Indians were referred to as Javi Peranakan- Javi being anyone or anything Islamic (Javi Peranakan was later replaced in popular culture to 'mamak' which has a more or less derogatory tone (Abraham, 2004)).

The limited number of newcomers, together with the existence of the early forms of South East Asian cosmopolitanism, allowed for an organic absorption of migrants into Malayan population and formed a more or less cohesive society with little recorded history in the way of communal conflict. With the arrival of European powers in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and especially the solidification of the British influence during 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, this was about to change.

### **3.3 Colonial era and emergence of a plural society and ethnic fissures**

When in 1511 Afonso de Albuquerque conquered Melaka and put an end to Malaccan Sultanate (Cleary and Goh, 2000), the history of gradual social exchanges there was to change into waves of social change and immigration under the Portuguese, Dutch, and British rulers (Worden, 2001). Although the Portuguese- and Dutch-rule periods saw some migratory effects as before, it was during the British rule and more specifically the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that the flourishing colonial economy of tin mining and later sugar and rubber plantation attracted large numbers of Chinese workers and entrepreneurs and Tamil plantation workers, among others, to Malaysia (Khuo, 2009). It was these major waves of immigration that changed the demographic shape of Malayan society.

During the British rule and as a result of what the well-known Malaysian sociologist Collin Abraham calls 'the colonial policy of divide and rule', the Malayan society shaped into a classic plural society. The term 'plural society' was first coined by the British colonial officer J. S. Furnivall to refer to the societies in Indonesia and Burma in which major ethnic and cultural groups lived in largely separate geographical areas,

adhered to separate religions, occupied separate social positions, and were endogamous to a large extent (Peacock, 1972). In Malaya, too, each group was left to fend for itself, with next to no social interaction between them, except in the marketplace, which inhibited the formation of a common social identity (Abraham, 2004, Rex, 1959).

The Chinese community, which was disadvantaged under the employment system, developed a communitarian attitude and reinforced their ethnic identity. On the basis of survival of the fittest, and the absence of a middle class between the rich and dominant Europeans and the Malay peasantry, Chinese occupied the middleman positions in Malaya, as they did in Indonesia (Peacock, 1972, Tan, 2001). The Indian peoples in Malaysia had much more diverse historical trajectories. The majority of Indian migrants up until 1880s were Muslim traders or educated people who took up the roles in Sultans' courts in Malay states. Afterwards, however, seeking to meet the growing demand for labour in plantations, the British administration sponsored the flow of Indian convicts, and later indentured labourers. These communities were to a great extent confined to secluded plantations, and lived under total domination and control by their employers. Moreover, the large extent of the latter form of Indian migration changed the image of Indians among the locals.

For the local Malays, meanwhile, it was business as usual as, except the royal and elite groups among them, they were mainly engaged in a rural agrarian lifestyle confined to their kampongs (Malay villages). This, however, was not a conscious choice on their behalf. The colonial educational policy towards Malays consisted of a two-tier system in which the Malay nobility would receive an elitist English education, while the rest would be controlled and trapped in a rural economy by means of inhibiting social mobility through education (Sua, 2013a). As Abraham (2004) explains, the planned exclusion of Malays from the modern sector of economy and English education, made the bulk of Malay population adopt an inward-looking worldview and fall back on the networks of cultural and religious ties. This also had the effect that observing the rapid economic growth of the country and its riches, the Malay peasantry felt left behind and marginalised in its own land by the invaders. At the same time, the incentive

behind such an educational system, which was to co-opt the Malay nobility in a British system, failed to materialise and instead gave rise to Malay nationalism (Sua, 2013a)

Although labouring Chinese and Indians paid a heavy toll under harsh working conditions, it enabled them, especially the Chinese, to benefit from the economic growth in those sectors and enjoy a limited degree of social mobility (Khoo, 2004). The birth of the Chinese capitalist class and the ubiquity of the Chinese small businesses in everyday lives of Malaysians led to the myth that economy is controlled by the Chinese (Puthuchery, 1960). This situation started the identification of ethnicity with economic status that although untrue on many levels, still holds the imagination of ordinary Malaysians.

Their perception of the character of the invaders, however, was largely detached from reality. The main beneficiaries of the spectacular economic growth in Malaya were British and European interests. Nonetheless, a successful social engineering practice based on the ideology of inherent white superiority effectively eliminated the colonial masters as points of reference and instead, the comparison was directed towards immigrants, 'who were taking over economic opportunities from the Malays.' It is also notable that the colonial rulers, except for the islands of Singapore and Penang, ruled Malaya indirectly through the proxy Malay rulers, or Sultans, giving them a less repressive silhouette. According to Abraham (2004) it was also intended to blur the class lines in the Malayan society and shift the rifts into ethnic divisions; a strategy that as Nonini (2008) shows, was neatly replicated after independence by the ruling alliance.

Holding the balance and stability of the colonial economy in Malaya required the preservation of insular socioeconomic spheres of Malay peasants in rural areas, Indian rubber tappers in plantations, and Chinese tin miners and industrial workers in urban areas, backed by educational and economic policies (Singh, 2001). The insular nature of the life spaces of these groups also meant that they did not have much direct contact and first-hand knowledge about each other, which in turn enabled the easy propagation of the negative social stereotypes. The most widespread of these

stereotypes were the image of Malays as lazy and impotent, Indians as untrustworthy, and Chinese as greedy.

This sinister balance was rarely disrupted until the Second World War. Only the economic depression of 1930s which led to the lower demand for the products of the export-oriented colonial economy led to introduction of restrictions on new immigrants, as well as heightened tensions between the communities as a result of economic hardships. The general picture, however, of the pre-WWII Malayan society was that of a classic plural society in which there was 'a corresponding cleavage along racial lines. The foreign elements live in the towns, the natives in rural areas, commerce and industry are in foreign hands and the natives are mainly occupied in agriculture' (Furnivall, 1956: 311).

It can be argued that the foundation of the social cleavages in the Malayan society is threefold. Firstly, the rapid pace of immigration (importation of labour) that did not allow for a natural contact and cultural assimilation/hybridisation. Secondly, the colonial policies kept the three 'non-white' communities in mostly impermeable socioeconomic spaces that facilitated the development of a consciousness of kind among the three main ethnic groups. Thirdly, the identifiable physiognomic characteristics between Chinese, Indians, Malays, and Europeans provided an easy basis for subjective ethnic classifications. Juxtaposed with religious and cultural patterns and differential access to political and economic power, these mundane physical traits were imbued with meanings of value and hierarchy and were accepted as the basis of social interactions in Malaya.

Prior to arrival of Europeans in Malaya, it was relatively easy for immigrant, especially Muslim Indians and Arabs, to assimilate in Malayan society, get married to a Malay and become one. Also for non-Muslim immigrants, a degree of cultural assimilation that led to emergence of peranakan communities was possible. The arrival of Europeans and solidification of colonial rule brought with itself the concept of 'race' which was more or less to the locals. Beginning with the consolidation of British presence in the area, the first census was conducted in 1871, covering Penang, Malacca, and Singapore (known as the Straits Settlements at the time) (Hirschman,



1987). The first two censuses used the word 'nationalities' to refer to origins of individuals. The term 'race' appeared in an appendix in the 1891 reports, and it replaced 'nationality' as a more accurate and less ambiguous basis for classification; this practice was complete by 1911.

Hirschman (1987:567) argues that these classifications 'were not the inevitable solution to a complex ethnographic maze but rather a particular construction of European taste.' In essence, this was the simplification of a wide array of diverse groups into a small number of simple-to-understand, but hardly meaningful categories. Beginning in 1921, the decennial census included all British Malaya (the Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore of today) and by the time of independence at 1957, the ethnic identities were so prevalent that they were taken for granted as authentic social categories.

While the categories themselves were more or less neutral in tone and meaning, the policies and the social realities of the society were not. A number of socioeconomic policies made these categories meaningful for the individuals carrying them (Haque, 2003). The 1913 Malay Land Reservation Enactment defined Malay as being Muslim, speaking Malay language habitually, and practicing Malay customs (Khou, 2009), forging a new identity for people who would think of themselves as Pattani, Bugis, or Banjarese, to name a few (Singh, 2001). Only one of the 'racial' terms in Malaya were based on biological traits (orang putih= white person), others being based on countries of origin (orang India and orang Cina= Indian and Chinese person) and a common culture (orang Melayu=Malay person).

The inter-group relations between groups, though, were mostly viewed as symbiotic and not competitive or conflictual, the primary reason being the social distance that made direct comparisons unlikely. This situation was about to change with the outbreak of Second World War and Japanese occupation of Malaya in 1941. As a result of their support for resistance against Japanese aggression in China, the Japanese viewed the Chinese with suspicion and contempt and seeing Malays as natural allies, given their fear of Chinese as enemies, assigned local Malays to help identify and catch

Chinese dissidents; this was the starting point for them being seen as comrades in crime to the Japanese (Visscher, 2007).

Throughout the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore until 1945, thousands of the Chinese were killed under suspicion of helping or sympathising with resistance movements in mainland China (Cheah Boon, 2003). The Malays, though suffering economic hardships of war conditions like other Malaysians, enjoyed greater freedom and occupied more official posts by aligning themselves with the Japanese (Cheah Boon, 2003). In fact, it has been argued that it was this period that ignited anti-colonial spirit in Malaya and revitalised Malay nationalism (Cheah Boon, 2007). Meanwhile, the Malayan Peoples Anti-Japanese Army (MPAJA), a predominantly Chinese armed resistance group, actively sought to punish the collaborators to the Japanese. In the immediate aftermath of Japanese surrender in 1945, MPAJA settled scores with the collaborators and policemen, mainly Malays, and this led to a number of communal violent incidents and formed the initial memory of interethnic violence (Shamsul, 2001, Kreuzer, 2006, Daniels, 2005).

This era also had an impact on the Indian community in Malaya. Initially used as labourers to construct the Burma-Thailand railway, they were later encouraged to join the Indian National Army, supported by the Japanese to fight the British in India; many volunteered, others coerced into joining (Cheah Boon, 2007). The events in India, the Japanese intolerance of communal label such as Malayali, Tamil, and Indian Muslim, and the respect they felt as part of a national movement made Indians feel as one community and enhance their solidarity, even though this was partly lost in the disillusionment after the war (Ramasamy, 2001).

The following period of 1948-1960 saw the guerrilla war between communist groups and the British who returned to Malaya after the end of WWII and the practice of forcible isolation of large parts of the Malayan Chinese community in concentration camps in Singapore and Malaya in the late 1940s and 1950s. Under the Malayan Emergency, launched by the British in response to the communist activities in Malaya, around 500,000 Chinese were rounded up and forcibly settle in fortified 'new villages' (Hirschman, 1984). The British rationale was to cut the popular support for communist

insurgents that was coming primarily from the Chinese community. But in the process, these mainly rural Chinese communities who were displaced during the Japanese occupation, developed a stronger feeling of resentment towards the Malays, which made up the majority of the security forces (Nonini, 2008). In the long run, this had the social effect of creating the mentality of 'separate social existence' (Singh, 2001: 48) between the Chinese and Malays, especially in the rural settings, where there was the best chance of intermingling and multiculturalism.

### **3.4 1945-1970: Interethnic honeymoon, formation and fall of a consociational agreement**

This section reviews the events that led to the formation of Federation of Malaya as an independent country, the interethnic social agreement that made it possible, the early years of Malaysia as an independent country and racial riots of May 1969 that changed the political and social landscape of Malaysia. Of particular importance is the nature of the main political parties and the structure of the ruling alliance which has been instrumental in channelling votes and allegiances along ethnic lines. The process of postcolonial nation-building and the clash of different visions for Malaysia, especially regarding the position of different ethnic groups in it that led to the secession of Singapore are the other significant events of this era in Malaysia.

After the end of Second World War, the world was changing and the pre-war mode of colonisation had lost its currency. The post-war policy of the British government, and the invigorated Malayan nationalism dictated a path to independence. The British put forth the proposal of Malayan Union, in which all citizens, including Indians and Chinese, would have equal rights (Khoo, 2009). The British amended the plan to abolish the power of traditional Malay rulers and pushed it ahead in 1946, to fail in the face of fierce opposition from Malay political groups.

The most potent force in opposition to the Malayan Union proposal came from a group of delegations from 41 Malay groups from Malaya and Singapore, which came together to form United Malay National Organization (UMNO) in 1946 (Daniels, 2005). It is important to emphasise that UMNO's *raison d'être* was to fight for 'Malaya for

Malays' and preventing the granting of equal rights to the Chinese and Indians (Worden, 2001). As a result of this resistance, the Malayan Union plans were dropped and replaced with Federation of Malaya plans in 1948, according to which the Malay rules (Sultans) were re-instated.

UMNO and Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) formed a coalition in the 1952 municipal elections. Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) joined the coalition later in 1954 and the Alliance was formed, comfortably winning the 1955 pre-independence elections with 51 out of 52 seats (Chakravarty and Roslan, 2005). Despite the fact that according to the 1957 census the Indian and Chinese populations combined were roughly the same size as Malay population, the Chinese and Indian share of the 1955 vote was limited to 11.2 and 3.9 per cent because many of non-Malays had not been given citizenships (Fernandez, 1975, Khoo, 2005).

The 1955 electoral win give the Alliance the role of negotiating the terms of independence with the British and to draft the constitution. At this time the Malaysian ethnic bargaining took place between the political elite on behalf of their respective ethnic communities. Wan Hashim (1983) notes that in this bargaining, in return for the citizenship for the Chinese and Indians, MCA agreed with the special position of Malay rulers, Islam as the official religion of the country, Malay language as the official language, and the special treatment of Malays as the natives of the land. This special treatment, manifest in Article 153 of Federal Constitution of Malaysia includes preferential access to scholarships, business permits, and public sector employment (Tan, 2001).

This bargaining became the defining feature of the new state in that it effectively reserved political power for Malays and economic power for the Chinese (Shoup, 2011). This social contract is seen as the glue binding the vastly different ethnic groups in the Malayan nation and the reaffirmation of the concept of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay Supremacy). This agreement reflected the viewpoints of the Malay and Chinese elites, who were mainly concerned with the fate of Malay Royalty and Chinese businesspeople, themselves being intimately linked to them. It does not however, reflect the position of the majority of the Chinese and Indian communities.

With political loyalty defined ethnic terms and taken as natural and required (Kreuzer, 2006), Federation of Malaya started life as a collage of three disparate (ethno-) nations living on the land that belonged to one of them. This odd mixture equality and hierarchy did not solve the power-sharing problem in Malaysia, but simply left it in 'a state of stable tension' (Shamsul, 2001:5). Nonetheless, the short years before and after the independence saw one of the highest levels inter-ethnic cooperation in Malaysia, or what the former prime minister Mahatir Mohamad calls 'honeymoon period' (Mohamad, 2010: 17). During these years, Chinese and Indians managed to get citizenship in the newly formed country.

Singapore, which was a crown colony, was granted self-governance in 1959 and together with British territories in North Borneo (East Malaysia of today) merged with the Federation of Malaya in order to gain independence, which was achieved in 1963 (Liu *et al.*, 2002). The resulting geopolitical entity was named Malaysia. Starting from this time, the term 'bumiputera' (sons of soil) started to replace the term 'Melayu' (Malay) whenever a term was necessary to exclude the immigrant communities. Non-Malay bumiputeras, comprised mainly of indigenous communities of Malaysia's eastern states of Sabah and Sarawak, were accorded similar indigeneity rights and privileges as the Malays.

When then Malaysian prime minister, Tunku Adbul Rahman requested that Malays receive the same privileges in Singapore as they received in the rest of Malaysia, the leader of Singapore's People's Action Party (later to be the first Prime Minister of Singapore) rejected the idea, instead pushing for a fair and equal society (Liu *et al.*, 2002). This was the beginning of a bitter 3-year debate of Malaysian Malaysia vis-à-vis Malay Malaysia between the Malay elite and Singaporean leadership, questioning the basis of the political establishment. This finally led to secession/expulsion of Singapore from Malaysia and contributed to dormant ethnic tensions in Malaysia (Singh, 2001).

Remaining true to the terms of the bargain, the Malaysian government maintained a laissez-faire approach to economy (Brown *et al.*, 2004). Rural poverty, however, was a persistent problem and although it was acknowledged, was sluggishly addressed. As the economy stabilised after the end of insurgency, some rural Malays started moving

to the urban fringes and saw the urban wealth the country possessed (Case, 2000). The economic position of local Chinese businesses was further improved after independence as they could now bid for the bigger public-sector contracts that were previously monopolised by the European companies. As per the circumstances prevalent in those days, most Malays lived in rural areas and were poor, whereas most Chinese were urban-dwellers and enjoyed the benefits of a modern economy. This, among other factors, caused the economic grievances that had a class nature be channelled into ethnic lines (Chakravarty and Roslan, 2005).

The growing Malay dissatisfaction with the economic inequalities on the one hand, and the Chinese political discontent paved the way for ethnic tensions. In these circumstances, when in 10th May 1969 the first Malaysian general election was held (prior to that, Malays, Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak held separate elections), many Malays reverted their vote from UMNO to the Islamist party PAS, while many Chinese voted for the left-leaning Gerakan and secular Democratic Action Party (DAP) (Wong Chin, 2007). For the first time since independence, the ruling Alliance lost its two-thirds majority, though it retained the government.

Following this and due to unclear circumstances and in times of post-1968 recession economic hardship, ethnic riots broke out in Kuala Lumpur on 13th May 1969. In these riots, hundreds were killed and injured, and houses were destroyed (Sagoo, 2012). In the aftermath, the parliament was suspended, a state of emergency was declared by the king, and a National Operations Council was set up to rule the country which obtained major concessions from other political parties to amend the constitution in return for reinstating the parliament (Chiu, 2001).

The May 13 incident is viewed by some scholars as having 'put an end to the true consociation arrangement practised from independence in 1957' (Tan, 2001: 954). Airing this point in no uncertain terms, the 1971 re-adjourned parliament passed "a constitutional amendment that banned any public discussion- even in the legislature- of all 'sensitive issues' relating to ethnic constitutional rights. The list of sensitive issues includes citizenship, the national language, the rights to use other languages, the special position of Malays and the natives of Borneo, the legitimate interests of

other ethnic communities, and the sovereignty and prerogatives of the rulers. Other legislation makes it a crime under the Sedition Act of 1948 to question publicly any of these matters” (Hirschman, 1984: 105).

Another provision was also made such that any law making a change in these parts of constitutional amendments needed to be passed through the Conference of Rulers (Malay Sultans). This sent a message to the other ethnic communities that the Malay hegemony would not be removed easily (Daniels, 2005). In the policy changes that followed, a more aggressive approach of promoting bumiputeras’ interests via facilitating their easier access to government scholarships, public sector jobs, housing, business start-up funds, and a quota system for entry to public universities was followed (Brown, 2007, Cheong *et al.*, 2009).

Formally promulgated as the New Economic Policy (NEP), the new policy had two stated aims: to eradicate poverty and to eliminate the association of ethnicity with economic function and status (Srisandarajah, 2005, Wydick, 2008). The next section discusses the era starting with the implementation of NEP, which was to be the beginning of many policies that although achieved significant success in reducing poverty and illiteracy in Malaysia, deepened the social divisions between the ethnic groups. From this point onwards, the Malaysian state can no longer be seen in Weberian terms: a neutral arbitrator among various (ethnic) groups (Haque, 2003).

### **3.5 Contemporary Malaysian society**

Consociationalism limited Malaysian politics to ethnically-defined spaces, ignored the intra-ethnic variations and essentialised ethnicity (Singh, 2001). The tense post-1969 situation also legitimised the gradual change from communal democracy to control (Lustick, 1979). During this period of power consolidation, Malaysian government also introduced National Culture Policy of 1971 in a bid to tailor an overtly Malay figure for the national culture, based on indigenous culture, ‘suitable elements’ of other cultures, and Islam (Yacob, 2006).

Struggles for language and education followed, but in the end, vernacular Mandarin and Tamil schools survived, though the language of instruction in national schools changed from English to Malay language (Sua, 2013b, Fee and Appudurai, 2011). This resulted in a generation of Malaysians –mainly Malay students- with poor English language proficiency and limited their choice of careers mainly to public sector as English and Mandarin remained the languages of business in the private sector.

Mahatir Mohamad, who was expelled from UMNO in 1970 for openly asking the prime minister to resign, was welcomed back by the new prime minister and climbed up the ranks quickly. He went on to become deputy prime minister in 1975, and the fourth prime minister of Malaysia in 1981. In his book, *The Malay Dilemma*, Mahatir notes ‘in any nations with more than one ethnic-cultural group, the question of racial equality constitutes an issue of vital importance’ (Mohamad, 2010: 85). He makes some worryingly disheartening statements at the beginning of the book about why Malays are not sufficiently evolved as to be able to compete with a hardy race such as ‘Chinese’.

Hirschman (1986) notes that one of the most entrenched stereotypes in Malaya was the notion of Malay laziness and lack of industrial fervour. This is the notion that Mahatir clearly believed in and there is no good reason to doubt the sincerity of this belief. After the publication of *The Malay Dilemma*, Alatas (1977) categorically refuted the authenticity of the myth of lazy Malay and showed that the same was said of Javanese and Filipinos, who resisted to work for Europeans. Mahatir, though, continued to wear his ethnic lens in politics and entrench the ethnic-based functioning of the country in a career that spawned from 1981 to 2003. One of Mahatir’s significant nationwide involvements was the forcible depoliticization of universities during the 1970s. In a process which Weiss (2009) calls ‘Intellectual Containment’, it was made sure that the official political narrative is the only discourse in the country, and in the process, turning universities into mere training camps for technicians and engineers for the economy.

Under his direction, NEP continued till 1991 when he proudly claimed that the Malay Dilemma had ended (Khoo, 2004). The economic results were important and



extensive. In fact, reducing poverty rates during the period 1970-2000 from 49.3% to 5.3% and absolute illiteracy from 41% to 6.1% is no mean feat (Cheong *et al.*, 2009, Chakravarty and Roslan, 2005). Since the 1991, NEP was replaced by NDP (National Development Policy) and then NVP (National Vision Policy). Although these latter policies are aimed more at economic growth and less at redistribution, they have kept the bumiputera tenets, at least in the public sector.

The economic policies had increased the participation of bumiputeras in the modern sectors of the economy by the mid-90s, and reduced the income gap considerably. By the year 2000, 93.9 per cent of the population had some kind of formal education, up from 59 per cent in 1970; while in the same period share of secondary or tertiary-educated population jumped from 8.6 per cent to 67.6 per cent. On the occupational level, the share of bumiputeras among registered professionals reached 37.3 per cent, up from 4.9 per cent (Cheong *et al.*, 2009).

However, Mahatir conveniently ignored the widening intra-ethnic economic gulf, sufficing to the simplistic idea that 'if these few Malays are not enriched, the poor Malays will not gain either', sufficing to make as many 'Malay millionaires' as Chinese ones. (Mahatir Mohamad, 2010: 62. The economic data shows that between 1977 and 1989, intra-ethnic economic inequality shrunk for Chinese and Indians, but grew for Malays <sup>1</sup>(Case, 2000). Mahatir, though, was adamant that equitableness was not to be between individuals, but between communities (Mohamad, 1998: 33-34). The post-Mahatir era saw the continuation of the same policies, albeit with minor adjustments.

On the education front, NEP has made secondary and tertiary education more accessible to some strata of society that could not afford it before it. However, the result of more than three decades of affirmative action policies, mixed with ethnonationalist fervour, is proving to be less than desired. Most bumiputera graduates enter the labour market from local public universities, which are less well-

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<sup>1</sup> The economic gain of among the sub-groups of the bumiputera category was also widely disparate. However, as the focus of this research is on the peninsular Malaysia and for the sake of brevity, I do not discuss that point.

regarded than overseas and a number of private institutions in the country. Low levels of English language proficiency is also noted as one of the main reasons public university graduates in Malaysia have to look up to the government for jobs, with majority of them ending up in the public sector (Lee, 2012).

As a result of ethnic quotas for public university places, the majority of Indian and Chinese students either enrol in private higher education institutions or continue their studies overseas; many decide to stay. Apart from the resulting brain drain phenomenon that affects the Malaysian economy (Tyson *et al.*, 2011, Foo, 2011), this educational separation extends to a new form of occupational segregation that itself worsens the occupational structural imbalances that it intends to correct. As a result, it cancels out one of the two main aims of such policies and exacerbates the ethnic polarisation.

Outside the realm of affirmative action policies, ethnic politics continue. By design, the dominant political parties in Malaysia need the focus of electorate on ethnic issue for their survival. Post-election comments by politicians such as that of Mahatir attributing the ruling alliance's poor electoral performance in 2013 to 'ungrateful Chinese' and 'greedy Malay' or the incumbent prime minister Najib Razak's calling of the 2013 swing in votes a 'Chinese Tsunami' regularly remind Malaysian people of their ethnicity and ethnic differences (Grant, 2013). These have the effect of constant sharpening of ethnic boundaries which might otherwise reach their expiry date.

While the economic policies and control mechanisms utilised by various Malaysian governments since the 1970s has made it a stable and economically more inclusive country (Cheong *et al.*, 2009), the ethnic relations in the country are far from ideal. It might be the case that in transition from a plural to a multicultural society, competition over economic benefits of the economy is a natural and expected path. However, for an integrated society to emerge, it is also necessary to facilitate harmonious interpersonal relationships, transcending the ethnic and other social boundaries. Some scholars regards the existence of a common identity as the necessary enabler of such relationships (Soroka *et al.*, 2007). The next section,

explores the dynamics of ethnic and national identity that are formed and reformed in an interplay of communal, economic, political, and religious factors in Malaysia.

### **3.6 Ethnic identity, religion, and ethnic relations in Malaysia**

The concept of a unified Malay identity came to existence in 1939 as part of Ibrahim Yaacob's transnational project of a unified Malay land combining Malaysia and Indonesia (Kok-Kheng Yeoh, 2013). This politicised identity was further reinforced by the introduction of bumiputera after 1969. For NEP implementation purposes, it was necessary to obtain information on which category an individual fits in order to determine entitlements to certain benefits (Nagaraj *et al.*, 2009). This made the newly-invented category meaningful beyond the symbolic connotations.

Most importantly, the Malay identity, apart from its formal definition already discussed in the earlier pages, has largely been formulated and interpreted in the relation to the 'other' (Hunt, 2009). This way, Malay/non-Malay dichotomy of the early years get supplanted by bumiputera/non-bumiputera of NEP discourse, and later to Muslim/non-Muslim as a result of Islamic resurgence of 1970s onwards (Brown, 2010). This can be considered an escalation compared to the more neutral categorisation of Malay/Chinese/Indian/Others (MCI/O). It is important to note that in modern Malaysian society, ethnic hierarchies of colonial times do not exist. Malays might have the executive power, but do not yield economic control. Culturally, too, compared to ancient cultures of Chinese and Indians, Malays do not have an advantage (Horowitz, 1971, Mansor, 1992).

Whereas the purely communal denotations have an earthly nature, the religious markers have the extreme potential to otherise outsiders using heavenly justifications. The history of political religion- in this case political Islam- predate the independence in Malaysia. Pan-Malaysian Islamic party (PAS) was founded in 1951 and turned into a strong opposition party in the years following independence. After a short period of alliance with the ruling party in 1970s, PAS returned to its opposition position. 1970s also saw the birth of young religious Muslim groups such as ABIM, out

of which came a controversial figure as Anwar Ibrahim, who went on to be Mahatir's deputy, and then the opposition leader.

Under the heavily contested religious discourse in competing for Malay votes with PAS, and in the inner UMNO power struggle, Mahatir increasingly reverted to anti-Chinese and religious rhetoric (Collins, 1998). On a more organic level, Islam also inhibited the assimilation of the Chinese into the mainstream society, whereas in the neighbouring Buddhist- and Christian-majority countries, the society absorbed the Chinese much easier (Singh, 2001). Moreover, at a time when non-Malays were starting to accept the Malay symbols for the country and ethnic lines were about to diminish, religion acted as a potent identifier to avert that.

The heavy-handed national discourse of the Mahatir era increasingly forbade non-Malays to discuss or have a role in shaping the narrative of Malay or Muslim identity, calling them 'sensitive issues' (Hunt, 2009). Parallel to the exclusion of non-Muslims from the discourse, Malays were bombarded with identity-defining and limiting propaganda and policies (Hoffstaedter, 2011). Based on a paternalistic system giving the Malay population token privileges and at the same time defining and policing who they ought to be and what they ought to think, the Malay majority has been 'politicized' (Hoffstaedter, 2011). Hoffstaedter succinctly points out that the authorities have greatly succeeded in defining a country on the basis of one ethnic identity, excluding others, and then defining, policing, and controlling that identity.

One might hope that inter-ethnic marriages (or intermarriages) be able to bridge the social distance between the ethnic groups. In fact, intermarriage has long been a measure of social distance (Bogardus, 1925). In Malaysia, inter-ethnic marriages are not easy affairs, especially between Muslims and non-Muslims. Page 16 of Act 303 (2006) on Islamic Family Law asserts that among Muslims, (1) No man shall marry a non-Muslim except a Kitabiyah (loosely translated into other people of the book, meaning adherents to Christianity and Judaism who can trace back their religious ancestry to more than 14 centuries ago), and (2) no woman shall marry a non-Muslim.

This puts a higher burden on the non-Muslims as it involves cultural assimilation of him/her- and not much in the way of formation of hybrid-culture families, potentially

resulting in threat to her/his social identity. Using a two per cent sample of the 2000 Housing and Population census, Nagaraj (2009) found that the overall rate of intermarriage was 4.6 per cent. However, for the three main ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese, and Indians), the rate was lower than average (2.25%, 2.8%, and 4.05%, respectively<sup>2</sup>) and much higher than the average for Other Bumiputera groups and foreigners living in Malaysia. It was also established that intermarriages are more common in more diverse Eastern Malaysia than Peninsular Malaysia.

Even when intermarriages happen, the registry system vigorously defends the salient ethnic boundaries by not registering new-borns under mixed categories. It might be helpful to note that Malaysian birth certificates (and more recently MyKads, Malaysian Identity cards) include information on the ethnic group of individuals. In cases of mixed parentage, parents need to choose either one of their official ethnic categories for their child. One such case was brought to public when Hanna Yeoh (A Chinese), a Selangor State Assemblyperson tried to register their daughter under the 'Anak Malaysia' (literally Son of Malaysia), to be blocked by the National Registry Department (Keng, 2011).

While the national policies in Malaysia have been more divisionary than unifying, there are a number of important exceptions. The first of these nation-building policies was Rukun Negara (national principles), introduced in the aftermath of May 1969 riots. It which set out to introduce a national philosophy for all Malaysians, based on democracy, social justice, prosperity, tolerance, and progressiveness. The second such attempt was the concept of Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian nation or Malaysian race) by Mahatir Mohamed in 1995 in order to create a civic national identity in Malaysia. The most recent concept set out to unify Malaysians under a national identity is 1Malaysia, introduced by the current prime minister Najib Razak in 2010. Nonetheless, as Abd Muis *et al.* (2012) argue, there has been little meaningful progress in achieving these visions.

The failure of these policies to establish an umbrella identity acting as a shared platform for different ethnic groups in Malaysia is clear in a research by Brown (2010)

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<sup>2</sup> Assuming equal number of males and females

where he reports that nationality is not the most important identity construct for any of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. More precisely, Malays identified most strongly with religion (93.9%) followed by Nationality (68.1%) whereas Chinese identified with Ethnicity (50.2%) and Language (47.5%), and Indians with Religion (71.1%) and Occupation (52.8%). Considering the constitutional religious aspect attached to it, the identification of Malays with religion can be interpreted as ethnic identification. Interestingly, place of birth, place of residence, and political ideology inclination did not make it to the list of five most important identifications of any of the three major groups.

Merdeka Center conducted a poll of 1,013 randomly-selected registered voters aged 21 and above in 2011 asking respondents for their perception of ethnic relations in Malaysia. Based on a short report and the analysis of the poll data kindly provided by Merdeka Center, it is possible to develop an insight into the contemporary Malaysian mindset with regards to ethnic relations. With regards to the participants, 59% were identified as Malay, 32% Chinese, and 9% Indian. The findings showed that the most important identifier for Malays is religion (64%) but not for the Chinese (6%) or Indians (11%). Conversely, Indians showed the highest levels of national identification (71%), followed by the Chinese (55%), well above Malays (26%). In general, religion, nationality, and 'race' membership were the main identifiers for 96% of the respondents. This can be seen in line with Nonini's (2008) account of extermination of class identity in Malaysia.

On the inter-ethnic relations, 66% of respondents thought it was 'good', down from 78% in 2006. Forty-four per cent of the respondents believed that ethnic unity in Malaysia is superficial, while a third thought it was sincere and friendly. On a positive note, 36% of the respondents felt that ethnic groups are getting closer, more than the 33% who believed they are moving apart and 26% holding the idea that the situation remained unchanged. There was overwhelming consensus (96%) among the respondent that the state of ethnic relations is an important factor in Malaysia. However, the rationale for it was varied from avoiding conflict/having peace (30%) to just 3% for improving communication and exchange opinions.

This is echoed by low levels of intercultural understating among respondents from two largest ethnic groups in Malaysia towards the other two. Only 36% of Malays understand Chinese culture, and only 31% of them understand Indian culture<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, 41% and 27% of Chinese respondents felt that they understood Malay and Indian cultures. This trend is reversed among Indian respondent with 81% and 74% of them claiming to understand Malay and Chinese cultures. This is in line with the finding of Tey *et al.* (2009) that found although most student prefer to interacting with peers of the same ethnic group, Indians<sup>4</sup> showed the highest degree of openness to accepting individuals from other ethnic groups as a friend, a spouse, a neighbour, or a colleague. This good will, however, did not appear to be reciprocated by others. In the Merdeka 2011 poll, Indians were found to be simultaneously the most trusting and the least trusted ethnic group by a wide margin. This can be partly attributed to the prevalence of colonial stereotypes about Indians; 63% of Malay and 49% of Chinese respondents believed that Indians could not be trusted.

In another study involving students, Tamam and Abdullah (2012) found that Indians showed a higher degree of intercultural integration, followed by the Chinese, and eventually Malays. One simple reason for this pattern can be the size of the groups and the opportunities to form mono/multi-ethnic groups. However, Tamam and Abdullah (2012) suggest that it is also the result of the low status of the particular minority group that drives the urge to integrate. Indeed, Malays as the 'natives of land' might not find it necessary to take steps toward integration, especially if it includes compromising their values. Chinese, being in the superior economic position and sufficient number can also afford to encamp in their constructed Chinese sub-society, a by-product of which is the acceptance of the stereotype of being 'selfish' by the Malaysian Chinese (Lee, 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> This is a reflection on the findings of the survey; otherwise the researcher does not believe in the existence of an Indian, or Chinese culture. However, these can be interpreted as the reports of perceptions of cultural understating that are significant in the behaviour of individuals in diverse situations.

<sup>4</sup> More specifically, Indians among Indians, Chinese and Malays. Students from other ethnic groups showed the greatest levels of cultural openness.

While Chinese and Indian identities in Malaya started as instrumental and the Malay/Bumiputera identities were constructed, their social utilities and the relationship between these groups gives the ethnic identities in Malaysia a primordial nature, fixed once constructed (Van Evera, 2001). Montesino observed that while Malaysians of different ethnic backgrounds do not have problem interacting at work, they 'neither go together for lunch frequently, nor get together after work' (2012:125). Nonetheless, the prevailing pragmatic view in the light of market forces brings different ethnic groups to a middle ground in the society and in the workplaces (Montesino, 2012, Montesino, 2006).

### **3.7 Commensality as social enabler or inhibitor of inter-ethnic relationships**

This section aims to bring into attention the significance of the mundane human activity of consuming food and drinks as an enabler of desirable relations in social settings. The adventurous urge to try new types of food or sharing recipes with colleagues/friends can be a starting and maintenance point for inter-ethnic social relations. However, ethnic and religious tastes, preferences and prohibitions can form barriers to the practice of conviviality in an ethnically-diverse setting. Although the concept of sharing a meal or a drink was not part of the initial conceptual framework in this study, it came up as early as the first interview. In fact, the commensality theme and the religious and cultural barrier around it came up in meaningful ways in 34 interviews.

The importance of sharing a table and how pervasive ethnic-related barriers to it are, as well as the ways these barriers are sometimes navigated warranted attention. As one of the most basic forms of human socialisation, sharing or not sharing a table can impact social relations in any society. In a faultline society, however, it is of immense importance as on the one hand it can bring together people who otherwise live in mostly segregated quarters, and on the other it may be more difficult because of the alignment of religious and cultural divisions with the dietary habits of ethnic groups. The coming two sub-sections first briefly introduce the theoretical viewpoint on



commensality matters that is adopted in this research and offer a brief on religious barriers to it. Following this, the issue of pork consumption is highlighted as the embodiment of religious barriers to commensality in the Malaysian context.

### **3.7.1 Theoretical underpinnings of commonality considerations**

Commensality has been the focus of a lot of attention in the social sciences and is simply defined as the act of 'eating with other people' (Sobal and Nelson, 2003: 181), or more literally as 'eating at the same table' (Fischler, 2011: 529), as per the root Latin word of 'mensa'. As Fischler notes, from a biological perspective, humans are omnivores, however, not only they do not eat everything and anything, but also 'mark their membership of a culture or a group by asserting the specificity of what they eat, or more precisely- but it amounts to the same thing- by defining the otherness, the differences of others', where 'others' make different culinary choices (1988: 280). It is precisely this social and cultural dimension of commensality that forms the analytical angle of this chapter.

Perhaps as an extension of the survival drive of sharing one's food only with one's kin, 'in every society to offer food (and sometimes drink) is to offer love, affection, and friendship. To accept food is to acknowledge and accept the feelings expressed and to reciprocate them' (Foster and Anderson, 1978: 268). Conversely, to fail to offer food in a context in which it is expected culturally is to express anger or hostility. Equally, to reject proffered food is to reject an offer of love or friendship, to express hostility toward the giver' (ibid). Therefore, commensality and food regulations comprise the lens through which the relationship between Us and Them crystallises for different social groups (Lévi-Strauss and Needham, 1964). Although there is extensive research on the material and preparation of food, among other aspects, from a social perspective, this research does not intend to, not is able to, consider all those aspects. Instead, the focus is on the cultural and religious norms and regulations regarding food and commensality that govern who can eat with whom and under what conditions, and how these dynamics impact interactions among individuals hailing from those different groups but in regular contact.

One of the sociologists who was interested in commensality is Georg Simmel (1858-1918). Although his extensive portfolio of subjects and even his theoretical lens of 'form and content' is beyond this research, the way he views the importance of commensality is absolutely essential here. An important piece of his work regarding this view was published in 1910 under the title *The Sociology of the Meal* ('Soziologie der Mahlzeit' in the original German article), attended to and translated by Symons (1994). In this article, he draws attention to the special quality of food as primitive and sophisticated at the same time. While the biological need to eat and drink is a universal factor among all human beings and therefore in the purview of the lowest of them, precisely because of its universality it achieves high social significance.

Moreover, while the intake of food and drink is a highly individual activity in the sense that no other person gets to share the food that one ingests, it is also mostly social whether in preparation or consumption. In fact, for most people, feeding starts as a social experience between a mother and her child. Apart and beyond the material necessity of food, it is the way it's culturally transformed when cooked (Lévi-Strauss, 2013)[1966] and distributed, consumed, and disposed that turns it into an important social object (Goody, 1982). Van den Berghe summarises this by proposing that 'food and what we do to and with it, is at the very core of sociability' (van den Berghe, 1984: 387). Although every stage of the human food cycle is sociologically interesting and worthy of analysis, Symons makes an astute observation that 'we must accept that we can never really share food. Instead, we share this animal need and we share the society and cultural forms that develop out of this need. In brief, we share the table' (Symons, 1994: 344). This is the part that links people with each other and builds bridges, as well as walls.

The social significance of the meal, according to Simmel, is clearly manifest in the prohibitions of commensality. He gives some examples such as those in 11<sup>th</sup> century Cambridge Guild, 13<sup>th</sup> century Vienna Council, and Hindu caste-system. However, it is in the case of the communal eating and drinking of religious groups that the social significance of commensality can be seen (Symons, 1994). Where there is a door, there are walls, and the extensive regulations of religious groups on what and with whom the members can or cannot eat define the boundaries of these groups.

Abrahamic religions<sup>5</sup> have developed three types of food restrictions with regards to religious foreigners (Freidenreich, 2011). The first type is concerned with the ingredients such as pork. Although on the list of biblically forbidden types of meat one can find vultures and dogs, among others, it is important to note that these restrictions find their social meaning in a socially comparative way, e.g. vis-à-vis the pork eaters. Food prohibitions can also be commensality-based or preparer-based. These types are established to limit the interaction of the adherents with others and demarcate the boundaries of the (religious) group. As is discussed in the next sub-section, these types are not necessarily mutually exclusive and in certain social situations, one may lead to the other. However, it is shown that in the diverse Malaysian society, the ingredient-based type weighs most heavily on the religious psyche of the Malays and is the most influential one.

### **3.7.2 Malaysian society and Islamic food restrictions: sama makan?**

Malaysian society is a beautiful mosaic of different religions and belief groups. However, when discussing the culinary restrictions, specifically with regards to the data collected in this research, the focus is on the related Islamic restrictions. Although the interviewees in this research include free-thinkers, Buddhists, Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, the commensality barriers narrated in the interviews were unanimously pork-related. As such, this section explores the Islamic food code with regards to the Malaysian society to exhibit what the researcher has come to believe is the biggest social rift in mainstream Malaysian society today.

In Islamic jurisprudence, there can three main categories regarding permissibility of edibles for adherents. As the majority of the food items are permissible, or halal, the forbidden items (haram) are specified as:

*God has only prohibited for you the carrion, blood, the meat of swine, and meat over which other than God has been invoked. (Quran, 16.115)*

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<sup>5</sup> As the commensality-based restriction discussed in this research is related to one of these religions, and for the sake of brevity, I avoid discussing the other such restrictions.

As we can see this list is basically meat-oriented and not only outlaws the meat of swine, but also the types of meat slaughtered in non-halal (halal: permissible) ways. The point of departure in Islam compared to traditional Judaism and Christianity is that it goes beyond the dichotomy of us and them, and introduces a trichotomy of us, like us, and them. The 'like us' category refers to people of the book, including Jews, Christians, and (possibly) Zoroastrians:

*This day are (all) good things made lawful for you. The food of those who have received the Scripture is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them. (Quran, 5.5)*

Whether this permission is related to the type of slaughter or the name of the god being invoked during the slaughter is beyond the scope of this study. The important connotation here is that few of the interviewees were Christians and none were Jews. And it seemed that the Christian background of these interviewees did not have a big impact on their food relations with the Malay Muslim colleagues/classmates. The other forbidden items are alcohol and other intoxicants (Quran 4.43; 5.90; 5.91) as well as the meat of animals that have canine teeth or fangs as well as birds of prey (as-Sahlani and Eagle, 2016). There is also the third category of Makruh, which refers to undesirable (Makruh) items such as meat of horse, donkey, or mule (ibid).

The aim here is not to provide an extensive list of food items prohibited or permitted in Islam or conditions thereof, but to draw attention to what has become the main sticking point in culinary practices of different peoples in Malaysia. As can be seen, alcohol aside, the Islamic restrictions on food are mainly meat-related. However, while most Muslims would know that eating meat of monkeys is not permissible, and while it is not inconceivable to think of certain people in Malaysia eating monkey meat on certain occasions, monkey meat is not a common food item in Malaysia and therefore not an important issue for Muslims to be aware and wary of. As a result, monkey (and monkey meat) has not evolved into a taboo in Malaysian society. On the other hand, pork is used extensively in the food prepared by the Chinese in Malaysia. In fact, the word 'rou' (meat), used on its own, is normally associated with pork in Mandarin (Dasheng, 2001).

As discussed in the third chapter, the modern Malay identity is constructed in opposition to the immigrant groups, especially Chinese, who are portrayed as the reason behind the supposed economic backwardness of the majority Malays (Khoo, 2009). This, together with the imbedded dietary differences, turns pork into a potent social marker differentiating 'pure <sup>6</sup>' Malays from the pork-eating Chinese. Freidenreich (2011:5) succinctly points out that 'the pork taboo only marks its adherents as distinctive within the context of other people who regularly eat pork, and it only constitutes a marker of communal boundaries in the minds of those who contrast one group's refusal to eat pork with other group's willingness to eat it.' In other words, although other population groups in Malaysia such as Indians, Eurasians, Orang Aslis might (or might not) enjoy pork in their diets, they are not associated with it.

This results in what Harvey Neo (2012) calls beastly racialization in Malaysia, where the pig has turned into a politicized symbol used as a thin veil to cover a racist/racialist ideology. The researcher has also experienced the use of the word 'pig' in several incidents as an insult against Chinese. Although the concept of beastly racialization sounds intellectually credible to a degree, the researcher would suggest that ordinary people are not necessarily occupied with the politicized symbols and instead restricted by the common practices resulting from them. To put it differently, what makes a Malay person averse to visiting a Chinese colleague's house is mostly the fear of impurity as a result of pork contamination rather than a racist impulse.

Fear of pork does not in and of itself lead to the impossibility of commonality between Malays and others, but makes it somewhat of a burden to work out. These considerations limit Muslims to the category of 'tak sama makan' (non-commensal), whereas non-Muslims are considered by each other as 'sama makan' (commensal) (Chee-beng, 2001). Although non-Muslims can and do eat Halal food, practice of reciprocity in eating in inter-ethnic relations is limited, potentially resulting in less frequent commensal encounters.

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<sup>6</sup> The word pure is used in a spiritual sense.

While the pork as a taboo in Malaysia is not a new one, the recent surge in expanding the concept of halal to other aspects of life is certainly new and worthy of notice. While the expansion of halal observance from meat to toothpaste and shampoo to fruits might be understandable by some stretch of the imagination, the recent issue of halal trolleys in supermarkets and even a halal train are too far a stretch in culinary terms (Wong Chin, 2015, Singh, 2015, Baharom, 2015). Effectively, a social phenomenon is rising in which the Muslim population is increasingly protected from that might not be to their taste, effectively sandboxing their lives and choices and forcing them into separate existential spheres than the rest of the population (Mokhtar, 2015).

## Chapter Four: Research Methodology and Methods

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodological issues in this research, methods and tools used, and the process of data collection and analysis. Firstly, the critical realist approach to the research objectives and choice of qualitative method is discussed. Following this, choice of semi-structured individual interviews as the primary method of data collection and the construction of the interview guide is explained. In line with the critical realist approach, it was necessary for the data collection phase to allow for the different positions of participants to be considered while keeping track of the structural theory informing the study.

Next, the choice of the data collection settings is discussed. The private healthcare industry is identified as one of the appropriate industry sections in Malaysia for being diverse as well as for its cooperative nature of the work. The employment patterns at the two hospitals and one healthcare college to which access was secured to for the data collection purposes were skewed towards Malays beyond that of the society average, necessitating a non-random and non-representative choice of interviewees in order to ensure the ethnic diversity of the interviewee sample and that different voices are heard to the extent possible. The interview sites were chosen in order to reduce the impact of internal migration patterns on staff composition and the impact of age differences in the final results.

The process of thematic analysis of the interview data and the coding used in the analysis are discussed in the fifth section of this chapter. Interview scripts were read and coded based on a coding system developed using theory and the results of initial interviews. The emerging patterns were re-examined in light of the main theme formed during the interviews, which crystallised the themes and highlighted where cases defied the themes or cut across them. These were re-examined in turn using the theoretical framework to correct their categorisation or provide possible explanations to their defiance.

The nature of this research meant that in the process of data collections, interviewees would share sensitive and at times emotive stories with the researcher. This necessitated that, as is the norm in qualitative social psychological research, a section be included detailing the self-reflection of the researcher, highlighting how the investigator's own identity might have shaped the research process. These considerations included factors such as ethnic background of the researcher, age, and gender, as well as lingual issues as faced at the interviews. Being a social outsider while having enough cultural exposure to ask relevant questions and understand nuanced answers, as well as a neutral and non-threatening image helped the research in the data collection process, the dynamics of which are discussed in the last section.

#### **4.2 Critical realist philosophy, qualitative methodology**

The research questions and framework of this study are based on the interplay of the macro-level social realities and the micro-level experiences and perceptions of individuals. When discussing a faultline society or essentialised ethnic identities, one is granting these concepts the role of social entities that exist independently of individual social actors. This existence, however, is perceived differently by those actors, who then act based on their perceptions. Being born in a certain ethnic group and subsequently carrying that identity and being subjected to the treatment that the society provides for that position is not voluntary, nor easily altered by a change of an individual's interpretations of it. Nonetheless, the individuals' position and understanding of it is susceptible to adjustments.

This view of ethnic identity and faultline society rejects both a purely positivist and a purely interpretivist orientation. A positivist orientation would greatly reduce the role of individuals and lead to a research that could hardly do justice to the research questions. An interpretivist orientation, on the other hand, would underestimate the role of the social structures and lead to overly broad conclusions. Table 4.1 sums up these assumptions and the relevant shortcomings.



**Table 4.1 Positivist and interpretivist research orientations and their shortcomings**

	Positivism	Interpretivism
<b>Basic Principles</b>		
View of the world	The world is external and objective	The world is socially constructed and subjective
Involvement of researcher	Researcher is independent	Researcher is part of what is observed and sometimes even actively collaborates
Researcher's influence	Research is value-free	Research is driven by human interest
<b>Assumptions</b>		
What is observed?	Objective, often quantitative, facts	Subjective interpretation of meanings
How is knowledge developed?	Reducing phenomena to simple elements representing general laws	Taking a broad and total view of phenomena to detect explanations beyond the current knowledge

Adopted from Blumberg *et al.*, 2014, p.18.

From a philosophical standpoint, the position of this study regarding the relation of individuals, ethnicity, and the society is that 'at any moment of time society is pre-given for individuals who never create it, but merely reproduce or transform it. The social world is always pre-structured' (Bhaskar, 1998: xvi). This view falls under the purview of critical realism, a social sciences philosophy emerging out of Roy Bhaskar's 1970s work on 'transcendental realism' as a philosophy of natural sciences and 'critical

naturalism', an extension of it to the social sciences (Bhaskar, 1975, Bhaskar, 1979). The significance of this view is in its recognition of the reality of the natural world and the events and discourses of the social world (Bryman, 2008), while admitting that the social world would not exist without the individuals who reproduce and transform its structures (Bhaskar, 1998).

The critical realist paradigm is based on a transcendental realist ontology and an mixed realist/interpretivist epistemology (Easton, 2010). Advocating for a reality beyond empirical world and not reducible to human knowledge and language, the critical realist paradigm evades epistemic fallacy by suggesting a stratified ontology consisting of three layers: empirical level, which can be experienced and measured, actual level of events, whether observed by humans or not, and the real level of the causal mechanisms or structures that cause events which are sometimes observable empirically (Danermark et al., 2002). As such, critical realists differ from constructionists in the importance acceptance that reality can be known, although it might not always be possible to do so (Bhaskar, 1975). Where possible, observation, interpretation, and theorisation link the three levels of reality.

The ontological and epistemological principles of critical realism can be summarised in the form of 8 points as done by Sayer (1992: 5):

- 1. The world exists independently of our knowledge of it.*
- 2. Our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory-laden. Concepts of truth and falsity fail to provide a coherent view of the relationship between knowledge and its object. Nevertheless, knowledge is not immune to empirical check and its effectiveness in informing and explaining successful material practice is not mere accident.*
- 3. Knowledge develops neither wholly continuously, as the steady accumulation of facts within a stable conceptual framework, nor discontinuously, through simultaneous and universal changes in concepts.*
- 4. There is necessity in the world; objects—whether natural or social—necessarily have particular powers or ways of acting and particular susceptibilities.*
- 5. The world is differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of events, but objects, including structures, which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events. These structures may be*

*present even where, as in the social world and much of the natural world, they do not generate regular patterns of events.*

*6. Social phenomena such as actions, texts and institutions are concept dependent. We not only have to explain their production and material effects but to understand, read or interpret what they mean. Although they have to be interpreted by starting from the researcher's own frames of meaning, by and large they exist regardless of researchers' interpretation of them. A qualified version of 1 therefore applies to the social world. In view of 4–6, the methods of social science and natural science have both differences and similarities.*

*7. Science or the production of any kind of knowledge is a social practice. For better or worse (not just worse) the conditions and social relations of the production of knowledge influence its content. Knowledge is also largely—though not exclusively— linguistic, and the nature of language and the way we communicate are not incidental to what is known and communicated. Awareness of these relationships is vital in evaluating knowledge.*

*8. Social science must be critical of its object. In order to be able to explain and understand social phenomena we have to evaluate them critically.*

Of the abovementioned, points 1, 4, and 5 relate to the ontological and points 2, 3, 6, and 7 to the epistemological considerations of the critical realist paradigm. Critical realism sees the world as theory-laden, but not determined by theory; theory being almost truth-like knowledge (Fletcher, 2017, Danermark et al., 2002). Therefore, critical realism condones a theoretical starting point to the research while pointing out that all knowledge should be treated as fallible, cautioning against any commitment to the theories used (Bhaskar, 1979). Hence, the critical realist methodology invites the researcher to keep an open mind to the possibility of their theories might be eventually supported, rejected, or corrected, even to the theories being challenged by the participants' experiences and viewpoints (Redman-MacLaren and Mills, 2015). This is in line with the researcher's position in this research as informed but not bound by the social identity perspective.

While critical realists assume that existence of an independent reality, they also acknowledge that unlike natural sciences, the conditions to access that reality is rarely met. As such, they accept that the world is socially constructed, but not in its entirety as the real world constrains such construction (Easton, 2010). A social constructionist view is adopted to explore how the social individuals construct their understandings

under the influence of a wider social ethos. Social identities and categories are normally understood as the products of the social contexts rather than fixed realities. Critical realism, while attempting to explain the ways in which the social structures shape these meanings, recognises that individuals perceive the related experiences differently. This is compatible with the view of ethnicity and ethnic identity in this research as involuntarily assigned to individuals but susceptible to adjustments and alterations by them.

This research intends to explore the effect of a number of complex social psychological phenomena at the workplace in order to develop a deep understanding of the dynamics of interaction between individuals of different ethnic backgrounds. These dynamics are largely shaped by the social construction of ethnic identities and the relations between ethnic groups, as well as political and economic factors involved. As such, the picture elicited in the data collection period would inevitably be socially constructed, necessitating a thick method which enables the researcher to investigate the depth of the phenomena under study (McClintock *et al.*, 1979), ruling out a purely quantitative approach.

With the aim of converging predictions from different theories, a case study and survey design was initially adopted in this study (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2012). As the understanding route is based on analysing narratives of social experiences as lived and reported by the actors and understood by the researcher, building an initial understanding of the research environment through interviews was seen as the first step. Organic questionnaires were to be developed based on these initial interviews and administered for each case study to enable a large enough number of responses, while eliminating some of the drawbacks of purely theory-based surveys (Alderfer and Brown, 1972, Alderfer *et al.*, 1980).

However, after the initial phase of the data collection and having conducted 5 interviews, the researcher realised that the previous research design needed to be modified. Firstly, the higher than anticipated level of trust and willingness of the interviewees to share their deeply personal stories regarding their views and encounters with ethnic diversity issues indicated the opportunity for a deeper

exploration. It also meant that the researcher needed to be sensitive to the timely clues and probe for a deeper understanding of the narratives. Individuals exhibited widely different views and attitudes towards ethnic diversity and shared stories from their personal, sometimes emotive, experiences. These accounts showed great variation from one interviewee to the other and were based on narratives of personal experiences that could not be captured in a survey.

Moreover, the initial case study plan based on organisational unit/work group design proved to be impractical. It became clear that interviewing all of the staff in a unit or even a simple majority of them would affect the busy workflow of the units and invite resistance from the unit managers. The nature of the access to the to the organisations studied was such that the researcher could interview individual staff from different units but only as far as it didn't interrupt the operations of the units. This did not cause much regret as emerging patterns showed variations in the views and attitudes of individuals and not organisational units.

These initial findings questioned the efficacy of the initial data collection design. It was clear that a quantitative tool, even an organic questionnaire, would not be able to make full use of the opportunity. Following with the survey would have resulted either in inadvertently getting respondents to affirm or reject the revelations of the interviewees or cosmetically modifying or accepting the present theories. This realisation led to adoption of a qualitative-only methodology and an individual unit of analysis. From a critical realist standpoint, this is not surprising as 'meaning [of social phenomena] has to be understood, it cannot be measured or counted, and hence there is always an interpretive or hermeneutic element in social science' (Sayer, 2000: 17).

This, in turn, raises the issue of subjectivity of the researcher, who had lived in Malaysia for a number of years and did not feel detached from the social realities there. Unlike positivism and certain strands of interpretivist research paradigms, critical realism does not require such a detachment, and in fact encourages active engagement of the researcher in guiding the interview process and even answers in line with the foundation theories (Smith and Elger, 2012). This, as is explained later,

helped in asking the appropriate questions, guiding the responses, and identifying suitable probes during the interviews.

### 4.3 Data collection method

To collect in-depth data, it was necessary that individuals are not under group pressure and feel as free as possible in speaking their minds. This necessitated an individual-level data collection. Considering the limitations of available resources regarding observation and other indirect methods, it was decided to use interviews. This decision was made on the basis that the theoretical framework of this study provided an idea of what main areas to cover, but it was not clear 'what would be the most important questions to ask' (Horton, Macve, and Struyven, 2004: 340). This later proved to be the right decision as it helped identify important explicit questions from the conceptual groupings to use in the later interviews.

In contrast to quantitative interviews, the purpose of a qualitative interview is 'to gather descriptions of the life-world of the interviewee with respect to the interpretation of the meaning of the described phenomena' (Kvale, 1983: 174). In qualitative interviews, therefore, there is scope to depart from previously set guides as the response of interviewees take the interview take new directions (Silverman, 2010). The interview process that compliments the critical realist approach would need to be in the form of an interactive process that allows for the generation of in-depth responses, while being informed by the relevant theoretical framework (Smith and Elger, 2012). Semi-structured interviews provide these characteristics by allowing '*for the exploration of lived experience as narrated in the interview in relation to theoretical variables of interest*' (Galletta, 2013: 9).

Semi-structured interviews are designed in advance with a number of questions that are open enough to lead to more in-depth discussions (Wengraf, 2001) and have been used by critical realist scholars to carry-out theory-informed, in-depth studies of social phenomena (Parr, 2013, Fletcher, 2017). These questions were constructed with the help of the theoretical foundation of this research. As some of the questions asked might have been interpreted as sensitive by some interviewees, parts of the

interviews were done in a story-telling scheme (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, Hyvärinen, 2008) in the form of a narrative of everyday work routine and continue with probes such as questions on specific instances, asking for more elaboration and commenting on the researcher's analysis in order to overcome resistance and enhance clarity.

The interviews started with an introduction to the study and a confirmation of confidentiality, followed by addressing any concerns the respondents might have had. Next, questions regarding the respondents' background and demographics were asked. As literature suggests, a number of demographic variables other than ethnicity, including age and gender (Pelled, 1996b), and temporal factors (Harrison *et al.*, 2002, Mannix and Neale, 2005) can affect group functioning and thus there was need to account for them in this research.

To account for the structural effects of interethnic socialisation opportunities, two factors were investigated. Firstly, the place the interviewee identified as their hometown. Depending on the diversity of the places individuals grow up, they might have had more or less opportunities to socialise, understand, and appreciate other ethnic groups. This was done in a quantitative way by measuring the ethnic diversity index of the respective town/city/area based on the data from 2010 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia Census. The diversity indices were calculated based on the transformation of Gini-Simpson formula as:  $D = 1 - \lambda = \sum_{k=1}^n P_i^2$ , where each  $P_i$  is the proportion of each ethnic group in the total population of the area. This index is also known as Gibbs-Martin and Blau index and equals the probability that two entities taken at random from the dataset of interest (with replacement) represent different types (Caso and Gil, 1988).

Secondly, the type of schooling system that individuals go through can either add or detract from the interethnic socialisation experiences open to them. In the case of Malaysia, this ranges from the national-type schools and convent schools to vernacular Mandarin or Tamil schools and religious schools. However, the pupil diversity in schools is influenced by the ethnic diversity of the area they are located

at. To ensure a reliable answer, the question on the type of schools was followed by a question on the diversity of the classmates.

Ethnic identity, being one of important measures in this research, is elicited via open-ended questions derived from established ethnic identity measures. Ethnic identification was elicited by asking open-ended questions on what ethnic group does a person think s/he belongs to. This is in line with Brown (2007) and unlike many other works that take the ethnicity of a respondent- as understood by the researcher- as the ethnic identity of subjects. Perhaps a more thorough method would have been 'Who Am I?' by Hutnik (1991) which includes analysis of ten items by the respondent as to who they are, and another ten as to who they are not. The time limitations of the interview session prohibit the use of this method in this study and therefore, I suffice to the respondents' answer to an open-ended question as to who and from what group they feel as belonging, which often also led to discussing the backgrounds of interviewees' parents. This allowed for the possibility of exploring more of the ethnic identity of respondents, as a simple question would most probably be answered by the official ethnicity, resulting in the loss of identity nuances.

One of the widely used tools for measuring ethnic identity is Phinney's (1992) Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM). The original measure consisted of 20 items that assessed participation in ethnic practices and other-group orientation. Later studies, however, a revised 10-item measure assessing ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity commitment was more reliable (Phinney and Ong, 2007). As the respondents are adults, the first 5-item subscale of ethnic identity exploration can be dropped. The remainder is a 5-item measure of ethnic identity commitment. In the interviews, these items form the basis of appropriate questions:

- a) I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.
- b) I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.
- c) I have a lot of pride in my ethnic group.
- d) I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.



e) I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background.

The MEIM is partly based on social identity approach that this research is based on. Moreover, MEIM assesses ethnic identities not in isolation but in diverse settings. These facts make MEIM an appropriate tool to use in this research. In line with the considerable overlap of ethnic background and religion, interviewees were also asked if they adhered to a religion. This was complemented by questions on the languages spoken. This combination intended to elicit interviewees' positions with regards to the ethnic faultlines in the society.

It was also important to consider the possibility of hybrid identity. For social, religious, and legal reason, intermarriage between the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia remains limited and pursuing the traditional definition of hybridity as mixed parentage alone would not be very helpful. In this research, a more contextually meaningful concept of hybridity is considered, one that is linked to the nature of a faultline society. As discussed in the third chapter, the main social divisions in Malaysia are ethno-religious ones.

Therefore, considering the social make-up of ethnic identities, a measure of hybridity was constructed as one recognising parents of different backgrounds as well as religious affiliations going beyond the social norms of Muslim Malay/Hindu or Sikh Indian/Buddhist-Taoist Chinese. A certain number of ethnic groups are also considered bumiputeras, a status which indicates native roots and brings along certain benefits and privileges. In the case of bumiputeras, mentioning a parent or grandparent of non-Malaysian origin also means that the individual does not totally embrace the idea of being native, resulting in a level of identity hybridity. Overall, the concept of hybridity in this research seeks to take into account the psychological means that individuals have to help them cross social ethnic boundaries as a result of their ethnic, religious, and lineage backgrounds. To have a manageable and consistent measure of hybridity, this measure is defined as a binary variable here, taking values 'yes' for any clear sign of hybrid identity and 'no' in the absence of one.

Having elicited a response to their ethnic group belonging— which sometimes went beyond the main ethnic groups and took the form of smaller group identifications such

as Malabari or Javanese- interviewees would be asked questions about their views on theirs as well as other ethnic groups and to try and find positive and negative characteristics about them. This is where a lot of stories and experiences were shared by the interviewees and timely probes helped to guide the interview flow to interactional patterns and attitudes of interviewees. These questions queried the interviewees on interethnic celebration attendance, after-hours activities, lunchtime companionship and best friends. obviously, these are trust-related questions and the interviewees were explicitly asked on whom they can trust in work and in personal matters. Efforts were made to interview a number of other staff mentioned at each interview in order to identify subgroups and cliques, revealing the interactional preferences at the units, as well as to gain a different narrative of the same stories.

Famously, many managerial-level informal interaction take place in gulf outings in Western contexts. At the level of work groups that this research studies and specially in the Malaysian context, eating out together seems to be the main informal activity. This is reported by Tey *et al.* (2009) and also came up frequently in the preliminary interviews. Therefore, commensality issues were added to the interview guide. As for the significant role of religion in Malay ethnic identity and the daily practice of Muslim prayers, I expected the practice of going to mid-day prayers with co-workers to provide opportunities for informal interaction and building a sense of closeness. Therefore, a question regarding religious companionship was added to the interview guide.

Based on the literature, it is clear that the informal interaction among individuals is based on trust and that psychological safety is the make-or-break factor in such conditions(Carton and Cummings, 2012, Chowdhury, 2005). Therefore, questions on cognition-based trust, affect-based trust, and psychological safety were also added to the interview guide. Although there would inevitably be overlaps between the items for trust and psychological safety, the latter mainly targeted the personal experience of being accepted in the unit. Also, related to psychological safety is the feeling of fair treatment. To separate the effects of society and organisation separate, this item was elicited by two questions on being treated fairly at the society and at the organisation. Finally, interviewees were asked to share the best and worst experiences they've had

working for the organisations. This would give them time and opportunity to share any relevant stories not covered thus far. Table 4.2 shows the interview guide used by the researcher during the interviews. Not all of these questions would be covered in each and every interview and there certainly are significant overlaps in what these questions intend to elicit. The initial interviews helped identify the more helpful questions and refine their orders as per the flow of the interviews.

**Table 4.2 The Interview Guide**

Areas to Cover	Possible Questions to Ask
Educational and work history	What kind of primary/secondary school did you attend? What was the language of instruction there? Was it a mixed school?
	When did you start working in this organisation/unit)?
	Have you worked at other jobs/organisations before?
	Has your job title changed since you started working here?
	What is a normal working day like for you?
	Who do you work with in this unit? Who is your unit manager/ senior/junior?
Ethnic identity	What ethnic group do you think you belong to?
	Are both your parents from the same ethnic group?
	(If different,) which one do you feel closer to?
	How strong you belong to your own ethnic group? (usually I set a scale of 1 to 10, and miming 1 with a shrug and 10 with an emotional clogged fist; respondents rate themselves on the scale. It is difficult for them to answer this question clearly otherwise.)
	Do you have a lot of pride in your ethnic group? What are the reasons for that?
	What do you think of other ethnic groups (name each)? What is good about them? What is not so good about them?

Areas to Cover	Possible Questions to Ask
Demography	How old are you?
	What is your gender?
	Where were you born? Where is your hometown?
	What languages do you speak? What languages do you speak at home?
	Do you adhere to a religion?
Formal and Informal Interaction	How often do you interact with your co-workers on work-related issues?
	If you are unsure about a task, who do you go to ask for help?
	Which of your colleagues comes to you for help?
	If you see a colleague doing a task wrongly, do you tell them? How do you tell them? How do they react? Can you give me an example?
	What do you do if you make a mistake at work? Can you give me an example?
	Who do you find it easier to tell about your mistakes?
	Which of your co-workers is a very close friend/ good friend?
	Whom do you trust to share your personal problems with?
	What do you discuss with your friends? work, family, politics, films, etc.
	How often do you go out for lunch/dinner/shopping/ watching a movie with your colleagues? Who do you go with?
	Do you go to your colleagues' Hari Raya/Chinese New Year/ Deepawali/Thaipusam celebrations? Do they come to yours?
	Do you do any sports? Do any of your friends join you in it?
	When do you have lunch during a working day? Who do you have lunch with?
	Do you take time to have a coffee or something with friends after work?
	Are you a member of a social club/church/mosque, etc.? Are of your friends a member as well?

Areas to Cover	Possible Questions to Ask
Trust and psychological safety	Do you feel comfortable being yourself at work?
	How different are you at work compared to home?
	Do you think being a Chinese/Malay/Indian/etc. Male/Female affects your acceptance at your job positively or negatively?
	Imagine you were a [combinations of ethnicity/gender. How different would it be for you to work/study here?
	Do you think your colleagues are competent?
	If you got ill in another city, would you prefer a Malay/Chinese/Indian nurse to look after you?
	If you have a problem at work, who do you think will assist you?
	If you have a personal problem, who do you think will help you?
	Do your colleagues respect each other? Even if they are not good friends? Can you give me an example?
	Can you freely share your thought with your colleagues? Whom with?
	How would you feel if a colleague of yours left and you no longer worked together?
	Do you think your colleagues care about you/each other?
	Do you think there is a welcoming and accommodating environment here for you? Has this changed over time?
Fairness Perceptions	Do you think you are treated fairly at work? Can you give me an example?
	Do you think that the unit manager treats you/others fairly? Can you give me an example?
	Do you think that you are treated fairly in Malaysia? Can you give me an example?
	What is your best experience at work?

Areas to Cover	Possible Questions to Ask
Best and Worst Experiences	What is your worst experience at work?

#### 4.4 Choice of interviewees and research sites

This section explains the process and rationale behind of the choice of research sites and the selection of interviewees in this study. It is discussed why private healthcare sector is chosen for data collection purposes in this research and the reason behind the selection of the three organisations at which interviews took place. Also discussed is the purposeful sampling of interviewees intended to elicit as diverse stories as possible. At both these levels, deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics of the research matter was prioritised over representativeness of the data.

While searching for appropriate sectors, there was a challenge to find a diverse industry which provided viable settings for the research. To be able to differentiate between formal and pragmatic, and informal and cordial interaction between co-workers, it was necessary that the nature of work in the organisations required a minimum of cooperation in performing everyday tasks. It would be beyond this point that the inter-ethnic interaction would be more interesting and subject to social boundary crossings. Also, more than four decades of affirmative action policies has had the effect of substantially changing the employment of ethnic minorities in the public sector in Malaysia. Therefore, it was clear that the search for the appropriate industry settings would have to be carried out at the private sector.

Then again, employment at the private sector in Malaysia mirrors the public sector to a degree, with the under-representation of the Malay staff in certain industries and levels. It was necessary for the organisations under study to be as close to the wider Malaysian society in ethnic distribution as possible, employing staff from across the Malaysian society in ways that went beyond token diversity. Based on this criteria, a number of industries were initially identified using data from Malaysian Labour Force Survey 2013. These industries were information and communication, financial and

insurance activities, professional services, education, and human health. Table 4.3 summarises ethnic and gender mix of employment in these industries in Malaysia.

With these industries in mind, the research set out to secure access for data collection in information, financial, and health services organisations. Out of these sectors, access to a private healthcare group was secured in January 2014. The healthcare industry in Malaysia exhibits an acceptable ethnic make-up of employment, making it suitable for this study. This choice, however, means that the interview sample would be made up of large female majority, something that needs to be kept in mind when drawing conclusions based on the data analysis.

**Table 4.3 Ethnic make-up of employment in 5 industries in Malaysia**

Industry	Information	Financial	Professional	Education	Human Health
Employment ('000)	191.3	319.2	307	817.4	489.9
% of total employment	1.4	2.4	2.3	6.2	3.7
Female%: Male%	61.5:38.5	53.5: 46.5	48.7: 51.3	66.7: 33.3	80.5: 19.5
Malay %	49.5	48.3	39.8	68.4	65.1
Chinese %	31.6	38.4	42.8	14.9	13.2
Indian %	11	8.3	8.9	5.2	9.5

Adapted from Malaysian Labour Force Survey 2013

Although public healthcare services in Malaysia are heavily subsidised and accessible to the public, the private healthcare sector is growing, thanks to income growth and government incentives. As of 2013, the private hospitals provide 14,033 out of a total of 54,236 beds in Malaysia, roughly translating into a 30% role in the country's

healthcare (Oxford Business Group, 2016). Private hospitals provide over a million admissions and close to four million attendances in 2015 (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2016). From an industry leadership perspective, healthcare was also important as it was one of the two ministries at the time of the data collection with a non-bumiputera minister at the helm (the other being Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment; both ministers from Malaysian Indian Congress, MIC). While this was not a criterion for selection of data collection settings, it can have an effect empowering minority staff in healthcare.

The first research site was a private hospital in Kuala Lumpur, hereafter named as Hospital KL. Established in 1980s, Hospital KL employed 500 staff and 80 medical consultants as of January 2014. Hospital KL is what one could call a typical private hospital in Malaysia, meaning not one catering to top-end of the market, and not what is known as a 'Chinese hospital', traditionally catering to a specific ethnic clientele. Many of the patients at Hospital KL benefit from its services through their insurance policies, making it slightly more affordable than higher end healthcare service providers. Based on data provided by the management, 74% of the staff were Malays, 7% Chinese, and 10% Indians.

The hospital is known as a 'Malay hospital' by the majority of staff and clients. This is probably because Hospital KL and the other two research sites were subsidiaries of a government-linked company formed as part of affirmative-action initiatives in 1960s and 70s with the aim of fostering bumiputera-owned and managed private businesses. These companies, however, have since been privatised and floated on Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange. While the organisational chart of these companies at the time of data collection showed an overwhelmingly Malay-majority leadership, review of the organisational publications made clear that they wanted to introduce themselves as multicultural entities, founded by businessmen and physicians of different ethnic backgrounds.

The researcher's visit to the hospital coincided with the Chinese New Year celebrations, during which the entrance and non-medical venues were decorated for that period and admission staff wore red clothing as it's customary among Malaysian



Chinese. The researcher was told that this is also the practice during Indian and Malay celebration periods. Hospital also has the policy of non-discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin. The researcher conducted a total of 23 individual interviews at Hospital KL, out of which 17 usable interview profiles were produced. Table 4.4 summarises the interviewee profiles at Hospital KL. Individual interviewees are codenamed as HAX to protect their identity and to facilitate their referencing.

**Table 4.4 Profile of interviewees at Hospital KL**

Codename	Age	Gender	ethnicity	Religion	Educational background	Occupational role
HA1	60	Female	Chinese	None	Nursing Dip.	Senior Nurse
HA2	29	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HA3	58	Male	Eurasian	Catholic	Medical Assistant Dip.	Medical Assistant
HA4	50	Female	Chinese	Buddhist	Secondary School	Care Assistant
HA5	55	Female	Indian	Sikh	Nursing Dip.	Senior Nurse
HA7	26	Female	Indian	Hindu	Undergrad	Nurse
HA8	36	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Senior Midwife
HA9	54	Female	Indian	Hindu	Secondary School	Care Assistant

Codename	Age	Gender	ethnicity	Religion	Educational background	Occupational role
HA11	23	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HA12	30	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Senior Nurse
HA13	24	Female	Indian	Hindu	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HA15	48	Female	Chinese	Buddhist	Nursing Dip.	Unit Manager
HA16	24	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HA17	24	Female	Indian	Hindu	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HA18	27	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Senior Nurse
HA22	29	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Senior Nurse
HA23	30	Female	Other Bumiputera	Christian	Nursing Dip.	Senior Nurse

While the initial findings in Hospital Kuala Lumpur were taking shape, the researcher found that a significant number of interviewees stated the hectic lifestyle in Kuala Lumpur and the daily traffic on their commute as the reason they do not usually have time and energy to socialise in after-work hours. Moreover, over half of interviewees were not native to the state and travelled back to their home state during holidays. This meant that they had less chance to attend each other's' celebrations. These

factors could potentially confuse the findings and the researcher needed to explore the inter-ethnic interactions in a similar setting, but in the relative absence of the described effects.

This led to the choice of the second data collection site, another private hospital in Johor Bahru. Hospital JB was established several years prior to Hospital KL and is a bigger one, employing about 850 people of which 87% are Malays, 4% Chinese, and 8.5% Indians. In terms of organisational policies pertinent to this research, the differences between the two hospitals are negligible. When asked about the small number of the Chinese staff, the human resources manager of Hospital JB made it clear that not only the hospital does not discriminate based against ethnic minorities in employment, but also that it prefers to employ a larger number of them due to the need in lingual abilities to cater for a diverse client base.

The reason behind the low number of Chinese staff, according to the HR manager, is the low status nursing in local Chinese culture, preference by Chinese nurses to work at the Chinese hospitals, and the higher pay rates in neighbouring Singapore. Interviews at Hospital JB enabled the researcher to examine the inter-ethnic relations among co-workers where they had more free time and a bigger number of them were local to the state. This contextual effect did not seem to change the interactional patterns observed at Hospital KL, helping to confirm the initial findings. A total of 16 interviews were conducted at Hospital JB, out of which 15 usable interview profiles were generated. Table 4.5 summarises the interviewee profiles at Hospital JB.

**Table 4.5 Profile of interviewees at Hospital JB**

Codename	Age	Gender	ethnicity	Religion	Educational background	Occupational role
HB1	47	Female	Chinese	Buddhist	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HB2	30	Female	Indian	Hindu	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HB3	45	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HB4	24	Female	Indian	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HB6	23	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Nurse
HB7	39	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Midwife
HB8	35	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Midwife
HB9	37	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Midwife
HB10	37	Female	Chinese	None	Nursing Dip.	Senior Midwife
HB11	23	Male	Indian	Sikh	Nursing Dip.	Physiotherapist
HB12	28	Female	Malay	Muslim	Undergrad	Therapist
HB13	40	Female	Malay	Muslim	Nursing Dip.	Senior Nurse

Codename	Age	Gender	ethnicity	Religion	Educational background	Occupational role
HB14	50	Female	Malay	Muslim	Assistant nursing course	Assistant Nurse
HB15	26	Female	Indian	Christian	Nursing Dip.	nurse
HB16	33	Female	Chinese	None	Undergrad	nurse

A second effect that came up in the interviews and could affect the findings was the presence of a generation gap. The interactional difficulties between individuals of different ethnic groups seemed to also occur between ones of different age groups. While in a quantitative study this could be statistically controlled, in this research it required a third site in which the effect of the age gap was minimal. This led to the choice of a healthcare college near Kuala Lumpur, from which some of the nurses in Hospital KL and Hospital JB have graduated. This institute, called Health College here, provided the opportunity to explore the inter-ethnic interactional dynamics at the absence of a generational gap.

Interviewees at the Health College were questioned on their experiences at the study spaces as well as medical training periods which the final-year students of nursing, physiotherapy, and pharmacy attend. The choice of the final-year students was made in order to make sure interviewees had had the initial socialisation at healthcare settings via their training periods. Ethnic composition of the students at the Health College was roughly similar to the two first cases, although the college refused to share the related figures. Also, students spent a lot more time together in non-training periods, especially in the college hostels, enabling periods of intense socialisation among students. Data collected in Health College enabled the researcher to achieve a much clearer picture of the original findings as well as observe some changes to

diversity attitudes in the upcoming generation. Table 4.6 summarises the interviewee profile at Health College.

**Table 4.6 Profile of interviewees at Health College**

Codename	Age	Gender	ethnicity	Religion	Occupational role
HC1	21	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Pharmacy Student
HC2	21	Male	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Pharmacy Student
HC3	21	Female	Other Bumiputera	Christian	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Pharmacy Student
HC4	21	Female	Indian	Hindu	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Pharmacy Student
HC5	21	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Pharmacy Student
HC6	21	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Physiotherapy Student
HC7	21	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Physiotherapy Student
HC8	21	Female	Indian	Hindu	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Pharmacy Student
HC9	21	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Physiotherapy Student
HC10	22	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Physiotherapy Student
HC11	20	Female	Chinese	Buddhist	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Physiotherapy Student

Codename	Age	Gender	ethnicity	Religion	Occupational role
HC12	23	Female	Chinese	None	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Nursing Student
HC13	21	Female	Indian	Hindu	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Nursing Student
HC14	21	Male	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Nursing Student
HC15	21	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Nursing Student
HC16	21	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Nursing Student
HC17	22	Female	Indian	Hindu	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Nursing Student
HC18	22	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Nursing Student
HC19	21	Female	Malay	Muslim	3 <sup>rd</sup> year Nursing Student

It is clear that in all the three cases, Malays make up the absolute majority of the staff, Indians are represented at close to the population share levels, and Chinese are underrepresented. To understand the inter-ethnic interactional dynamics, it was necessary to listen to more ethnic minority voices that would be possible by following a random or representative sample. As such, the researcher made every effort to interview more Chinese, Indian, and other ethnic-minority-background staff where possible. In total, a number of 8 Chinese, 27 Malay, 13 Indian, and 3 staff of other ethnic backgrounds were interviewed. Although this is not a representative sample and is not large enough to generalise the findings, it does include a number of each of the three major ethnic groups of different ages and origins to make the common patterns meaningful.

To understand the viewpoints of different ethnic identities, the researcher needed to hear from individuals from various backgrounds. While every interviewee would have a unique experience and viewpoint, the theoretical framework suggests that they would be, at least partially, determined by their ethnic backgrounds. Hence the researcher looked for the variety in ethnic backgrounds of interviewees in order to increase the chances of hearing a variety of narratives. Similarly, the researcher also

had a preference for interviewing individuals with a hybrid ethnic background to explore the effects of a possible hybrid identity compared to monolithic ones. With these in mind, the researcher would also make efforts to interview individuals specifically mentioned by previous interviewees as special in some way with regards to the discussion subjects. These included individuals who were more open or hostile to others (of different backgrounds) and individuals who had been involved in stories worth mentioning by their colleagues.

As per the business model of both hospitals, the physicians were not employed by the hospitals, but instead rented their own clinic inside hospitals. Their time spent at the units were also limited to ward rounds at the beginning of the shifts. Overall, doctors were not part of organisational units at the two hospitals and their interactions with the staff were limited, hence their exclusion from the interview sample. Moreover, while the researcher interviewed a unit manager and a deputy unit manager, he did not make efforts to include more of them in the interview sample. There were two pragmatic reasons behind this decision. Firstly, the unit managers were generally busier than their staff and insisting to interview them would have resulted either in short, burdened interviews or worse, resistance and end of interviews at their units. Secondly, the subject matter of the research is considered sensitive by some individuals and some unit managers were especially worried about its implications for the reputation of their unit in case the results were not positive.

These worries, of course, were based on the thought that the research was either commissioned by the hospital or it was going to be reported to its management; both of which are untrue. Nonetheless, the researcher felt that sufficing to interview a sample made mostly of nurses (junior and senior), assistance nurses, healthcare assistants, midwives, and physiotherapists across the different units would serve the purposes of this study. At the Health College, access was given to the 3<sup>rd</sup> year student of nursing, physiotherapy, and pharmacy, only the last group of which do not have interviewed counterparts at the hospitals.

Finally, there was the issue of language used at the interviews. According to Education First English Proficiency Index (EF-EPI) scores, Malaysia is ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> in Asia, below



only Singapore and above India and Hong Kong. Although English is not the official language in Malaysia, it has some official status, is widely used in schools, in daily communications, and in business. Along the growing health tourism in Malaysia and the business orientation of the hospitals in this study, as well as the status of the English language as the language of medical instruction, the corporate language at the three organisations studied here was English.

However, as the conflicting educational policies of different eras in Malaysia regarding the role of English language has left some cohorts of national schools with considerably lower English proficiency than others, the organisations have had to accommodate staff some of which could not communicate comfortably in English. They hold English language courses for the staff, free-of-charge and encourage communicating in English. Nonetheless, English language proficiency is not part of employment criteria. It's notable that there are also Mandarin language courses offered in order to remedy shortage of Chinese-speaking staff.

For the researcher, this meant having a potential sample of individuals with varying degrees of English conversational abilities. On the interviewees' side, there were some cases of outright refusal to be interviewed on the grounds of lingual problems. While this was not a large number, they were excluded due to their choice. There was also a case of a Malay nurse who was quite enthusiastic about the interview, but after 20 minutes of struggling to comprehend the questions and reply to them, a joint decision was made not to carry on with the discussion. The majority of the staff, however, did not have problems with conversing in English at an intermediate level. The researcher was told that this language issue would be far worse at the public hospitals as per the absence of English requirement there and sometimes even at the public tertiary education.

On the researcher's side, prior experiences came to help when conducting interviews. Firstly, he had worked as a teacher of English as a foreign language for three years in his youth and he was comfortable with level adjustment in discussions. This made it easy for him to be understood by the interviewees. Secondly, the researcher had lived in Malaysia for close to four years prior to the research proceedings and was adept at

the local variations of spoken English as well as some common expressions in Bahasa Malaysia such as 'jalan jalan' or 'boleh', or 'lah' that do not have a direct equivalent in English. These abilities allowed the researcher to conduct the interviews in a language that was easy to understand for most of the interviewees and strike a friendly, almost-local tone.

However, it was clear that there were significant differences in English lingual abilities of the interviewees. Apart from those stemming from varying educational levels and travel experiences, there was, subjectively, an ethnic variation to English proficiency levels as well. Possibly for the combination of reasons of national school curricula, public sector job outlook, and lack of necessity to speak English in everyday life (due to the size of the community speaking Bahasa as a first language), Malays were generally less confident in English than their Indian or Chinese colleagues. The word 'confident' is used intentionally here as it might or might not equal 'proficient'. In certain cases, a digital Bahasa Malaysia-English dictionary was used to help interviewees struggling to find appropriate English words in the discussions. Overall, though, the researcher was satisfied he has interviewed enough number Malay staff/students with high levels of English proficiency for the results not to have been determined or affected by varying degrees of lingual abilities of the respondents.

#### **4.5 Data analysis**

As the data collection progressed, the researcher had the feeling that a tacit, but rather clear picture was emerging such that some interviewees shared similar viewpoints and attitudes in a categorical way. The researcher wrote down a short subjective profile of each interviewee after the interview as a reference point. This helped to crystallise the concept and categorise the rest of the interviewees in comparison to the initial ones. These emergent categories, namely resistant, tolerant, and transcendent, formed a new emergent theme for the data analysis. Individuals perceived ethnic diversity around them as a threat, a burden, or an opportunity and these views had important impacts on their diversity attitudes and interactions.

The interviews could only capture a mix of attitudes and intentions together with certain evidence of action on those bases from the interviewee narratives, which causes a double hermeneutics problem (Woodside et al., 2005). However, critical realism considers individuals beliefs, feelings, and thoughts as real as the physical objects and events (Maxwell, 2012), not least because of their causal powers to shape actions (Archer, 2003). Furthermore, drawing a connection between attitudes and actions is possible as a level of interpretivism in critical realist research is inevitable (Easton, 2010).

The initial codes were based on the items derived from the literature and reflected in the interview guide. As the interviews proceeded, it became apparent that some questions were more important than others. For example, in line with Montesino's (2012) observation that Malaysians work together in a pragmatic way, but rarely go together for lunch, it emerged that eating together constitutes an important part of the social life. It also became apparent that the concept of bodily purity from a religious viewpoint constitutes a major barrier to eating together, especially in the case of pork consumption. It was also clear that for married female interviewees, informal interaction usually took the form of family or group activities than individual or pair events and that they had less time for those activities altogether. In light of these facts, interview questions were adjusted accordingly.

The group of 5 interviews at the first unit at Hospital KL were initially coded immersively and independent of theoretical considerations. The codes derived were then compared and added to the initial codes and subsequently grouped based on the theoretical framework. The result was a theoretical coding set of 45 items in 8 groups, as presented in table 4.7, which were utilised to code and analyse the interview scripts.

**Table 4.7 Research analysis codes**

Group	Codes
Prior diversity opportunities and experiences	Diverse schooling experience (DSE)
	Hometown Diversity (HTD)
	Socioeconomic background (SEB)
Ethnic and religious identity	Identity strength (IDS)
	Hybridity (HYB)
	Religiosity (RLG)
	Social/religious taboos (SRT)
Professional identity	Length of experience (LOE)
	Task-orientation (TOR)
	Task flexibility (TFX)
	Technical knowledge (TEK)
	Work ethics (WET)
	Pro-social motivation (PSM)
Informal interaction	Same-ethnicity best friend (SBF)
	Other-ethnicity best friend (OBF)
	Social circle diversity (SCD)
	Commensality (COM)
	Religious barriers (RBR)
	Social isolation (SIO)
Formal interaction	Work isolation (WIS)

Group	Codes
	Openness to correcting/being corrected (OCR)
	Professional mentor/mentee relationship (MMR)
	Respect for organisational/ professional hierarchy (RHY)
Psychological safety and trust	Perceptions of (un)fairness and (in)justice (PFJ)
	Interactional resistance (IRS)
	Minority status (MST)
	Cynical views (CNV)
	Concern about others (CAO)
	Exclusion experience (EEX)
	Reciprocity and care (RAC)
	Ability trust (ABT)
Diversity Views	Perception of threat in diversity (PTD)
	Perception of burden in diversity (PBD)
	Perception of opportunity in diversity (POD)
	Perceived ethnic hierarchy (PEH)
	Ambivalence (AMB)
	Self ethnic group critique (SEC)
	Other ethnic group critique (OEC)
	Other ethnic group appreciation (OEA)

Group	Codes
Other factors	National identity (NID)
	Self-confidence (CON)
	Lingual abilities (LGA)
	Pragmatism (PGM)
	Intention to leave the organisation/country (ITL)

Upon coding each interview script, the researcher looked for factors that justified the initial categorisation of individuals as resistant, tolerant, or transcendent. This systematic approach helped the emergence of the explicit category criteria while previously they were only tacit and perceptual. In the process, while the majority of interviewees kept their category labels, some were moved to other categories based on the newly formed criteria and comparison with other individuals. Summary forms were produced for each interview to help with the review and referencing purposes, an example of which is included in the Appendix I.

Categorising individuals was not a straightforward task as some individuals showed cross-category or boundary attitudes. In these cases, their profiles were re-examined for more information that could justify and explain their standing. Clear examples include HA2, who could be placed on the border between the tolerant and transcendent categories. More specifically, she showed transcendent attitudes with tolerant behaviour. The justification could be found in the monolithic schooling years and the lack of early life socialisation opportunities. All the other predictors were in line with the transcendent category criteria. Another prominent exception was the case of UC19, who fit in the transcendent category while the predictors would suggest a tolerant or even resistant category. The explanation behind this case, which the researcher counts as a happy anomaly, can be found in the dominance of professional identity in the individual. Although UC19 is only a 3<sup>rd</sup>-year nursing student, she has

been caring for her diabetic parents for years and the nurse identity is strong enough for her to wish to work as a medic in war zones.

The updated coding system enabled the emergence of a picture that went beyond existing theory in both showing that there is a spectrum of social identities even in highly segregated societies, rather than the simple and discrete categories mostly found in social laboratory experiments. Moreover, the ability to unpack different aspects of an individual's ethnic identity made it possible to look beyond the ethnicity as a rigid label and identify the elements of ethnic identities that limit inter-ethnic interactions. For example, religiosity and socioeconomic background were among the factors identified as important as a result of the grounded analysis.

In conclusion, this research was guided by the framework of social identity perspective, concept of faultlines and nested identities, but at the same time contextually embedded in the societal factors of its settings in sampling and analysis. Coding was done based on original framework and the emerging themes. The emerging themes identified three interactional categories by adding the possibility of ambivalence, indifference, and neutrality to that of positive and negative diversity attitudes. These categories constitute parts of a spectrum of diversity attitudes and behaviour rather than discrete and separate groupings.

#### **4.6 Position of the researcher**

This research is a qualitative study and therefore contains a level of subjectivity characteristic of qualitative research. More specifically, this study deals with the issues of social identity and the relational nature of its dynamics means there is the possibility that the social identity, experiences, and viewpoints of the researcher has had an impact on the process of interviews, interviewee responses, and the data analysis. The researcher, while not being part of the social context under study, was not totally detached of it, either. In the process of interviews, it was necessary to be mindful of some context-specific issues to ensure the fidelity of the research process. This section is dedicated to reflections on and declarations of such subjectivities and stances.

The researcher had lived in Malaysia from 2008 to 2011 and the experience was an invaluable asset in the research process, especially in data collection phase. A certain level of knowledge of local culture was necessary in order to understand the informal side of Malaysian social life. For example, shopping centres are popular pastime spaces in Malaysia. Related to the theme of informal activities, knowledge of certain local expressions seemed indispensable. For example, 'Jalan Jalan' can be transliterated into 'street street' or 'streets' in English, but means a leisurely walkabout. A jalan jalan partner is probably one's good friend. A basic knowledge of different holidays in Malaysia also helped the research as these holidays include important celebration period for the Malaysian ethnic groups.

On the other hand, it was necessary to express a degree of ignorance of some local factors such that the interviewees would explain them in their own language. An example of such undertaking would be to elicit perceptions of fairness by ethnic minorities regarding ethnic quotas for public university places. This is where a local person would probably have a difficult time eliciting honest answer due to the effect of social taboos. An outsider would be in a much better position here as their perceived ignorance of social taboos helps the interviewees relax and share more.

During the data collection process, the researcher made every effort to be and be perceived as neutral towards different ethnic groups and religions. Although not systematically documented, some colours seem to carry social meanings in Malaysia. For example, red convey a Chinese hint, while green could mean Islamic and thus related to Malays. To avoid these, the researcher made sure that at all interviews, he appeared in a light blue shirt and grey suit, which was as neutral as he could come up with. Moreover, the same colour composition and appearance was replicated in all the interviews. The researcher also steered clear of giving clear answers to the questions regarding his religion. It is important to note that this question was mainly asked by Malay interviewees who associated my name with a certain religious background.

Overall, all effort was made to be perceived neutrally and identically by all interviewees. The depth of the views shared by the interviewees in the data collection



process makes the researcher believe that these efforts have not been in vain. The trust put by the interviewees in the researcher meant that he needed to make sure to protect the identities of the interviewees and also that of the organisations. Therefore, all the information that could have led to identification of individuals and cases have been dropped.

However, it is also possible that the social identity and stance of the researcher himself have had an effect on the process of data collection. Firstly, as a person born to parents who are healthcare professionals, the researcher has immense respect for the interviewees. In simple terms, he really had ears to listen to them. Secondly, as a person believing in ethnic equality, he could not take any primordial comment on ethnic groups at face value and would look for a deeper explanation. Finally, the researcher's social identity as a person of Middle Eastern background would probably be expected to align him with the Malay majority in Malaysia. However, coming from an ethnic minority background in his country of birth, he could also understand and empathise with the Malaysian ethnic minority views.

Finally, the relational dynamics between the researcher and the interviewees can be viewed from a gender perspective. All but 4 of the 51 individuals interviewed identified as female, which makes the issue of interactions between a male interviewer and female interviewees all the more important in the case of this study. To the researcher, the interviews with the four male respondents – admittedly a small number- were not noticeably different from the rest of the interviews. One notable exception was the role of religious routines such as prayer attendance for Muslim males and its impact on their everyday work relations. This is something that the research predicted as an important factor for all Muslim interviewees, but in effect were important only for the males as the expectation of daily religious performances were less stringent for females.

Apart from the abovementioned topic, the interviews with male and female interviewees were comparable. As part of the self-prescribed data collection dress code, the researcher avoided sporting socially important signifiers, among them any form of facial hair; this could have had an effect in limiting the social distance with the

female interviewees. Perhaps more importantly, the research found out, while transcribing the interviews, that he had been inadvertently adjusting his tone of voice to uncharacteristically feminine-sounding levels during the interviews. The researcher believes that this natural adjustment to a feminine atmosphere helped facilitate smooth flow of interviews.

Nonetheless, it is possible that the identity of the interviewer as a single male has had the effect of limiting discussions regarding, for instance, married family life and medical topics at the maternity units. While the research has no way to know for sure how different the responses would be in the absence of the gender difference with the majority of the interviewees, he has reasons to be optimistic that the effect has been minimal. The honest discussions with the female interviewees of different age groups regarding their life changes upon marriage, maternity traditions of different ethnic groups, and even FGM supports such optimism. The researcher, in turn, in line with his inner appreciation of healthcare professionals, paid full and unbiased attention to the interviewees, for data collection purposes as well as for life lessons.

## **Chapter Five: Three Categories of Interactional Attitudes- Resistant, Tolerant, and Transcendent**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter introduces the main theme of the findings of this study. Three categories of individuals with regards to attitudes towards inter-ethnic interactions were found. These categories are mainly based on the individuals' informal interactional patterns and preferences, showing their voluntary relations with their colleagues with regards to the ethnic diversity of their organisational environment. Analysis of factors predicting and explaining diversity attitudes of individuals in each category and ethnic variations in these factors are also discussed. Discussion of formal work relations of the same sample and how individuals balance their work requirements and interactional preferences will follow in chapter 6.

The abovementioned categories are named resistant, tolerant, and transcendent as reminiscent of resisting diversity, tolerating diversity, and transcending ethnic boundaries while living and working in diverse social settings. These categories were initially formed out of the researcher's observations during the interviews on existence of clear patterns among the interviewees in their social interactions and how they saw their and other ethnic groups. Subsequently, the data regarding these categories was analysed in detail and theorised based on the concept of ambivalence towards diversity.

The experience of cultural and ethnic diversity is linked to a kind of affective ambivalence that invokes both the feelings of fear and disgust, as well as those of meaning and delight (Van Leeuwen, 2008). This is the result of breakdown of a body of embodied, accepted, and unproblematic knowledge, otherwise known as common sense (Geertz, 1992, Taylor, 1995). In multicultural societies, this 'horizon of communal unproblematic convictions that provide a certain background consensus' (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 150) is challenged. As the initial surprise of the cultural encounter gives way to habituation and the 'strange other' turns into the 'familiar other', the initial feelings mostly settle as a slight indifference forming the bulk of the

spectrum of affects, with positive and negative feelings at the extremes. Van Leeuwen (2008) concludes his articulate discussion by linking these feelings to perceptions of threat to psychological integrity, vital integrity, and national integrity.

Likewise, of the three categories presented in this chapter, tolerance constitutes the middle ground and the largest category, and is characterised by signs of ambivalence, indifference, and neutrality. Transcendence and resistance are the smaller categories at the extremes and denote a clearer positive or negative view of diversity. These categories should be viewed as parts of a continuum rather than three mutually-exclusive classes. Moreover, some individuals might express attitudes that cut across these categories or change over time or depending on the context. Nonetheless, while the category boundaries can be permeable, individuals can be meaningfully placed in each category based on the balance of their professed attitudes and preferences.

These characteristics include individuals' general view of diversity as a threat, burden, or opportunity, as well as the way they see their own ethnic group and other ethnic groups in their society. These perceptual factors interact with the opportunities and limitations caused by the social context to bring about the behavioural manifestations of one's diversity attitudes and preferences. These indicators are also used in constructing the categories and include heterogeneity of one's inner social circle as well as broader but less frequent informal encounters such as participating in ethno-cultural ceremonies of co-workers.

These ceremonies and in general, most social functions narrated by the interviewees include some form of consumption of food. Commensality, as a particularly potent form of social interaction also proved to be a good barometer of inter-ethnic relations in the context of this study. Sociocultural significance of food in the region combined with the religious barriers to culinary intermingling makes the concept of sharing meals a well-placed lens through which one can explore the inter-play between unifying and dividing social forces and how individuals balance them in their daily lives. This factor is included in the analysis as an important interactional mode.

A logical next step towards understanding these behavioural differences would be to question their roots. This study identifies a number of factors that potentially explain

a degree of this variation. One such factor is the structural conditions of inter-ethnic socialisation earlier in life. In line with the predictions of the contact hypothesis, structural opportunities for diverse socialisation, i.e. at school, are found to correspond to the interactional tendencies of individuals in diverse settings. Socioeconomic status is also shown to be among the partial determinants of individuals' interactional attitudes.

The analysis of aforementioned factors for individuals from different ethnic groups shows somewhat different trajectories to a certain category. For example, while socio-economic status was found to be more important in case of Malaysian Indians, early inter-ethnic socialisation played a central role in Malays' interactional attitudes. However, viewed from the angle of social make-up of each ethnic identity, the findings start to converge. Ethnic identities of individuals and their meanings to them vary according to their life experiences and how their identities are constructed. Certain identity elements- such as religiosity or a sense of ethnic superiority- are socially constructed as incompatible or opposite to other ethnic groups in the society.

Individuals with a high share of such identifications are more likely to feel threatened in inter-ethnic interactions and therefore develop a preference to limit such interactions, exhibiting resistant behaviour. In the absence or weakness of such identity elements, individuals are more likely to embrace diversity and interpret it as interesting and rewarding, leading to transcendent behaviour. Interestingly, transcendent individuals showed strong ethnic identities, suggesting that the abovementioned elements might be important, but not central to the construction of ethnic identities. Most individuals, however, would have different perceptions based on the situation and exhibit mixed interactional preferences, tolerating diversity in general.

## **5.2 Category introductions and distributions**

This section introduces the three categories of inter-ethnic interactional attitudes that form the overarching theme of the findings of this study and presents the distribution of each category across the interviewees' ethnicity and age lines, as well as the

diversity indices of their hometowns and the types of schools attended. The aim is to have a clear picture of the three categories as they emerged during the data collection and theorised later upon analysis before proceeding to explore each category in detail. The definitions of the categories presented here are not rigid and clear-cut, but rather subjective such that some individuals might be positioned at the point of interface of the two categories, exhibiting attitudes from both. Moreover, these categories are constructed based on individuals' attitudes and behaviour towards informal interactions upon which they had more discretion to exercise. While these attitudes have implications for formal interactions at the workplace, there are other professional and organisational factors involved in such relations as discussed Chapter 6.

During the interviews, individuals were asked about how they felt about their own and other ethnic groups and if they could attribute any positive or negative traits to these groups. The aim of this exercise was to initiate expressions of diversity attitudes from the interviewees' own frames of reference. It became clear that a minority of interviewees had little more than appraisal to say about their own ethnic group while largely subscribed to mostly-negative social stereotypes (some of the most prevalent among these stereotypes are mentioned in the 2011 Ethnic Relations Perceptions poll results published by Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research, a few of which can be found in the interview excerpts in this and the next chapter). This group saw diversity and the related matters, explicitly or implicitly, as threats and as a result limited their inter-ethnic interactions to a minimum required to do their jobs.

This meant that while they were able to communicate with co-workers of different ethnic background across formal lines, they preferred socialising with colleagues of similar ethnic backgrounds. As a result, their inner circle of trusted good friends were mostly uniformly made up of their fellow ethnic compatriots. This category is named resistant as there were clear signs of resistance to cross-boundary intermingling among these individuals. It is important to note that even in the informal interactional matters, resistance is in the form of a preference and not a rigid boundary; when intent of a particular informal activity, some of the individuals in this category could afford situational flexibility. Moreover, resistant attitudes were somewhat open to

individual modifications by virtue of length of common service or assimilative strategies of the other party.

The second category, comprising the majority of the interviewees, expressed a more balanced view regarding ethnic groups in Malaysia. For the most part, they could think of positive and negative characteristics of their ethnic group as well as the other ones. While the stereotypes were prevalent in this category as well, the views of individuals included clear elements of ethnic self-criticism. As the largest category of the spectrum, the tolerant group was also the most diverse one. It included individuals from all the three main ethnic groups as well as all age brackets, with a wide range of diversity attitudes. On the one end, it includes the individuals who harbour views similar to the resistant group, but try to be politically correct and 'get on' with others. On the other end, there are individuals who express interest in and openness to establishing close relations with people of different ethnic groups but have never had the opportunity to do so.

The researcher also found individuals in this category who had established a selective mode of interaction which preferred individuals of similar ethnic background for informal activities while favouring those from different background for work-related and formal activities. While the individuals in this category are more flexible than the resistant category and likely to have access to a more varied range of strategies in different social situations, their informal networks, subject to the temporal and interpersonal adjustments, are heavily skewed towards their own ethnic group. The views of individuals in this category on what diversity of the society means for them is a mixture of positive and negative through ambivalence, indifference, and undecidedness. Overall, this category seems to espouse the notion that diversity is a reality of life, or a burden, which needs to be respected, accepted or tolerated.

The individuals in the third category, however, show an important difference compared to the tolerant category in celebrating diversity. Like the individuals in the tolerant category, they have a more or less balanced view of their own and other ethnic groups in the society, attributing both positive and negative traits to them. However, their attitudes towards others are considerably more liberal and the issues

that were barriers for other categories seem to lose their importance here. Correspondingly, the patterns of social interaction are qualitatively different in this category such that the social networks of individuals are very heterogeneous and in some cases, their closest friends are from a different ethnic background than themselves.

Some are of the view that individuals should be seen as such and not a member of this or that ethnic group. Others saw different characteristics of other ethnic groups, and by association, individuals of those backgrounds, as opportunities to see the world from different angles not available to them as well as opportunities to learn and benefit from their strengths. In other words, the individuals in this category view diversity as an opportunity, to socialise, to understand, and to learn. From a social boundary perspective, one can figuratively think of the resistant group as the guardians of the ethnic boundaries and of the tolerant group as the content residents in those boundaries. Then, the third category would be made of individuals who live across those boundaries, their diverse social circles enabling them to frequent different spaces of the social sphere, transcending the ethnic boundaries.

The introductions above directly originate from the patterns of similarities and differences among the interviewees perceived by the research throughout the data collection process. This perception started early-on while conducting interviews at Hospital KL and continued to strengthen and crystallise throughout the process. These categories then needed to be analysed and compared in order to gain a deeper understanding of their meanings and theoretical explanations. First, the distributions of individuals in these with regards to important demographic and background factors are considered, beginning with the distribution of the categories by ethnic backgrounds, as shown in Table 5.1.



**Table 5.1 Sample distribution by category and ethnic background**

Category		Resistant	Tolerant	Transcendent	Total
Ethnic Background	Malay	3	19	5	27
	Chinese	3	4	2	9
	Indian		10	3	13
	Other		2		2
Category Total		6	35	10	51

It can be seen based on Table 5.1 that with the exception of Indians and the resistant category, the categories are represented among all ethnic groups. Next, several demographic and structural factors were found to be related to the membership of the categories. Firstly, as predicted by the contact hypothesis, the environment and the opportunities to interact with people from different backgrounds and establish a first-hand understanding of differences and similarities, especially earlier in one's life, was found to be related to the make-up of the categories. To explore this, the question 'where were you born' was corrected early in the data collection process to 'where is your hometown?' and 'where were you brought up?'

This change was necessary as some of the interviewees were born in places other than the place of residence of their families, mostly due to reasons of convenience and access to healthcare. Malaysia is a diverse country, but naturally not every city or town are diverse at the same level. There are regional differences in patterns of ethnic make-up of towns as well as differences in rural/urban areas in each region. Table 5.2 shows the diversity indices calculated for the hometowns of interviewees grouped in the three attitudinal categories.

**Table 5.2 Diversity indices of hometowns of individuals by category**

Indices		Category	Resistant	Tolerant	Transcendent
Diversity Index Brackets		0-0.20	1	2	0
		0.21-0.40	1	3	1
		0.41-0.60	2	10	0
		0.61-0.80	2	20	8
		0.81-1.00	0	0	1
Total			6	35	10
Category Mean			0.490	0.570	0.649
Corrected Category Mean			0.420	0.584	0.678

The diversity indices calculated here are based on transformation of Gini-Simpson formula (also known as Gibbs-Martin and Blau index) which equals the probability that two entities taken at random from the dataset of interest (with replacement) represent different types and is calculated as  $D = 1 - \lambda = \sum_{k=1}^n P_i^2$ ;  $P_i$  being the proportion of each ethnic group in the total population of the area.

To construct Table 5.2, the theoretical range of diversity index has been divided in 5 equal brackets and the distribution for each category is shown. Category means are calculated as averages of diversity indices of hometowns of individuals in each category. However, it was decided that 2 interviewees from resistant category and 1 from each of tolerant and transcendent categories were outliers as there was evidence of specific reasons that override the rational of a diverse environment effects and the corrected category means were calculated. These 4 cases are discussed in their respective category sections that follow. Although the membership numbers of the two extreme categories are small, the table above helps show a rough correlation between chances of earlier socialisation in an interethnic environment and interactional attitudes.

Another important factor in determining early-life socialisation chances is schooling, in the way of the diversity of the schools attended. In Malaysia, as explained earlier in the chapter on Malaysian context, the main types of schools are national type schools and vernacular Mandarin and Tamil schools. Also, convent school of the old days came out in the interviews with more senior interviewees, as well as the religious variation of national type schools. To avoid misleading presumptions, interviewees were asked not only about what type of elementary and secondary schools they attended, but also about the ethnic composition of those schools. This proved to be the right strategy as in some cases the national type school, unlike what is normally assumed, were not diverse; this mostly happened because of the ethnic composition of the area.

While not all of the interviewees had tertiary education, where applicable, same questions were also asked about the college/university attended. This was also shown to be especially important in terms of English language acquisition for national type school graduates, some of which had a particularly weak foundation in English, which happens to be the language of instruction at medical schools in Malaysia as well as the preferred language at work. Table 5.3 presents the breakdown of categories based on education types discussed. Although the number of individuals is not large enough to start making statistical inferences, the effect of attending ethnically diverse schools is apparent when comparing the transcendent and tolerant categories to the resistant category.

**Table 5.3 Schooling type attended by category**

Type <sup>7</sup> \ Category		Resistant	Tolerant	Transcendent
Primary	Mixed	2	25	9
	Monolithic	4	10	1
Secondary	Mixed	2	29	10
	Monolithic	4	6	
Tertiary	Mixed Malaysia	5	30	10
	Monolithic Malaysia		2	
	overseas	1		
	None		3	

It is also important to consider the age composition of the categories for any possible generational differences or temporal effects. To do this, the interviewee sample age range of 20-60 was divided into 4 equal brackets. However, the interviewees emphasised the importance of marriage as a change of lifestyle and social activities. Many of the interviewees would recall spending time with colleagues on a range of social activities while single. After marriage, however, the responsibilities of house-care and later of motherhood left much less time for informal activities. Scanning the marital status of the interviewees compared to age, the research found that the under-28 group were single and thus had a different set of roles and responsibilities that allowed them more freedom over their social activities. As a result, the age

<sup>7</sup> Mixed schools include national type schools, and mixed Mandarin schools in Eastern Malaysia. Monolithic schools include monolithic national type schools (in monolithic areas), MARA schools, Tamil schools, Mandarin schools, and Islamic schools.

categories in Table 5.4 were adjusted for a more meaningful representation of the life stages of the interviewees (Burt, 1991).

**Table 5.4 Age distribution by category**

Category		Resistant	Tolerant	Transcendent
Age Bracket	20-27	2	20	7
	28-40	2	8	3
	41-50	1	4	
	51-60	1	3	
Total		6	35	10

Apart from the young sample, the age distribution of the categories shows the younger composition of the transcendent category compared to the other two. Viewed in conjunction with Table 5.2, it can be suggested that young metropolitan individuals make up the majority of the transcendent category. Having established the structure of the attitudinal categories, the discussion can proceed to the analysis of each category. The next three sections of this chapter explore the dynamics of informal interactions of each of the three categories to understand the patterns and origins of their diversity attitudes.

### **5.3 The resistant category**

This section explores the characteristics of interviewees in the resistant category regarding inter-ethnic interactions, how they view other ethnic groups, and establishes a common theme among them. This category is the smallest of the three categories, comprising 6 individuals out of a total sample size of 51. Resistant individuals exhibited a positive view of their respective ethnic groups, rarely being

able to find anything negative about it. However, they did not extend the same feeling to the other ethnic groups. In a narrative that reflected societal stereotypes and social, economic, and historical grievances, they branded other ethnic groups as less capable, less intelligent, less moral, less clean or less entitled, to mention a few. In other words, they exhibited clear outgroup denigration.

The attitude towards diversity in these individuals corresponds to one emanating from viewing diversity as a threat to themselves; be it economic threat, cultural threat, or spiritual threat. They were pragmatic enough to be able to work together, as most Malaysians are perfectly capable of, but consciously kept informal interaction and socialisation to a minimum. For this category, the networks of informal interactional networks were almost uniformly made of individuals from their own ethnic background, although there were a few exceptions to this rule as will be explained. This category was limited to the interviewees from Chinese and Malay ethnic backgrounds, with resistance towards diversity in interactions appearing to have different roots among Malays and Chinese. To the Chinese, it was connected to a feeling of superiority combined with a sense of unfair treatment. To the Malays, it was a result of scarce early inter-ethnic socialisation and worries of crossing religious boundaries.

As there were no individuals of Indian ethnic background in this category, a comparative analysis with that ethnic group is not possible. However, previous research has found that Indian university students have higher degrees of multicultural awareness and flexibility (Tey *et al.*, 2009) and also that ethnic Indians exhibited the highest levels of national identity in Malaysia (Brown, 2010). This can be justified both in numerical terms as the possibility of limiting oneself to intra-ethnic relations, and in social psychological terms considering the lower status of Indians in Malaysian society and psychological benefits of embracing the overarching national identity for them. Overall, one can speculate that Malaysian Indians are less likely to experience the set of conditions that could potentially drive individuals to exhibit a resistant orientation and therefore less likely to be resistant.

Interactional orientations of individuals in this category means that presence of their ethnic peers in their work/study unit is of paramount importance to their social lives in the unit. In other words, the chances of socialisation for resistant individuals is determined by the possibility of finding someone of the same ethnic background at the same unit or one nearby. Therefore, the actual patterns of interaction would be different for the Malays and Chinese in this category. The three organisations where the data was collected had mostly similar ethnic compositions. Hospital KL employed roughly 75% Malays, 5% Chinese, 10% Indians, and 10% others. The staff in Hospital JB consisted of 86% Malays, 4% Chinese, 9% Indians, and 1% others. The exact ethnic composition of the Health College is unknown to the researcher, but judging by the composition of the course groups interviewed a similar pattern can be expected. The number of Chinese students in every group was either 1 or 2. Therefore, in each of the organisations Malays had absolute majority, while Chinese were at an absolute minority.

### **5.3.1 Resistance among Chinese**

There was a total of three Chinese interviewees who were categorised as resistant. Although this is a small number, but the similarities in attitudes are clear. The two main components of their attitudes towards others of different ethnic backgrounds are a sense of superiority and unfair treatment. These are not surprising considering the historical and current socioeconomic facts in Malaysia. It is important to note that while the Malaysian Chinese are generally known in society to be more enterprising and financially better-off than others, this certainly cannot be true as a rule. In the case of my interviewees, there is an even less such possibility as they come from lower or lower middle class backgrounds. Nursing is not a high-paid job in Malaysia and part of its attraction is the sponsorship some students receive from hospitals as well as the ease of finding employment. Therefore, the sense of superiority in the case of the Chinese interviewees here has to come from the cultural narrative prevalent in Malaysia, portraying the Chinese as rich, capable, and hard-working.

The economic background of the three respondents in this group had created the conditions that led them to perceive the government policies as unfair. Compared to their Malay compatriots of the same economic standing, they had not benefitted from the preferential policies in areas such as education and employment. This is the source of the sense of being treated unfairly. These factors together appear to have the effect of a preference to avoid interacting with individuals from different ethnic backgrounds than one's own. The twin factors of a positive identity (superiority) and anger (unfair treatment) are similar to the conditions put forward by Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin (2010) as the precursors of ethnic conflict.

Let us explore what these interviewees revealed when asked about their background, education, friends, and relation. HA1 is 60, a senior nurse in Kuala Lumpur, HA15 is 48, a unit manager in Kuala Lumpur, and HC12 is 23, a final-year student at the Health College. All of them studied at Mandarin vernacular schools, where the great majority of students are of Chinese background (the situation in Eastern Malaysia is noticeably different). Moreover, all of them come from the state of Perak, one of the states with a large Chinese population in Malaysia. Nonetheless, all three attended the national schools for their secondary schooling.

HA1 studied nursing in the UK and worked there for a number of years before returning to Malaysia on her parents' request. She talked about the UK with a degree of nostalgia and stated that she would have preferred to stay in the UK if not for the pressure from her parents. She is 'proud to be Chinese actually' because 'Chinese are hard-working and good in mathematics', evident to her by colleagues' often asking for her help with calculating dosage of medicine. Moreover, being Chinese to her is synonymous with freedom: she was not forced to get married, a luxury that her Indian and Malay associates did not have.

Part of the feeling of freedom also comes from the religious codes imposed on the Malays by the society and the law. Showing the anxiety resulting from Islamisation of the country, she said 'I tell you, to me, I don't want to convert to Muslim... it's very hard, because no freedom for the woman. You have to listen to your husband', this was narrated in the context of a Malay friend who was 'free, just like me' but forced



by her husband to wear Hijab (headscarf) after getting married. HA1's views on the non-Chinese are not as positive: 'Indians are also OK... Malays are lazy and just don't bother... and their English is not good.'

This sense of sufficiency is also shown in lingual matters. She can speak English, Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin, and Hokkien, so that 'language no problem so far... I can speak to everyone'. Relevant to the effect of lingual abilities on psychological safety of the interviewees are two internal and external factors. Firstly, as over half of the patients in these hospitals are Chinese and there's a preference or need from some of them to converse in a Chinese language, so much so that it is almost a requirement for each unit to have at least one staff who can speak Mandarin or Cantonese. This unwritten fact was confirmed by the human resources manager of Hospital JB and he went as far to say that although there are not regulations on the ethnic group of job applicants, there was a preference for Chinese-speakers.

Beyond a sense of superiority, she also has some grievances. She had to go to England to study because she was not given a place in a Malaysian university; something that she attributes to the ethnic quota system for public higher education and perceives as unfair. The sense of unfair treatment by the majority also was present at the interpersonal level:

*Malays treat their own race better...they would divide; they would prefer their own race. They don't eat our food. We call non-Halal. Even though I bring chicken, they don't eat.*

In fact, HA1 was the first person to bring the commensality issues into the discussion and then went on to link it to groupings for social activities after work (in this case, shopping and spending time together):

*We will go with the Chinese. So far they [Malays] don't go, because if we go with them, unless we eat western food, they cannot eat Chinese food.*

The interesting point is that although HA1 claims that she can and does eat Malay food, the least common denominator for them is to go to a western restaurant,

perhaps in reciprocation to the fact that 'they can't eat our food, they don't want.' Although she made an exception in that Malays can eat at a Chinese restaurant if it exclusively serves seafood, she could not remember if it ever happened in practice for her and colleagues. The resulting social landscape for her, in a Malay-majority unit is that 'they go their way, we go ours', with 'they' mainly referring to the Malays and 'we' referring to the Chinese or non-Malays.

She is the only Chinese staff member permanently connected to her unit; there is another Chinese staff member who intermittently works at this unit. She views Indians, in a pattern similar to some other individuals, as co-victims of an unjust system and therefore in a more positive light than Malays. However, there is no indication or mention of an Indian friend at work or elsewhere. Overall, HA1's social situation in her unit can be best described a psychological withdrawal. Although she is confident of her professional abilities and likes her job, she does not feel appreciated. Her best friend is another Chinese nurse who works at another hospital and whom she can trust. She does not trust her colleagues at this unit enough to share personal problems with them as she thinks they would 'go around and gossip'. It is evident that in this case, a strong ethnic identity aligned in faultline conditions with language and religion and compounded with the perception of unfair treatment leads to strong social barriers.

HA15 has studied nursing in a college from which almost half of the nurses in the hospital have graduated and has been working in the hospital for more than 20 years, so she has had ample socialisation opportunities. As of the time of the interview, she is the manager of one of the most important units of the hospital and her active and hands-on approach to management was clear since the researcher entered the unit. However, it took her 11 years to get promoted, and her perception is that the position of the unit manager was only given to her because she was more senior than the other Malay candidate. Although she believes that she is now treated fairly by the hospital management, there are other indications that she perceives unfair treatment of the Chinese in Malaysia as a whole.

Although her interpretation of being Chinese is- apart from religion and cultural practices- to respect everyone, their knowledge and thinking and forgiving people if they make mistakes, the long history of affirmative action policies has affected her view of Malays. Interestingly, she links the longstanding myth of the lazy Malay with the affirmative action policies:

*Because majority here is Malay, if the country, the government is like that, what do you expect [from] them? The government, they support Malay citizen, there are so many Malays working in government work as civil [servants] and already got their income and they got subsidy. So their mind-set will be if I'm not working hard also I earn well. So no need to spend so much time. So the culture is like this until most of them have this mind-set.*

This leads her to think of Malays working under her lacking initiative, following routines blindly, and not thinking about all the possibilities in their daily work. There is not much positive she could tell me about the Indians either: 'They are very good in talking. But [if] you really wanted them to work, you must check on them' (not good independent workers). Here again we see a person with a strong and positive ethnic identity that according to herself has been staying in the Chinese community, practicing Chinese beliefs, and has had very little meaningful socialisation with the other ethnic groups outside of work settings. The result is a resistant attitude, that as explained in the next chapter, had had negative effects on her management abilities.

The third and the youngest Chinese interviewee categorised as resistant is HC12, who is 23 and studying at the final term of a nursing diploma course at the time of the interview. She studied at a Chinese primary school and Chinese-majority (due to the area the family lives) national-type secondary school. She is extremely proud of being Chinese, particularly for historical reasons. She finds Indians 'too drastic' and Malays not punctual, but she could not think of any negative trait that she could attribute to the Chinese (however, she did manage to mention something positive about Indians and Malay). She is also the top student in the class (judged by the CGPA), which can potentially be a source of pride for a student.

The students in the course group consist of 26 Malay females, 5 Malay males, 5 Indian females and 2 Chinese females. For HC12, the other Chinese classmate is the best friend, and the roommate towards whom HC12's informal interactions are mostly channelled. They enjoy speaking together in Mandarin or reading Mandarin novels together. Her roommates consist of her best friend and two other Indian female classmates. Although she does not seem to have any acute social problems in the college, she has shunned its social life for the most part. As the top student in the class, she is usually invited for outings and cultural ceremonies by the classmates, but she 'never go[es] out of hostel.' She identifies the problem as cultural, and mostly religious. She has never invited her classmates for Chinese New Year celebrations because:

*Because of the belief. Because Chinese eat pork, then Malays don't. Most of Indians also don't. then Chinese New Year of course got that type of food.... They have sometime belief that the spoon, the things that they used to pork they cannot touch, for Malays. But for Indian they don't care.*

The same cultural barriers stop her from attending the classmates' celebrations:

*The food is the problem... I mean their lifestyle. Because I don't think I will ... food I still can accept. Because they eat beef, I rarely eat beef. And in Hari Raya time they surely have beef. And I don't know how to communicate with families of my friends.*

This is despite the fact she feels that the college and the hospitals where she is sent for practical training are not only fair, but also appreciative of her. This is not despite but because of her being Chinese, as the number of Chinese nurses in the hospitals are very low. So, although Malay nurses are welcoming and open to her, she still feels the cultural divide is too great:

*When the student would join the staff nurses when they are eating... but the feeling is not so strong. They ask: ok, let's go to eat. Something like that. But the Malay would go and join...I wouldn't eat during my*

*working hours...because wasting of time... if everyone is eating together, then nobody will be there to answer the calls...Maybe feel not so comfortable eating with them, because they will having some type of conversation, gossip, usually is gossip. I just listen, I won't talk anything.*

What we see here is that the informal communications of Malay nurses are perceived as gossip and withdrawn from, replaced by answering the calls. She verified the ethnic roots of these issues by saying that if she were a Malay, she would be more accepted among the Malays and it would be easier for her to get along with the staff. While HC12 finds the college and the training hospitals fair to her, the wider society is a different matter. The defining point of her discontent was with the quota system in public university admission, which she had personally experienced:

*Then usually, Malay will get first, before them... I mean when the result come out, most of the Malay will be selected. Because previously I have been applied for teaching, teaching courses, then, most of my friends Chinese didn't get. I don't know because of the mark or quota. Because they got quota inside the [government education]. Means how many Malay will get in, how many Chinese, how many Indians. Usually Malays will be more easier to get the government [universities].*

In HC12's case, a strong ethnic identity, limited inter-ethnic interactional opportunities, and a perception of social injustice has resulted in resistant attitudes. She shows clear signs of psychological withdrawal from the social life of the class, keeps herself busy studying and does not socialise actively with the other classmates. Her social circle is thus limited by the composition of the class to the only other Chinese classmate.

The resistant attitude of the three individuals discussed point to clear commonalities. They all have a strong ethnic identity based on a sense of superiority and in line with some of the positive social stereotypes about the Chinese. They also share the perception of unfair treatment, sometimes in the organisational life, but mostly in the larger society. Both these two factors have clear historical, and socioeconomic roots

in Malaysian society. When compounded with limited early socialisation opportunities in diverse environments, the individuals prefer to suffice to intra-ethnic relations, which in the case of the Chinese in this study, is seldom available at the organisations. Hence, they are mostly socially-isolated and withdrawn from the group informal activities.

### 5.3.2 Resistance among Malays

There was a total of 3 interviewees who identified as Malays and exhibited diversity-resistant behavioural attitudes. In all three cases, there was a common structural factor in the relative absence of earlier opportunities for inter-ethnic socialisation. Malays, as the largest ethnic group by population in Malaysia, have higher chances of social exclusion e.g. in rural areas and in many Malay-majority cities. This is not possible for Indians except in a number of plantation communities, from which there was no interviewee in the sample. For the Malaysian Chinese, there is possibility of relative structural ethnic isolation in certain areas, notably urban areas of the northern state of Penang. Again, there was no interviewee from this state in the sample and therefore a judgement if not possible.

Of the Malays in this category, two come from hometowns which are on the lower side of ethnic diversity by Malaysian standards, where Malays constituted 77% and 92.4% of the local population. Moreover, both have studied in Malay-only secondary schools. The third person in this category, a 21-year old male final-year student of nursing (HC14), was brought up in Kuala Lumpur, which is considerably more diverse than the hometown of the two other interviewees. However, he attended an Islamic primary school, an Islamic boarding secondary school, and two final years of secondary school at Saudi Arabia. As a result, while he has had the possibility of interethnic socialisation to a certain degree, his chances of contact with people of other faith backgrounds has been very limited. He was also very frank on his views on 'race' matters:

*[Chinese] they are rude... they are so racist. For me, I think everybody is racist.*

Trying to probe further, when the interviewer asked him if he himself was racist, he responded in an affirmative way, going on to reciprocating with the same question. Although he could find positive and negative points to mention about Malays, Chinese, and Indians, his social circle is decidedly uniform. He has chosen his roommates to be Malays, he studies together with his Malay friends, and he spends his free time with them. Finally, he has never been to a Chinese New Year, or a Deepawali (Indian celebration), and does not intend to do so. He provided a comprehensive view on why he avoids attending Chinese New Year and Deepawali celebrations of the Chinese and Indian classmates. This is despite the fact that his paternal grandmother is Chinese. Considering the religious requirements of intermarriage in Malaysia and the significance of religion in his family, one can safely rule out the influence of hybridity. The following exchange portrays the commensality barriers from his view:

[Interviewer: Do your Chinese classmates invite you for Chinese New Year?]

HC14: *I think they know that if they invite, they have alcohol, something like that, so they don't invite. I think so. I mean like for religion issues, right?*

[Interviewer: But you don't have to drink, do you?]

HC14: *What about the... they cook pork, sometimes. So rather than that, if they invite, I will say no, sorry.*

[Interviewer: What if they cook two types of food: one with meat and one without met, only vegetables?]

HC14: *[laughing] but I love meat.*

[Interviewer: What if they cook chicken?]

HC14: *If they cook chicken, what about the slaughtering? Sometimes Chinese they have chicken sourced from the Chinese also, so no bismillah [in the name of God], no...*

Here, one could see the religious barrier to commensality in full force. Not only alcohol and pork are mentioned as issues, but also the religious slaughter of the meat comes to the fore. The only instance when he welcomes interethnic interaction is in playing

football, admittedly because of the very low number of people interested in playing it at the college. This is interesting because it shows that in the structural absence of more preferable playmates, even the resistant attitudes could be temporarily suspended or modified to the more tolerant ones. Of course, this is possible in instances where the basic identity tenets are not threatened, as in this case playing football does not trespass upon religious or cultural barriers. This is also in line with the Malaysian pragmatism that enables the society and organisations to function despite deep divisions.

Compared to HC12, who was discussed in the previous sub-section and is a classmate, HC14 has less trouble in the social sphere in the college or in the hospitals. His best friends are two other Malay male classmates with whom he also shares a room. They also attend the prayers together. During lunch time, he is part of a group of 2 Malay boys and 2 Malay girls who eat together. Even in study matters, he tries not to 'disturb' the Chinese and ask the Malays, because he can relate to them. The strong religious element of HC12's ethnic identity and the lack of prior inter-ethnic socialisation drive his resistant attitude towards diversity. However, although his relations are decidedly limited to 'my fellow friends, my Malay friends', the ethnic composition of his group means that he has ample opportunities for social interaction on his preferential terms.

The two other Malay interviewees in this category were more cautious with their words, but not meaningfully different in attitudes. HB9 is a soft-spoken senior midwife and mother of three and an established figure in her unit where she has been working for more than 13 years, who defines being a Malay as politeness, having good manners, and respecting others. She comes from a town with the diversity index of 0.387, a relatively low index for Malaysia, in which Malays are the majority with 77% of the population. She has had a mixed primary, but Malay-only secondary schooling experience. While she declined to pass any positive or negative comment about Indians, her views on the Chinese were clear: 'They are all very rich and all never share with us economic part.'

Clearly, this perception has its roots in the divide and rule policies of old which channelled economic grievances into ethnic lines, diluting class divisions. Her best



friend is a Malay female nurse, from another unit, with whom she has been friends since college days. Her social circle is almost entirely made of Malay friends and colleagues, with one exception being a Chinese colleague (HB10) who has chosen to assimilate among the Malay colleagues and accept their culture. As a result of this flexibility, HB8 has modified her negative views, established a degree of friendly relations, and attends the Chinese colleague's new year celebrations. Her explanation shows the of religious commensality barriers:

*Maybe she know our... [she is] more sensitive about the Malay or Muslim culture, she didn't cook or if she invite us to house she didn't cook or what... she will buy order some food from our friend here... so if we go to, we more confident to eat the food because she order the any food from Muslim friend.*

It is interesting to see that general attitudinal orientations are subject to situational changes. The presence of a transcendent colleague has adjusted HB9's views in the specific case of interaction with this colleague. Nonetheless, this trust does not extend beyond this specific case:

*If Indian, they normally she... they all will cook curry... we also eat but sometime we didn't ... err... for Muslim we not sure the maybe the ... spoon or what... so that's why normally Indian we didn't go.*

She is also quite concerned with following the religious code of conduct and went on to ask the researcher whether he was a Muslim, a question that was also asked by the student previously mentioned, HC14. Together with other mentions of religious issues, this shows the level of importance of religion to these individuals. Notwithstanding, she did not face much pressure to be flexible in her views. She was born and raised in a Malay-majority area, attended schools where students were almost entirely Malays, and now the workplace is not much different in that regard. The overwhelming numerical majority of Malays in her unit does not necessitate much flexibility on her side.

She views Malays as the social glue of the Malaysian society as 'Malays can bring Chinese and Indians together', reminiscent of the prevalent narrative of Malays as the hosts in Malaysia. nonetheless, she does not seem to intend to, be prepared to, or even need to play that role. A strong religious ethnic identity has guided her through different life stages in largely monolithic environments, where she has not been challenged to make cultural adjustments. And as her workplace provide ample opportunities for social relations without demanding a significant adjustment, she does not have relational problems there and can actually choose to socialise more with someone she has known for a longer time.

Finally, HB12 is a young Malay therapist who comes from Kota Baru, the capital of state of Kelantan, known for being the most Islamic (as per the party controlling the state and the Islamic laws governing) state in Malaysia. Although she attended national primary and secondary schools, there was little inter-ethnic contact as the per Malay population share of 92.4%. Moreover, the last two years of her secondary schooling was at a special Malay-only Mara school. Doing a degree at one of the main public universities in Malaysia does not seem to have changed her attitude towards diversity. Neither has the fact that her husband's mother is Chinese<sup>8</sup> and they attend Chinese New Year celebrations out of respect.

She finds Chinese 'not sentimental... not very close, not generous... When they are dealing with people, they are very strict... Also stingy.' She also finds Indians 'they are harsh. On the road, public area, stuff like that.' While HB12 cites Malay religion and culture as the positive sides of Malayness, of which she is very proud, she reports a moderate level of allegiance to her ethnic group. Moreover, she could roundly criticise Malays for being scared to start businesses and not taking risks (she also runs an online kitchen utensil business herself).

Her social relations at work should be viewed in the light of the fact that she had moved to this city and hospital 10 months before the interview and had not had enough time to integrate in the unit. The unit staff included female and male Malays

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<sup>8</sup> In this case, as per Malaysian family law, the mother-in-law would have converted to Islam to marry in a Muslim family.

and a male Indian. She goes to lunch with any colleague based on availability, although she prefers female colleagues. And although she also uses social media to keep in touch with colleagues, she does not have a trusted friend at the hospital. The individualistic nature of her job in delivering therapy to patients also requires less communication with colleagues compared to the nurses, and that communicating is mostly done through written case reports.

Overall, HB12 was a difficult case to categorise and can be considered a resistant-tolerant boundary case. Her moderate level of ethnic allegiance and being able to self-criticise are in line with the characteristics of the tolerant category. Her short length of service and her gendered socialisation preference also means that the researcher cannot draw clear conclusions based on her actual workplace relations. Her categorisation as resistant and not tolerant is mainly justified by her view of her Chinese connections as a burden, which she would be happy to see reduced. Overall, her case is one of growing up in a culturally uniform environment, feeling comfortable in it, and having no intention of changing that.

In conclusion, it seems that there are two factors that lead to resistant attitudes among Malays. Firstly, the structural opportunity of early life socialisation in an ethnically diverse environment is severely limited in certain geographical locations in Malaysia. The later work or study experiences do not seem to radically change this. Although this can theoretically apply to any person from any ethnic background, it is much more probable for Malays and to a less extent Chinese than Indians. Due to the numerical majority, there are many regions in Malaysia where Malays are the absolute majority, in effect having little chance to socialise and know other ethnic groups.

Secondly, the increasing role of religion in the social life of Malaysians has the effect of limiting the willingness of Malays to have social interactions with people from different religious backgrounds. A major part of this has to do with the religious limitations on food consumption. It can be said that to avoid crossing the boundaries of religious inhibitions (or being thought of as doing so), Malays prefer to limit their inter-ethnic social interactions. As Malays are legally defined as Muslims, this applies to all of them to a degree. With these two factors put together, the religious symbolic

boundaries morph into more rigid social boundaries which are only occasionally challenged and rarely crossed.

Based on the review of the organisational interactions of the individuals in the resistant category, it can be concluded that these interactions are greatly monolithic with regards to ethnicity. For individuals from the ethnic group with a considerable numerical majority, this does not limit their abilities to interact and socialise at work. The Malay resistant individuals used sub-grouping based on factors such as gender and prior acquaintance. On the other hand, for the individuals from the ethnic group with the absolute numerical minority, these attitudes severely limit their social network. In the absence of an ethnic peer, they choose to social isolation and withdrawal from the social life of the unit. In the presence of an ethnic peer, all social relations are channelled in the direction of that person. There are exceptions to these patterns, however, such as in the presence of assimilative behaviour of another individual or a personal desire to participate in certain activities. The next section explores the interactional attitudes of the common middle ground, the tolerant category.

#### **5.4 The tolerant category**

This is the largest attitudinal category, comprising 35 of 51 interviewees. It also represents the pragmatic middle ground. Not surprisingly, this category is the one with the most variety of individual backgrounds and views. Some tolerated diversity because they had to in order to be able to work in their environment; being pragmatic in other words. Some others were ambivalent about diversity, choosing different company in different activities. Moreover, nearly half of this category were individuals with a degree of hybridity<sup>9</sup>. While most of interviewees in this category found positive and negative aspects to associate with ethnic groups, for the most part they neither resisted nor cherished diversity; they tolerated it.

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<sup>9</sup> The definition and operationalisation of hybridity in this research is explained in the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter.

This is the pragmatic position on which Malaysia was founded and it should come as no surprise that most of the interviewees, especially the senior ones, fell into this category. While compared to the resistant individuals, the tolerant ones generally have more interaction with persons of different ethnic backgrounds, these interactions generally remain at the surface level unless the passage of considerable time manages to forge meaningful relationships. Due to the variety of factors involved in tolerant attitudes, this section is organised into four sub-sections. Firstly, as 16 of 35 individuals in the tolerant category had hybrid ethnic identities, the tolerant attitudes explored in conjunction with the issue of hybridity.

Then the concept of ambivalence as simultaneously preferring an ethnic group for certain reasons and avoiding it for some other reasons is discussed in the context of tolerant attitudes. This is followed by a discussion on the temporal effects on shaping tolerant attitudes as some individuals develop the flexibilities needed for amicable relations in diverse environments or just to get along with others. Finally, the perception of unfair treatment is shown to be related to a kind of tolerant attitude that is based on common grievances among the Chinese and Indians. Perceptions of systemic injustice to 'immigrant' communities help bring them closer while takes them further apart from the Malays.

#### **5.4.1 Hybrid identities**

The definition of hybridity in this research goes beyond mixed parentage and is linked to the nature of a faultline society. As discussed in the third chapter, the main social divisions in Malaysia are ethno-religious ones. Moreover, the concept of bumiputera is also important as it indicates having native roots. Considering the realities of Malaysian society and the social make-up of its ethnic identities, a measure of hybridity is constructed in this study that recognises parents of different backgrounds as well as religious affiliations going beyond the social norms of Muslim Malay/Hindu or Sikh Indian/Buddhist-Taoist Chinese. In the case of bumiputeras, mentioning a parent or grandparent of non-Malaysian origin also grants the person hybridity.

Overall, hybridity in this research means any possible avenues to cross social ethnic boundaries as a result of one’s ethnic, religious, and origin background.

Applying this definition of hybridity, there are a total of 18 hybrid-identity individuals in the sample. Sixteen of these are in the tolerant category, other 2 divided equally among other categories. If hybridity was simply defined as mixed parentage, the sample would include a total 7 such individuals. Out of 7, 4 carry the official ethnicity of Malay, 1 Chinese, and 2 others. These 7 individuals are all in the tolerant category. However, the researcher believes that considering the importance of faultlines concept and ethnic identification of individuals in this research, the wider definition of hybridity suggested would be more meaningful. Table 5.5 show the age distribution of individuals with hybrid ethnic identification, which is clearly skewed towards younger age brackets.

**Table 5.5 Hybrid ethnic identification by age brackets**

Age \ Category		Resistant	Tolerant	Transcendent
Age Bracket	20-27	1	11	1
	28-40		4	
	41-50		0	
	51-60		1	

The eldest interviewee in this category, HA3, is 68 and of a mixed Anglo-Indian/Chinese heritage and takes a completely neutral position towards ethnic issues in the country. Officially, he is considered a Eurasian in Malaysia, a sub-category of ‘other’ ethnic group. His identity, however, is centred around his British heritage, love of tea, and being a Roman Catholic. Although because of his facial features, HA3 is identified by some people as an Indian, hybridity has placed him outside the ethnic groupings in Malaysia. As he has ties to Indians and Chinese, he seems to balance

those affiliations by thinking positively of Malays. Overall, his multi-faceted ethnic background has led to a kind of neutrality that gets along with everyone at work, but doesn't develop strong ties with colleagues.

HC11 is a final-year student, 20 and although of mixed Chinese/Filipino background, although identifies as Chinese. With a moderate ethnic allegiance, she is proud of being Chinese because of the freedoms and history associated with this group:

*Chinese, first I can learn a lot of language. And for me, Chinese, if you compare with other races, I think Chinese and Indian is more open about everything, rather than Muslim friends. So I like Chinese and we have our own culture which dates back long ago, I'm very proud.*

She has relatively balanced (positive as well as negative) views on the other ethnic groups and is a member of a friendship group with 4 Malay female students and an Indian Muslim female classmate. When the group eat together, they have Mamak (Indian Muslim) food. Similar to HA3, HC11 does not have a best friend among classmates and as the top student of the class, is very task-focused. But at the same time, she reports being curious about cultural differences with the other ethnic groups and asking her friends about them. Nonetheless, she thinks that Indians like to stick together and that Malays will only approach her when they need her and otherwise would leave her aside. Coming from a city where Chinese have a slight majority over Malay, and having studied at Mandarin primary and secondary schools, she does not have a minority identity, but at the same time is not well-versed in inter-ethnic interactions and thus it seems that her curiosity is being offset by her pessimism and caution.

The only person of Chinese/Malay parentage in the sample, HC16, is slightly different in that she does have a best friend among the classmates and that is a Malay girl. This is in line with her chosen ethnic identity of a Malay. Further evidence for the precedence of Malay to Chinese identity for her came in the form of the notion that although her mother is Chinese, but she is '*already Muslim*', so as to play down the effect of being Chinese. This is not a big surprise because she is from a northern

Malaysian town where 95.5% of the population are of Malay background and the religious notions are abundant in her expressions of identity.

Nevertheless, the hybridity in the family meant that her younger sister attended a Chinese school. HC16 can speak some Mandarin herself as she has worked in a Chinese nursery before and had regular interaction with Chinese people there. With a moderate level of ethnic allegiance and fairly stereotypical views of Indians and Chinese, she is relatively positive towards diversity, though more open to Chinese than Indians. As there are no Chinese students in her class, her social relations are limited to some Malay classmates.

Another noteworthy example is HA23, a 30-year-old female nurse from East Malaysia with a Portuguese-Iban<sup>10</sup> father and a Chinese mother. She has constructed her ethnic identity based on the paternal Iban side as per rarity of it and the freedom it affords her because of relative lack of cultural restrictions and taboos. Her best friend at work is also Iban from Sarawak, but works in another unit of the same hospital. However, she also has Chinese and Malay friends at work. This is explicable as she shares ethnic links with the Chinese, and official status with the Malays as bumiputeras. She hasn't had much contact with Indians, and unsurprisingly, she does not have a positive view on them.

So far it appears that mixed parentage provides a structural possibility for individuals to be open to more ethnic groups and form friendships with them. However, it happens only at the level of secondary friendships. In the case of best friends (the most trusted ones), all but one of the tolerant individuals with hybrid ethnic identity have made choices based on their more salient ethnic identity. However, the hybridity seems to keep the door open to other ethnic groups. HC15 is a Malay student with some distant Chinese heritage and has a Chinese best friend. Nonetheless, the willingness and ability of that friend to appreciate and assimilate in Malay culture seems to have been a determining factor. The mentioned friend is in a relationship

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<sup>10</sup> Ibans are one of the major ethnic groups in Sarawak, Eastern Malaysia.



with a Malay male classmate and together with HC15 and her boyfriend, make a cohesive group.

There are two cases of hybridity via religion. HB4 is a junior nurse, Indian and Muslim and has been brought up in a Muslim family who had assimilated in the Malay culture and speak Malay language at home. Religion seems to have replaced ethnicity in this case and her inner circle of friends is made up of Malay colleagues. Interestingly, she is more positive towards Chinese than Indians, but the social relations are uniformly Malay. It is interesting that as an Indian Muslim, she has adapted her dietary ways far from Indians and towards Malays: 'No Indian restaurant. I don't like Indian food. I prefer to eat Malay food, but I like to eat Chinese food.' She then went on to give the interviewer the address of a Chinese halal restaurant.

HB15 is also a junior nurse, born and brought up in an Indian Hindu family and converted to Christianity later. She equates ethnicity and religion, seeing herself as ethnically Christian. Her best friend is a Christian Chindian (mixed Chinese and Indian) colleague with whom HB15 has had early interaction since she was a nursing student. As a Christian, she does not have a problem with beef (present in many Malay foods), but still steers away from inviting Malay colleagues over because 'some of them query about the food, whether is halal or not.' This is a reference to the burden of working out commensality between Malays and non-Malays.

A less obvious level of hybridity can be found in the form of ancestral connections with culturally close neighbouring countries. For example, it is an established fact that a considerable portion of the Malay population in Malaysia have Indonesian ethnic origins, such as Javanese and Bugis. However, this is usually not seen as a mixed background because of religious and cultural similarities between those groups and Malays. Nonetheless, when an individual perceives her/himself as 'mostly Malay' because their father is from Indonesia or 'Malay but with Javanese grandparents', they allow themselves a degree of freedom from ethnic purity and that seems to translate into a moderate degree of openness towards other ethnic groups, which can narrow social boundaries. A case in point is HC10, a Malay physiotherapy student who attends Chinese New Year celebrations, but would only eat peanuts and oranges, informing

the hosts that 'we didn't eat what they cook, because we afraid that their plates or equipment to cook mixed with non-halal...'

Finally, HA2 is a good showcase for an ambivalent hybrid identity. She is 29, has worked in her unit since graduation 7 years prior to the interview and identifies as Malay, mainly because of her official ethnicity. Her mother is Malay and of Bugis (Indonesian) background and her father is Mamak. She exhibits low ethnic allegiance and religiosity. Her hybrid ethnic identity helps her see people more as individuals and less via their ethnic backgrounds. However, although she is willing to think positively of other ethnic groups, her limited contact with them has resulted in persistence of some negative stereotypes. For example, she views Indians as having good verbal abilities, but interprets these abilities as the potential to twist the truth and therefore she can't really trust them. On the other hand, she is open enough to attend an Indian colleague's celebrations and partake in the food:

*One [of the colleagues] is Indian Hindu... so she came back she said come to my place, all eat Halal, so we're OK. And in Hari Raya, went to my place, my mom cooked special food, they came over.*

One can notice that while religious food barriers are present here, she does have enough trust in the Indian colleague to take her word for the suitability of the food. And clearly, her good gesture is reciprocated. In fact, she had had a good Indian friend at work with whom she worked for a number of years and developed very good relations. With the departure of the mentioned friend to work in Saudi Arabia, HA2's current social circle consists of a bowling group made up of Malay colleagues from different units. One of these friends is also her best friend at work and her lunch partner. This is case of blurred boundaries between the three categories; her attitude can be thought of as the point of interface of tolerant and transcendent category. However, while she shows signs of ability to interact across ethnic boundaries, she doesn't make many efforts to do so and that's why she is categorised as tolerant.

It can be concluded that hybridity narrows the ethnic divide by providing structural opportunities as well as psychological space for individuals to be more open towards other ethnic groups. However, hybridity is not very effective in overcoming the

religious barriers to interaction. This was to be expected as a result of the exclusivist nature of (mainly Abrahamic) religions. In other words, hybridity in ethnic background of the family rarely translates into hybridity in the religion(s) practiced in that family.

#### 5.4.2 Ambivalence

A significant number of individuals in the tolerant category exhibited decidedly tolerant behaviour. For some, this simply meant to get along with others at work. To others, it took the form of picking and choosing their company for different activities. This behaviour is not incongruous with the hybridity argument as some individuals might choose to form or accept a hybrid identity while others prefer to overlook it. Pragmatic tolerance in the way of accepting differences and building on similarities has deep historical roots in Malay cosmopolitanism (Hoffstaedter, 2011). This subsection looks at the interactional strategies of tolerant individuals which emanate from their ambivalent views on other ethnic groups.

A good example of making conscious decisions about one's social interactions is the case of HC15, a 21-year-old final-year Malay student of nursing. While she enjoys Malay company at lunch, she prefers the working style of others, therefore:

*I have different groups [for] when I want to eat and I want to study. When I want to eat, I like to mingle with Malay friends, because they are more [sensitive] about our culture and like that, but if I want to study, our group assignment and all that, I will prefer to Chinese and Indians group... because the way how they do their work and they are more responsible.*

Similarly, HC9 is 21, female, Malay, and a last-year physiotherapy student who has the experience of working as a nursery teacher where most of the teachers were Chinese or Indian. She appreciates the open-mindedness of Chinese and according to herself, feel jealous of the lingual abilities of Indians as well as the Chinese. She is planning to learn Mandarin and because of that she has joined the friendship group with the only Chinese classmate. Nonetheless, even though she reports finding Chinese staff the

most helpful during her clinical postings at the hospitals, concerns about the food and more broadly cultural understanding has left her cautious about deeper inter-ethnic relations, and this is despite her moderate ethnic allegiance and positive views on other ethnic groups.

Another Malay person who prefers to work with the Chinese is HA16, a female Malay junior nurse who has the experience of working for a Chinese-owned banqueting company for a few months before entering college. She narrated the positive experience as:

*I've been working before this under Chinese ...before continuing my study, for a few months. Working at banqueting at convention centre...and I can see how they treat us, they want us to be with them, working with them, and they treat us like fairly. That's why I prefer to be working with Chinese, not Malay. Because Malay, if I compare, they are more like ... they like you they like you, they don't like you...*

However, although she likes working with the Chinese because of their professional attitude towards work, both her close friends are Malays, which would at least partially be explained by the fact that: 'I don't like how their lifestyle, because for me they are poor hygienic.' Both of HA16's attitudes towards Malays and the Chinese are in line with the social stereotypes. However, no matter how close her perceptions are to reality, she employs a pragmatic approach from an ambivalent position in order to secure advantages both socially and at work.

In relation to Indians, HA16 sees the only problem as her feeling of discomfort when her colleagues converse in Tamil in her presence, which she does not comprehend. Apart from that, she shares lunch and some weekend activities with Indian colleagues. This is partly enabled by the fact that her Indian colleagues 'they also have studied at national school, and know that Malays eat beef', and so do not have a problem with beef at their table. As HA16 and a number of other Malay colleagues do eat at Indian restaurants with Indian colleagues once in a while, it can be said that the commensality barrier between Malays and Indians is not as great as it is between Malays and Chinese.

Another case of Malay ambivalence towards the Chinese can be seen with HC10, a Malay physiotherapy student who at secondary school was part of a class for high-achiever students:

*In my class, we have 40 people, most of them are Chinese. The higher rate students in the school are put in one class, and that class are mostly Chinese because we know that they are more intelligent than Malay...normally with the top students is Chinese...That's why I learnt Mandarin.*

However, she is also concerned about the cleanliness of her Chinese friends and as a result, although there is a Chinese girl in her friendship group, there is a certain limit to their interactions and her best and most trusted friend is another Malay female classmate. It should be noted that this cleanliness concern is less about health worries and more on spiritual purity and contamination fears, of which the pork gap is a prominent example.

Finally, another member of the same group, HC7, a Malay physiotherapy student, tries to fight the myth of the lazy Malay and prove to be as intelligent as the Chinese, while acknowledging another positive stereotype about them, being hardworking:

*for me, they [the Chinese] are not too smart, but their effort is more than Malay. The Malay person, they are smart, but they are too lazy. Something they will tell ok.... Never mind...late later. But Chinese, one of my friends is Chinese, my classmate only one girl Chinese girl, after we going back form class, she study study study until night. Even she didn't change their uniform yet. Study study and we Malay girls, what's wrong with her?! Why don't even change your clothes first and later you study? But she don't want. She said she must study, and she is one of the student 4 flat from the Sem 1 until now. So for me, Chinese is their effort is more.*

Counteracting this appreciation is the religious divide:

*maybe because they don't know how Islam, how we Islam we ermmm, we do our culture, so they don't know. Why you have to explain to her, so ... I don't mind, I just explain to her, so I think not good, maybe certain of them not ...rude, not all, sometimes.*

And the religious discomfort extends to Indians as well:

*Indian for me, because I have three person with us, polite, very shy, smart, and they not so busy body as Malay. They love to let go [easy-going], [however,] their culture, sometime their religion, every religion have their own [prayers], so maybe their prayers sometimes [make] uncomfortable others [like burning incense].*

Overall, while HC7 showed positive overall inter-ethnic views, her strong ethnic allegiance, embedded with religious barriers, meant that she did prefer a Malay social network. In a display of ethno-religious nature of faultlines in Malaysia, she went on to correct the interviewer, who suggested that a Mamak restaurant, their favourite eatery, is a type of Indian restaurant: 'No, not in here...actually Mamak is not Indian restaurant. Is the Indian Muslim, that is Islam also.'

It should be clear by this point that the type of ambivalent attitude observed here is seen among the Malay interviewees and is centred around the theme of appreciating the abilities and work ethics of the Chinese and Indians and at the same time assigning a degree of cleanliness or cultural understanding that is lower than or incompatible with that of Malays. Both sides of this equation show traces of societal stereotypes and entrenched social boundaries. While there is no theoretical reason why this phenomenon would be limited to Malay, the character of religious limitations for them compared to other ethnic groups in Malaysia as well as ease of sufficing to intra-ethnic relations for them could partially explain it. Moreover, it can be seen that such examples are centred around younger Malay respondents. Could it be that passage of time in the shape of common service or even life experiences modify interactional attitudes of individuals? This is a point that the next sub-section aims to discuss.

### 5.4.3 Time matters

A number of organisational scholars have suggested that the passage of time moderates the effects of relational demography in groups (Harrison et al., 1998, Sacco and Schmitt, 2005). In line with this, the researcher analysed the data for evidence of temporal effects in this study, which as for the cross-sectional design of the research, can only be done based on age and service length of interviewees. Firstly, there was evidence that experience of working in diverse settings enabled certain flexibilities in dealing with the religious social boundaries.

For example, HB14 is a 50-year-old Malay assistant nurse who has been working for 28 years and is the most senior staff member at the unit. She has a very strong ethnic allegiance and is also fairly religious. The views she expressed on ethnic characteristics were also very conservative and somewhere in the lines of 'every group have good and bad'. However, being known as the mother of the ward, she attends the new year celebrations of her Indian and Chinese colleagues, where she only eats fruits and cake. In this case, the pork gap has been narrowed down to a level that allows a minimum level of commensality. This modification also extends to outings with colleagues when in the presence of Chinese or Indian one, the group choose McDonalds or KFC.

These types of adjustments are usually limited to the codes and restrictions associated with the Malays, and these restrictions are understood and respected by the others. However, at the edges of the tolerance spectrum, there are reciprocations such as the case with HB3, a 45-year-old senior Malay nurse:

[To release tension, she sometimes goes shopping with colleagues]  
*...lunch with juniors at [Name] restaurant for beef soup. Usually younger ones, mostly Malay, but sometimes Indians as well. Normally I'm not order beef if with them...I respect them religious and cultures.*

She has been working in this hospital for 23 years as a care assistant, assistant nurse, nurse, and a senior nurse and is the most senior staff member at her unit based on years of service. She has a strong sense of ethnic and religious belonging, but at the same time is very pragmatic. Interestingly, she stated that if she was Chinese, she would work in Singapore, where should earn more as a nurse; something that she

cannot actually do because, according to her, nurses are not allowed to cover their her in Singapore. All in all, while she does not have a very good friend at work and prefers to keep private issues to her family, she has developed a way of getting along with everyone.

The case of HB7 is similar: she is 39 and has been working in the hospital for 19 years, 16 years of which has been in the present unit as a midwife. She has a strong sense of ethnic belonging, but has been to a Christian school for secondary schooling, where she had many Indian friends, which would have the effect of simulating diversity under equal conditions. Now, she is the very busy mother of 5 children who lives 20km from work and does not have much free time for socialisation after working hours. She suffices to exchanging food recipes with colleagues, including a Chinese one, and attending their new year celebrations from time to time. She is happy to simply get along with others; tolerance in this case means amicable but not deep relationships, finding points of agreement or interest with some colleagues, and being OK with most.

Even with sufficient time to socialise, some individual choose to separate work and informal activities into different spheres. HB16, 33, is the only Chinese nurse in her unit, and with 10 years of experience, feels settled there. She was sent to this unit because they needed a Mandarin-speaking staff member, so psychologically at least, she seems to enjoy a privileged position. She feels a strong belonging to the Chinese ethnic group, which has afforded her freedom of and from religion, as she does not adhere to any. However, even though she is single and does spend time on social activities, she tries to keep some distance from the other colleagues, while still being somewhat active through attending the occasional lunch with them and through Facebook. Her informal activities are mostly directed towards her friendship group outside the workplace. Even playing volleyball with an otherwise all-Malay team at the hospital does not change that: 'I won't share anything with them. Just ask when is the next training.'

Finally, HA9 is 54 and has worked as care assistant for 30 years, 24 years of which has been at Hospital KL. She has a very good and trusted friend in her hometown who is a Malay and they have known each other for many years since they attended convent



school in early 70s. in her view, 'the convent school generation' had better inter-ethnic relations among them and mixed together, but the younger generations tend to keep to their own ethnic group. Her closest friend at work now is a junior Indian colleague, which better understands the Indian married life stories. Overall, 'home is home, work is work' is her rule, which is broken only by old friendships and cultural homophily.

What we see in the case of last two interviewees is that length of service and experience appear to enable one to make small compromises in order to enjoy more positive relationships at a diverse workplace. Whether it is a result of the length or breadth or one's experiences, the majority of the interviewees were able to get along with their colleagues of different backgrounds and maintain a level of harmony without the need to significantly alter their social ways or challenge the social norms. Their stories, however, show the difficulty of these relations in replacing ethnic ties when religious, cultural and lingual, and sometimes experiential commonalities are superimposed.

For example, Hari Raya (Malay New Year) celebrations, weddings, and cooking together bring Malays together in a potent way. For tolerant Malays, inter-ethnic interactions normally occur at the level of greetings, an occasional cup of coffee, or working together at organisational occasions whereas at the level of a trusting relationship, ethnic ties become more important. For instance, HA8, a Malay senior midwife, in case of needing consultation, would turn to:

*...my family, with my daughter, want some opinion. Older than me, my senior, they have families, daughters, also Malay... Normally, I prefer Malay...because I'm Malay also. Ok? Yes. Cultures are close. If general problem, Malay, Malay.*

And it seems that this feeling does not depend on any form of outgroup bias. Putting more clearly:

*Prefer Malay, easy to communicate. [Although others can speak Malay language], but more comfortable [with Malays]. Think the chemistry lah, the chemistry to our own culture. I prefer my culture, my race lah,*

*Melayu. Not hate Chinese...Just prefer to the Malay. Because our culture is different, right? If time for solat (daily prayers), we can solat together. It's more comfortable lah.*

The theme of cultural chemistry is present across most of the interviews with mentions of Hari Raya, Korban (both religious celebrations), going to prayers together and attending religious talks by the clergy making it clear that cultural and religious solidarity is a fundamental issue in informal interactions. However, among non-Malays, partially due to diversity, and freedom, of religion and culture, this type of cultural chemistry isn't as strong. However, a commonality of a different nature seems to bring together individuals who do feel unfairly treated by a society that prioritises bumiputera rights and culture over that of other communities. The following section discusses this theme.

#### **5.4.4 Common grievances**

When discussing the resistant group, it was found that none of the interviewees who identified as Indians did not fall under that category. However, the perception of unfair treatment was clear and prevalent among some of them and although it had not led to resistant attitudes, it seemed to be the main gripe on the way of more openness towards others and especially towards Malays. For example, HC4, an Indian student of pharmacy, had grievances regarding the educational as well as the career opportunities given to Malays:

*Our PM offer more scholarship to Malay students, they offer the government universities to 90% to bumiputera means Malays, and 10% non-Muslims.*

*In work, depends on the race I think. If Malays, maybe this is Malaysia because, they give more opportunities to Malays. I think so, that's my perception. So for Malay race, they give let's say if their point is 3.0 also they might get work, in government and all that. But Indians and Chinese, we have to struggle. At least we have to 3.5, 3.6 to get job.*

While the researcher does not have a way of assuring the truth value of these claims, they are very real to the people perceiving them. This unhappiness also extends to the increasing role of religion in the society and the personal experiences of it:

*I think Malays always talking about their religion to other religion peoples, like their religion is like this, it's better, and all that. So we disagree with that. It's your culture, it's up to you. Whether it's good or not. You believe your culture is ok, that's right? No need to come and tell us to go do this lah. For example, here in Mecca God did this, that. Our religion is that because our religion came first, like that.*

This is obviously perceived as attacks on one's social identity and the resulting lack of psychological safety leads to certain relational preferences:

*Compared to Malays, I like Chinese. For example, if we talk about religion, they believe in their religion, they not force others. They religion Buddha, ok, fine, Buddha. They won't talk about Muslim, they won't about Indians, like that.*

As a result, while she has not attended a Malay new year celebration since she finished secondary school, she regularly attends Chinese New Year celebrations of her Chinese friends. Among the college students, HC4, an Indian student, is in a friendship group of 4 roommates, all Indians. dissatisfaction with the status quo was also apparent in HA17's statements:

*I planned to buy a house... When I [was] small I don't know anything about this, anything about politics. When I grow up and want to get a house, even you have bumiputera, bumiputera is the Muslim, you get free. Free deposit, they have land for bumiputeras only. Bumiputera is for Muslims, I mean for Malays. Not for Indians or Chinese. And here we work very hard to get those things, to get earn money and easily goes to Malays. House, everything, even your personal loans...*

Another young Indian nurse shares the same grievance, and while maintains a medium level of informal interactions with the colleagues, including having lunch together,

reserves her deeper relations for her housemates, both of whom are Indians. She can discuss most matters with them, even politics, and have arguments with them, something that she doesn't think she can do with her colleagues. It should be clear by now that these gripes are systemic and results of macro-level policies and social trends rather than negative interpersonal experiences. Although disillusioned, these individuals are still able to have amicable relationships with their Malay colleagues. The natural question to ask is, how would they relate to others at work if it was not for these grievances mentioned above. Sometimes, as the so-called immigrant ethnic groups, Chinese and Indians share the feeling of unfair treatment. However, specific incidents at work can crystallise this sense and bring them together.

The case of an event narrated by an experienced Chinese care assistant, HA4 is quite informative of the social relations under the surface. The story starts with one of the nurses in the unit deciding to leave the hospital to work in Saudi Arabia for a higher pay. There was a goodbye party held for her departure, and only the Malay colleagues were invited. HA4 and HA5, an Indian Sikh senior nurse at the same unit, were not even informed of the party. HA4 sounded really heartbroken that she was excluded in such a manner. They had been in good terms with the leaving colleagues and they had working together for years and she clearly expected a farewell. This exclusion on the basis of ethnicity obviously made her feel treated unfairly:

*They have the farewell outside. They give a farewell to her, not telling us...only Malay people know... I mean ... I feel it (facial expression of pain) ... why they do that to us. Huh...We have been working together for so long! Why do they left us... you know... why they have their own group doing things and ... because we all work together... we are working shift, we are working everything together, isn't it?*

Although she does not show overtly resistant attitudes, she now keeps to herself and tries to keep herself very busy with the work tasks. Her informal relations, too, are limited to the mentioned Indian colleague, with whom she shares the bitter experience of social exclusion:

*I don't know... Why they don't call us doesn't matter lah. You see when you take somebody as a friend, you don't care what religion you are, what race you are, if you take the person as a friend, you will by all means always call the person to come. But if you take my community and my people, then how can we work as a team? When certain things come, functions or anything like that, we are just kept aside. They push us away...It's very sad, very very sad.*

Overall, the tolerant category shows varied patterns of inter-ethnic interactions and for different reasons. The main factors separating individuals from different ethnic groups were found to be religious boundaries, cultural chemistry, and sense of unfair treatment. These were countered by the existence of hybrid identities, positive social stereotypes, and temporal factors. The actual patterns of tolerant individuals are also partly determined by the structural opportunities for intra-ethnic relations. For Malays, the numbers of Malay staff allow them to form groups based on more personal characteristics, or sub-group. For Indians, these interactions are centred around the other(s) Indian colleagues in the same or adjacent unit and occasionally the Chinese colleagues. As per their very small numbers in the studied organisations, the tolerant Chinese would need to reach out to other units to find Chinese connections, or suffice to limited interactions with Indian and Malay workmates.

### **5.5 The transcendent category**

This is the category of individuals who have active inter-ethnic relationships and are happy to do so. Some see ethnic differences as opportunities to socialise and learn from each other, others see individuals as individuals and not as representatives of their ethnic groups. In all cases, they have managed to cross, or transcend, the social boundaries prevalent in a plural society. This category of 10 interviewees consists of 5 Malays, 3 Indians, and 2 Chinese. The important factors in transcendent attitudes are directly linked to the factors discussed so far for the other two categories. Moreover, although there are differences in these factors for each ethnic group discussed, the

commonalities build a meaningful theme and enable the category to be discussed as one.

Firstly, all but one of the transcendent interviewees are brought up in cities and towns with high levels of ethnic diversity, with calculated diversity indices between 0.649 and 0.823. Moreover, all of them have been to either national type primary and secondary schools, or other types of schools with an ethnically diverse attendance (such as convent schools or Chinese schools in Eastern Malaysia). This has provided them with early chances of interethnic understanding and socialisation that equips these individuals with necessary skills to appreciate differences and celebrate diversity.

Secondly, while the individuals in this group exhibit strong ethnic identities, their personal characteristics seem to moderate and weaken certain parts of those identities that are less compatible with welcoming diversity. Consequently, the patterns of social interactions are qualitatively different for individuals from the transcendent category. Their attitudes towards others are considerably more liberal and the issues that were barriers for others seem to lose their importance.

With a few exceptions, the strategies applied are similar in nature to the ones seen in tolerant cases. It is the ease with which the issues are negotiated that makes a difference. For example, when scanning the interview scripts for the transcendent interviewees, the words 'pork' and 'halal' are much more scarce than the other two categories. These individuals seem to have found ways to turn the burden of commensality into a way of life. These ways range from all the parties involved eating what everyone else can to everyone having what they like and nobody getting offended. In the next two sections, the transcendent attitudes of 7 individuals are explored to draw the common theme. This is followed by a short exploration of a trio of transcendent college students who exhibited intercultural tendencies.

### 5.5.1 Opportunity in diversity

The common factor among transcendent individuals is that they see diversity as an opportunity and not a threat or burden. This is clearly possible only when the experiences of a person and the effects those experiences have left does not pit them against individuals of other ethnic groups. Due to social, economic, and political divisions between ethnic groups in Malaysia, this effect has different embodiments in different ethnic groups. The discussion here starts by the Indian individuals, followed by the Chinese and Malays.

Not only the Indian ethnic group in Malaysia is considerably diverse itself, they are also structurally more prone to interaction with other ethnic groups than Malays and Chinese. None of the Indian interviewees in the sample were brought up or lived in places where more than 15.8% of the population were Indians. This reduces the chances of Indians for ethnic encampment and drives them to find common ground with more people. There are, however, issues that stand in the way of Indians realising their potential fluidity in the society.

Firstly, as the results of the ethnic relations opinion polls by Merdeka Centre (2011) show, Indians are also the least trusted ethnic group in Malaysia. This is in no small part due to higher than average involvement of the Indian youth in criminal activities. Although this issue is regularly exaggerated for political purposes, it is also indicative of some real problems. Lacking the economic networks of the Chinese or the backing of the state, it is easier for Indians to feel desperate and hopeless, paving the way for entry of disenfranchised Indians into criminal circles. Secondly, in a similar way to the Chinese of lower economic standing, Indians are more likely to feel the brunt of economic competition in terms of unfair treatment via affirmative action policies in place since 1970s.

In the presence of equal opportunities, Indians easily exhibit positive attitudes towards diversity and interethnic interactions. This is mostly dictated by the socioeconomic background of the individuals. A good example of Indian transcendence pattern is HA13. She is 24 and a junior nurse from a middle class family in Kuala Lumpur, and her father is a civil servant. She was admitted to a public

university but could afford to not attend it as she preferred to study nursing. Because she has not been in competition with others for a university place or employment and neither her family has financially struggled, she can relate to others from a neutral standpoint. She has a relatively strong ethnic identity, a weak Hindu religious identity, and a view that seems to have accepted the positive ethnic stereotypes and filtered out the negative ones.

At work, she is a member of a Malay clique and her best friend is a young Malay nurse at the same unit. She not only finds value about all ethnic groups, but also defends her Malay colleagues against what she perceives their unfair treatment by the Chinese unit manager. She also actively attends colleagues' celebrations and ceremonies. Commensality doesn't seem to be a problem as she follows the colleagues to Malay restaurants and doesn't mind them eating beef there. When they go to shopping centres, they would stop by at Starbucks, which is a reminder that the transcendent category is mostly made up of younger metropolitan individuals who share elements of an emerging modern culture. The only adjustment necessary in interactions with her colleagues seems to be to refrain from political debate and focus more on 'how to make cookies'.

Take HB11 as another example, a 23-year-old cosmopolitan physiotherapist of Punjabi Sikh background. He has worked as a waiter, maths and English teacher, and a handphone retailer, before studying physiotherapy. Although not from a particularly well-off family, he has had a chance to get an education and have a job he likes. As a result, he has a wide social circle of like-minded youth from different ethnic backgrounds. He was probably the most individualistic person the researcher interviewed for this study in the way of low ethnic allegiance ('I'm not really one of those...') and universal religious view ('to me all the religions are the same').

He has been working in this unit for 18 months and being the only male staff member, has not yet managed to forge deep relationships at work, but feels comfortable working with colleagues, the majority of whom are Malays. Although majority of his informal activities are concentrated around his friendship group outside of work, which is an ethnically diverse bunch, he and two other Malay staff from other units



meet every Wednesday to play badminton. In fact, he expressed openness to marrying a Malay, something that in Malaysia would require him to convert to Islam. His experience in diverse national-type schools and socialisation with friends of different backgrounds has prepared him for life across ethnic boundaries.

It can be concluded that for Indians, socioeconomic status plays a very important role. While most Malaysian Indians have the experience of interacting with other ethnic groups, the nature of the socialisation can be undermined by experiences of being negatively affected by the ethnic-based affirmative action policies and negative social stereotypes. It can be predicted that it is more likely to find transcendent Indians among those with sufficiently high socioeconomic status to not feel left behind. These findings suggest that structural and early socialization factors interact with socioeconomic status and government policies to shape the attitudinal outcomes.

The two Chinese transcendent individuals in the sample, HB10 and HC3, have one important factor in common: they both grew up in Eastern Malaysia which is socially very different that Peninsular Malaysia (where the research sites are located), being more diverse with a larger number of ethnic groups and where none has an absolute majority. This shows the importance of early socialisation and environment once more. The social landscape of Eastern Malaysia is such that it cannot be considered a faultline society. In Eastern Malaysia, where HB10 and HC3 grew up, Chinese are not one of the two main competing identities, but rather one of many. As such, none of them have difficulty relating to their work/classmates of different ethnic groups. Moreover, HB10 studied at a public college, which means that unlike many of the Chinese and Indian interviewees, she does not suffer from the perception of unfair treatment in education.

HB10 is a Chinese senior midwife who moved from East Malaysia to Johor Bahru and found herself working in a unit where she was the only non-Malay. Willing to make conscious efforts to develop good relationships at work and realising the importance of being able to eat together with her colleagues and invite them to her house, she utilised an assimilative strategy:

*Since 3 years ago, I mean during every Chinese New year I'll choose a day just for my colleagues. I will order food from the Malay friends also [catering]. I mean all the utensil, all the fork and spoon I buy disposable spoon and forks. I mean for the drink I we didn't touch anything, just put inside the ice box it's OK for them, so usually I do that...Because I respect them. They are all my friends. Because we already know they cannot eat...I make sure they will come...I feel happy if they coming, and then I can see bringing their kids, because every year they come, so year pass by, kids all grown up already, is different.*

She is obviously taking a positive stance towards her Malay colleagues which is in stark contrast with the HA1's (resistant Chinese senior nurse) withdrawal after realising Malay colleagues wouldn't eat her non-Halal food and outright refusal of HA15 (resistant Chinese unit manager) to participate in colleagues' commensality and celebrations. It is also possible that non-adherence to any religion has made it easy for her to respect the religious views of her colleagues. Her behaviour has certainly struck a chord with her Malay colleagues:

*Ok, my friend here, the only one my Chinese friend, she's very sensitive. She know that we not, she knows about halal and haram, ok? She didn't cook, she order the food from the Malay caterer. All the things is from the Malay caterer.*

Another one explained that:

*When the Chinese colleague open house last February, we (7-10 ppl) did go to her house, eat, chit chat... Normally, she asks for catering from Malay cater... so we can eat the food. [If she cooks herself,] we can't eat the food that she cook. Because if she use the same utensil for her... she not cook pork, but the same also can... (Pollution through utensils)*

At the time of the interview, HB10 was a much-loved member of the unit who also attended the celebrations of her Malay colleagues. Effectively, she has leapfrogged the religious wall between the Chinese and Malays using flexibility and cultural

understanding. The other Chinese individual in this category, HC3, has the official status of a bumiputera and hence the meaning of Chinese identity is somewhat different for her. Moreover, her elementary school years were spent in a diverse Mandarin school in Eastern Malaysia where her classmates included some Malays. This means that she has the experience of her language and identity being accepted and appreciated by the Malays. As a result, she has positive view towards the Malays and one of her best friends, as is discussed in detail in the next sub-section, is a Malay.

There was a total of 19 Malays in the interviewee sample, of which 5 were in transcendent and 11 in tolerant categories. The fact that Malays are more likely to be found on the transcendent/tolerant end of the attitudinal spectrum should come as no surprise. Malay history is one of hybridity, tolerance, and intermingling, enabled by the geographic location of peninsular Malaysia, a character that Hoffstaedter (2011) calls archipelagic cosmopolitanism. Although decades of political entrepreneurship and the more recent surge of religious zeal have mostly crowded out this vision of Malaysia, the transcendent Malays still describe Malayness in these terms. For example, HB13, 40, a Malay senior nurse, is proud of being a Malay because:

*In Malaysia we have many Indian Chinese Malay culture, so I think their food, them behave[iour], but I don't mind. Let's say my friend is Indian, they like...*

Another Malay midwife, HB8, 35, characterises Malayness by the phrase 'budi bahasa amalan kita', which she understands as meaning that the way you carry yourself shows your character. This is not to say that these interviewees did not find anything to criticise other ethnic groups or their own for, but that they defined their ethnic identity in positive terms. Both HB13 and HB8 expressed interest in learning Mandarin language, with HB8 actually taking classes at the time of the interview. Looking for their backgrounds in inter-ethnic socialisation, it can be seen that both have studied in diverse national-type schools and are from cities where Malays make up only a relative majority of under 50%.

This is also the case with HA18, 27, a young senior nurse for whom being a Malay means to be modest and soft-spoken, and this has helped her build her personality.

However, she is clear that on the question of ethnic allegiance, she stands 'in the middle, not too conservative. Follow some traditions, not all'. More importantly, most of her social circle are Chinese friends and the reason is interesting:

*As a Malay, there are certain topics which are taboo for you to talk with someone even your parents or among siblings...so, for Chinese, I say more to general view on certain things which are [taboos]...social stuff. As a Malay we don't have a view on that. We go outside, I think oh what's that!*

In effect, she sees ethnic diversity as an opportunity to gain an understanding of social realities that would otherwise be denied to her. Food wise, anything is fine for HA18 and her Indian colleagues and Chinese friends as long as everyone in the group can eat it. While this might sound trivial, it is a departure from acceptance of barriers towards crossing them.

In discussing the centrality of structural opportunities for inter-ethnic socialisation for Malays as determined by the place of residence, there was mention of an exception in the transcendent category. The exceptional case, HC19 was born in a town with a very high indigenous (Malay and other Bumiputera) population and very low Chinese (2.4%) and Indian (0.9%) populations. She comes from a lower-middle class family background and has not had much opportunities for interethnic interaction prior to the college. However, her identity is dominated by her strong professional identity of being a nurse. Taking Florence Nightingale as her role model, she wished that she could go to war zones to help the wounded. She is also a moderate person when it comes to religious issues, judged by the fact that she likes to play with dogs, a controversial issue for some Muslims in Malaysia. In her case, it seems that her professional vis-à-vis ethnic identity strength and lower level of religiosity balances the structural deficit. In explaining commensality arrangements with her Indian friends, she posits:

*Indian doesn't eat beef, isn't it? So if we want to order something or I bring something to bring from my house, I will ask my mom to cook something that she can eat.*

Here, HC19 implicitly accords equal status to Indians and Malays, whose views she believes should be equally respected. According to Symons (1994), non-dominance of a single person is a prerequisite of conviviality. In other words, this signifies the absence of power gradient among the commensal friends. Overall, it is clear that the name of the social game for the transcendent category is assimilation and establishing relations with people from different backgrounds regardless of their ethnicity. In doing so, individuals from backgrounds that are in a minority in their social setting have more to gain as it significantly broadens their social landscape. However, the mechanism of transcendent relations is similar across the ethnic groups and is based on respect, equality, and taking risks in order to learn.

### **5.5.2 Transcendent cell: Striving for interculturalism**

This sub-section is allocated to the report and analysis of three interviews at the Health College with three college students, self-identified as Indian, Malay, and Chinese who had chosen to live together as roommates, share meal times together, study together, spend leisure time together, and more importantly, learn from each other's cultural practices and even question them. What sets these three apart from the rest of the transcendent interviewees is that they have set on a journey towards creating a microcosm of the society in which they would like to live in, rather than simply accepting its social boundaries.

This is in line with Cantle's (2012) definition of interculturalism and is particularly relevant to the Malaysian society where multiculturalism has had limited success. As per the meaningfully different nature of interethnic interactional attitudes of these interviewees, it was decided to devote a section to this trio in order to further the understanding of transcendent behaviour among Malaysian youth. Although this case is a singular case in this research, there is no reason to think that the dynamics of these relationships are limited to these individuals.

The researcher started the interview with HC3, 21 and studying at the final year for a diploma in pharmacy. Although she initially identified as Chinese, coming from a Sino-

Dusun<sup>11</sup> father and a Chinese mother, she is officially a bumiputera. This is the only case among my interviewees where the ethnicity and ethnic identity sharply diverge, rendering the limitations of a system designed to identify between the 'native' and 'migrant' communities. Although she is officially a bumiputera, and also a Christian, she prefers to identify as a Chinese, mainly as a result of benefits accrued as such in the way of lingual abilities and community ties. This is reciprocated by the other Chinese who think as long as she can speak Chinese, she is Chinese.

What made the researcher interested in her case was that she took the initiative to ask Malay friends about their cultural practices, and especially about their daily prayers. In fact, she likes the fact that Malays pray daily and think about their god. Not only that, she also likes the modest dress code of Malays and is critical of Chinese dressing in revealing manners. And then she likes Indian food, and their strong family bonds. Overall, although she does find the Malays' steadfast belief in the unique truth of their religious ideas occasionally irritating, and Indians noisy at night time, the net outcome of her views on Malays and Indians is, by far, positive.

Her Malay roommate, HC5, is of the same age, and a classmate. She exhibits a stronger ethnic identity: 'We are pure, pure Malay. My grand grandfather also Malay. No other religions or culture. So I think very strong Malay.' As discussed before, a major part of construction of the Malay identity in Malaysia is the religion of Islam and here is where HC5 differs slightly from other Malays. She positively identifies as a Muslim, but chooses not to cover her hair. Although this would be a non-issue in some circles in Malaysia and elsewhere, it is a big enough deviation from the accepted social norms among the Malay students at the college to isolate her among them. This is one of the main reasons for HC5 in choosing Indian and Chinese friends:

[HC3 on HC5] *She's been trying to be, because she's not tudung [headscarf covering the hair], she didn't wear tudung, she's free hair, so she said when she tried to approach the friends with tudung, they got advise her: you must wear tudung, all this. But she doesn't feel comfortable wearing the tudung yet. So she feel deserted by them. So*

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<sup>11</sup> Dusuns are an ethnic group native to the state of Sabah in Eastern Malaysia.

*she said preferably I like other cultures to be with among other cultures, because sometimes not only your own culture understand you, other cultures might understand you more.*

In HC5's own words:

*[Why didn't you choose to live with other Malays?] Actually I'm very open-minded person, so when I'm study in here, so I have seen a lot of people from other state. And their believers, their attitudes, is different form my friends in KL. Because for example, in Kelantan, people they very alim, very fanatic to the Muslim attitude [religious] so when they see something different from that, so they will deserted me...Kelantan, Terengganu...they do not want to talk with me, they a bit differentiate me like I'm others, other religions, something like that.*

*I don't know, because for me it's ok, but I don't know why they do like that. So I just get other friends that can want to be friend with me, can accept me as I am, so I choose people that can accept me. So others I just friend not very close, but still communicate, no problems. But I cannot stay together with them...with Malay students. I cannot stay with them because they are very...not open-minded.so, hard for me.*

However, this did not mean a complete change of social norms for her:

*[Chinese] can give me some bad influence, like drinking alcohol, something like that because most of my friends are like that.*

To HC5, her group provides her with a sweet spot of freedom, acceptance, and learning opportunities in which she does not get judged. Interestingly, she thinks that she ought to cover her hair and be a better Muslim, and she would even like her future husband to push her to do so. But as for the friends, she does not like to take advice or be judged. Her mention of the northern regions of Kuantan and Terengganu also points to the differences between mindsets of metropolitan Kuala Lumpur and the less diverse regions.

The Indian member of the trio, HC8, thinks there is another element to their group as well: 'Since we are all live together as Malaysian also we more patriotic. So we are like that.' Patriotism and in general the element of national identity has been mostly absent from the interviews. But it can well serve as an overarching identity to bring different ethnic groups together. She identifies as an Indian and is quite proud of the history of it, at the same time appreciating the ways and manners of Malays and the Chinese. She also thinks that her Malay friend is different in that she doesn't judge or denigrate others:

*Some of my classmates they are more holistic [reference to holy, i.e. religiosity]. So they believe in their god. There are no other god in the world other than theirs. So, they like since she is talking to also, they feel like why a Malay go and talk with a Chinese or other culture. [The Malay roommate] is not like that; she doesn't think that Hindus go to hell.*

So far, it's been established that these three friends respect and accept each other the way they are. But they also learn from each other. HC3 has had the opportunity to learn about Islam:

*When my friend praying, the solat, I would ask my friends, because I was curious, because I was not experiencing this before, so I ask my friend why are you doing this. They said every time maybe in certain times they have to do solat, so I asked them why you want to wash everything, they said because before we pray we must be clean. So ok, I accept. So whenever I have doubts, because it is sometimes different form Christian, I'll ask them so they would not misunderstood me for not understanding them.*

As is the case with HC5:

*We share our knowledge...sometimes she talk about her culture. She talk about her religion. Sometimes I'm also do like that.*



And HC8:

*Sometimes we talk about our cultures. We just share, because what we think is relevant we share...And they don't think that non-Muslims or non-Christians go to hell. She come to my prayer room, and I tell her [about Hinduism]. she also like Indian culture...she will try to be, to learn new things.*

As someone who has spent a number of years in Malaysia, the researcher was interested to know how this unlikely relationship had started. Interestingly, there has been no influence from a third party. The allocation of the college accommodation to students is done by the wardens, and as far as I could collect from the students and the college staff, students are allocated rooms with classmates from the same programme, gender, and ethnic background for reasons of convenience. In the case of the three friends, they were put in different rooms as well, though in the same house. After a period of clinical posting, where they were being reallocated rooms, they all made the decision to stay together in a room. As for the importance of commensality and the religious barriers regarding it, it was important to explore how they were managed by the three friends who would '[go to the] *Movies together, shopping together, eating together. Evvvery day. We will take lunch together, dinner together, we will eat together*'. While none of them has forbid others from eating certain items in their shared room, and they would not get offended if the others did, they made their best effort to respect each other's beliefs and limits:

*HC3 (Chinese): Yes, we have lunch together. Sometimes my friend she will bring Indian food, which one of my Malay friends really likes, and then she insists my Indian friend to bring more, which is good. So my friend sometimes she will bring the food, so we'll share together...I make sure it's halal before I give them to taste. My [Malay] friend understands that if eating beef burger, then we intend to share with others, but then she would say sorry I cannot share with you because it's beef. I eat beef, but not the Indian. So she says it's OK.*

HC5 (Malay) mirrors those points:

*Every day, we will take lunch together, dinner together, we will eat together. We just eat, but my friends, the Indian girl cannot eat meat, right? Cow meat. So she just OK, she is open-minded, doesn't matter we want to eat or what. But if they want to eat pork or anything non-halal, so they won't eat in front of us. [The researcher: Are you OK if they eat pork in front of you?] Yeah.*

And finally, HC8 (Indian) suffices to saying that:

*Sometimes we eat Indian, Chinese, Korean, Japan, any type of food we will eat together.*

It is clear that the transcendent trio in the Health college, through extensive socialisation and keeping an open mind, have been able to de-sensitize problematic sentiments in themselves and enjoy a commensal and convivial relationship, much conducive to their friendship. I use the issue of commensality here to explore how the barriers are navigated by the transcendent individuals. As a result, their relationship is so advanced that all the three of them feel more comfortable with each other than when they are at their parental home, citing being more talkative in their shared room than elsewhere.

Like most of the other transcendent individuals in this research, these three individuals are born in diverse cities, they all have been to schools where they have had the opportunity to socialise in a diverse environment. I would like to interpret it as a sign of things to come, that with the growth in the urban population, improvement in living standards, and the rise of a Malay middle class, there would be more interaction between the different ethnic groups in Malaysia. Perhaps it would be fit to end this section with a message from one of these young Malaysians to her compatriots:

*I think that people should be not too racist. They should trust and then they should respect the other culture, too. The problem I think is, they are not mixing with each other. They're sitting with their group, so what they thought is that they are the best and their culture is the best.*

## 5.6 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the three categories of attitudes towards inter-ethnic interactions among individuals. These categories are derived from the similarities and differences in interactional attitudes between the interviewees and is based on the concept of ambivalence in diversity. These conceptual categories are introduced as parts of a continuum and not discrete classes. It is also possible that individuals express attitudes cutting across these categories. The placement of individuals in each category has been based on the propensity of their different attitudes and how and if they are put to action; this has been particularly difficult at the edges of middle category. The two smaller categories at the extremes of this continuum represent net positive and negative attitudes towards ethnic groups different from one's own. The larger category in the middle denotes the ambivalent, indifferent, or neutral majority.

At the one extreme is the resistant category who view diversity as a threat and as such, prefer to limit their inter-ethnic interactions to a minimum. Lack or scarcity of earlier opportunities for inter-ethnic socialisation and perceptions of unfair treatment are precursors of such attitudes. At the other extreme are individuals who conceive diversity as an opportunity and happily engage with individuals of different backgrounds. Members of this category are generally young and hail from diverse cities where they have been socialised in a diverse environment from a young age.

The middle category of tolerant individuals is characterised by the hybridity in ethnic identification, which allows for multiple or fluid affiliations. The Malay identity has been historically one of tolerance, hybridity, and cosmopolitanism, as was the case with the majority of Malay interviewees. Tolerant individuals are also pragmatic decision makers in their social lives. This pragmatism ranges from flexibilities necessary to get along with others to developing networks for different tasks, pointing to the situational fluidity of the individuals. It was also noted that the more senior persons in this category exhibited higher levels of ability to adapt to different social situations and create simple informal networks, suggesting that individuals may move from one category to another over time.

This chapter also highlighted the central role of commensality in social interactions. It was emphasised that religious barriers to commensality in Malaysia present a significant challenge to informal interactions among individuals of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. Although this challenge is present in the majority of inter-ethnic interactional situations in Malaysia, the issue of pork consumption and fear of spiritual contamination by it is the main social inhibitor between the Chinese and the Malays. Fortunately, this barrier is not impassable and is navigated by tolerant and transcendent individuals to varying degrees.

## **Chapter Six: Formal Workplace Interactions- the Role of Ethics, Organisational Structures, and Fairness Perceptions**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This chapter is dedicated to exploring the formal workplace relations of individuals in ethnically diverse Malaysian settings. The previous chapter discussed the interactional preferences of individuals in the form of the three attitudinal categories based on informal relations. While those categories are mentioned in this chapter when there are differences based on them, they are not the determining factors. As expected in a regulated industry such as healthcare, formal interactions at work were mostly channelled across lines of organisational hierarchy and medical authority. While these are relations that are expected by the structure of the organisations, the moral effects of high work ethics give it a personal and voluntary dimension that helps cut across individuals' interactional attitudes. Moreover, the presence of work routines and protocols lowers the possibility of disagreements and personal opinions, reducing conflict.

The structure of the organisations was also shown to influence the diversity perceptions of individual staff members. Ethnic diversity of the managerial ranks was perceived by the staff members, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds, as the indicator of the power relations in the organisations. When there was little organisational evidence to disrupt an unequitable picture, minority identities would lead to perceptions of unfairness in the organisation even when it wasn't objectively the case. One area with highest concentration of such sentiments was the process of organisational promotions. Regarding daily operations of the units, however, a thoughtful selection of highly accepted figures as unit managers were successful in creating cooperative atmospheres, indicating that organisational policies can adjust the effects of societal faultlines to a certain degree.

Finally, this study discusses the observations related to the differences in the spatial settings of the two organisations and how it might have affected the interactions in

them. Firstly, it was observed that the fast-paced life in the Kuala Lumpur and the fact that many of the staff interviewed at Hospital KL were born in other regions and would return during holiday periods negatively affected their ability and motivation for social interactions compared to Hospital JB, where the city life is less hectic and a higher share of the staff are local. Secondly, having a canteen located at Hospital JB that offers space for commensality over food which all colleagues can partake, seems to help improve the workplace inter-ethnic relations, compared to Hospital KL, where such a luxury did not exist. While this study did not collect enough data to consider spatial settings as part of the research design, observations made by the researcher pointed to a clear pattern of higher cohesion in Hospital JB.

There are two points to consider about this chapter. Firstly, as the main focus of this study is on informal interactions, the collected data is centred on the voluntary, identity-based networks of individuals. Secondly, the researcher could not secure access to organisational charts and ethnic make-up data for the Health Colleague. Together with the fact that although the interviewed students did work at the clinical settings as part of their practical training, the nature of their relationship to the hospitals was different than that of the other interviewees, who were full-time staff members. Therefore, it was decided that the data collected at Health College would not be included in this chapter. Together, these two points resulted in a briefer discussion in this chapter than chapter 5.

## **6.2 Work ethics, routines, and hierarchy**

All along the data collection process in Hospital KL and Hospital JB and across all the three attitudinal categories, respect for medical authority and following established routines and protocols was apparent. Together with the clarity of positions as medical consultant, unit manager, senior nurse, and so on meant that the flow of authority and responsibilities helped make workflow predictable. This was perhaps best captured by a junior nurse who explained the chain of command when encountering problems: 'I will ask my senior. In case she also not sure, we can refer to the unit

manager. If not confident, then doctors'. The clarity of this principle seems to make it easy to apply.

The highly-accepted medical authority also results in breaking down of some barriers that would otherwise probably be present because of individuals' attitudes and prejudices. For example, HA1, a resistant Chinese senior nurse believes that the Chinese are hard-working and good in mathematics, Indians are OK, and Malays are lazy, don't bother, and their English is not good. Interestingly, these views did not extend to the doctors, all of whom she considers to be highly educated and professional. And even though she thinks that Chinese and Indian are better nurses and care more for patients, she would refer to the unit manager if she were unsure about a procedure. While these attitudes could be explained by the total acceptance of organisational hierarchy and medical authority, there is also an ethical dimension behind her work behaviour.

Not only she would inform her colleagues and the unit manager in case she makes a mistake because their work- unlike office work- cannot be easily undone, as in the case of a wrong medication which can cause complications for the patients, she also shares her knowledge with other colleagues, so that the next time a case happens to a patient, they would know what to do, and this is despite the occasional cold reception to her interventions. In HA1's case, her commitment to patients not only modifies her own personal resistant attitudes, it also overcomes hesitation from colleagues.

Another case of primacy of authority over personal views is that of HB9, a resistant Malay midwife with generally negative views on the Chinese and Indians, whose worst experience of work in the hospital was that of being scolded by a Chinese doctor for deciding to go out of the protocols in order to help a patient. Nonetheless, she attributes it to the responsibility of the doctor and thus she has no perception of unfair treatment, believing that the doctor would have treated a Chinese nurse, or anyone for that matter, the same. While it might sound natural for it to actually be so, the fact that HB9 views the doctor as a medical professional rather than an ethnic Chinese is important in shaping positive work attitudes. This seemed not to be less important for

HB12, a resistant Malay therapist as per the individualistic orientation of her job which involves working directly with patients in different units. Nonetheless, while at other units, she prefers to communicate to other staff because of their experience.

For HA2, a tolerant Malay nurse with some transcendent attitudes, there are pro-social motivations involved in helping her cross ethnic boundaries. firstly, she tried to find some positive character about every one of her colleagues because they will be working together for the coming years and it's good to remember something positive. While like most of the nurses her points of reference for complicated on-the-job questions are doctors, she does not hesitate to ask other colleagues. She does interrupt if she sees a wrongdoing, even if the person wouldn't be too happy with being corrected. She was clear that there is no ethnic variation to this stance. Her motivation for doing so is threefold:

- 1- So that it will not happen again and that the colleagues can do the task by themselves next time, so the work of the whole unit would be easier.
- 2- She doesn't lose anything by sharing her knowledge.
- 3- When she teaches someone, she refreshes her knowledge as well.

However, she is also willing to engage with her Chinese and Indian colleagues to learn about their beliefs and customs so that she does not make the patients feel bad. The example she gave was learning through her Chinese colleague that putting a clock on the door or next to the bed of some Chinese patients makes them feel uncomfortable as it can be interpreted as waiting for their death.

HA3 is a medical assistant in the accident and emergency unit, who has started in the hospital after retiring from the insurance industry. To satisfy his passion for auto racing and medicine, he used to attend races as emergency crew. He shows a clear level of hedonic motivation for the excitement of A&E work: 'you never know what's going to happen. Every day is different.' In sharing the knowledge of what he does best, finding veins, he is motivated by a desire to reduce patients' pain of being poked a lot, as well as the knowledge that unsuccessful attempts by the colleagues would eventually result in him being summoned to perform the task. On complicated medical protocols,



he would call up a medical consultant and would not attempt a try and error method because he 'deal[s] with life'.

The ethical push to cooperation is also the case with HA4 although she is unhappy about being pushed aside in the social life of the unit by the Malay colleagues. As a care assistant, HA4's position does not place her high in the medical hierarchy and she freely asks her colleagues and especially the unit manager for help on tasks which she is unsure about. However, her experience and concern for patients compel her to intervene, despite some resistant from the colleagues, in certain times when she realises a mistake being made:

*For me, I feel I have to tell them. It's for the patient's good. You have to improve...we should learn together...don't keep it to yourself because of you're not there, then who's going to do it? We have to share.*

The ethical push for interactions for the benefit of the patients was sometimes enough to break down barriers that otherwise individuals would not be willing to take on. For example, HB16 is a young tolerant nurse, who, being the only Chinese staff member at the unit, separates her informal and formal activities to such an extent that even her interactions with the other members of the volleyball team at the hospital at which she trains regularly is limited to the sport and asking when the next training is. However, she does make an effort to tell colleagues if she sees a mistake. While some might get angry, but she would still do it for patient safety. Another young Malay nurse explained the reason why she would easily report her mistake to her Indian unit manager:

*Because we are dealing with human life. Sometime might be a small thing, but we don't know how they affect with the person. If anything happens, someone knows. As long as I won't be regret if anything happens no one knows it will be my fault, I'll be paining myself.*

However, ethical and hierarchical factors do not completely override other factors. For instance, the temporal effects still exist in formal relations and contribute to the cooperative behaviour in the units. HA9, a Malay care assistant with nearly 30 years of experience, reports an interesting interplay between a low position and high

experience than enable knowledge sharing with the other staff. While her position allows her to seek help from junior nurses, her experience is seen by them as valuable, facilitating a two-way knowledge sharing:

*Workwise, if I don't know anything I will ask them. They also don't know everything...actually I am much more lower than them. They all are staff nurses. Sometimes they don't know many things, they do ask me because of my experience...There's no such thing as Malay or Indian, all ask me.*

On the flip side, enabling factors do not always override other social interactional boundaries. A simple case was that of HB14, an experienced Malay assistant nurse who would prefer to interact with the Malay doctors because they were more receptive to speak to her in Bahasa Malaysia than the Chinese and Indian doctors who preferred to follow the English code of the organisation. In this case, lingual abilities and not necessarily diversity views limit the interactional patterns. At a different level, a senior Iban nurse, HA23, who takes over from the unit manager in her absence, does not have a problem with pointing out mistakes even to other senior nurses. However, she is more hesitant to do this when it comes to her Indian colleagues because she thinks they are not as receptive as others:

*Malays don't fight back I case they are caught mistaken; they don't have the courage. This makes them easy to work with. Indians fight back. Chinese are perfectionists, they usually don't make mistakes. Very precise. Chinese is work oriented.*

Mirroring her view is HA8, a senior midwife in a unit with only Malay and Indian nurses and midwives. She views the Indian culture as one that finds it difficult to admit mistakes and pushes the blame on others. She is also of the idea that if she were Indian, her junior Indian colleagues would be more receptive to her:

*Honestly I tell you something, Malay...Malay is more accept[ing of criticism] compared to Indian. Some Indian they think they are goooooood, like that. But not all, certain people. A bit difficult for them [Indian nurses] [to admit their mistakes] sometimes. Sometimes they*

*blame someone else. Honestly I tell you, Indian culture is like that...if they know something, they will not share with Malays.*

Finally, HB1, an experienced Chinese nurse at an A&E unit, points out two less talked about factors about the task-related interactions at work. Firstly, she notes that to ask for help on specific issues, she would go to the staff with specific post-basic training on that area, specifying task-based medical authority and not necessarily the organisational hierarchy. In a similar fashion, she was sent to a cannulation course and is now the point of reference to her colleagues on that specific issue. This is mirrored by her colleague whose professional trust of other colleagues was conditioned on their post-basic training. Secondly, she doesn't see any difference or difficulty with junior colleagues based on ethnicity and instead believes that young nurses from rural backgrounds are humbler and eager to learn than the younger urban nurses. While this is not directly relevant to ethnic diversity of the units, it indicated a possible cross-cutting line in a faultline system.

### **6.3 Organisational structure, representation, and fairness**

This chapter discusses the relation between organisational structure, representation of ethnic groups in organisations, and the fairness perceptions in shaping diversity attitudes of individuals. More specifically, it explores how the number of individuals from an ethnic group and their position in the organisations influences fairness perceptions of staff members. Perceptions of fair treatment are discussed at the three level of society, organisation, and organisational units to see how organisational policies interact with the social atmosphere to accentuate or mitigate psychological safety concern of individuals working in the organisations, with implications for their motivation and turnover.

It became apparent that the relation between representation and fairness perceptions is only a factor for the individuals from the minority ethnic groups. As we review the composition and structure of the two hospitals, the reason becomes clear. Malays make up the great majority of the staff as well as the managerial roles in both hospitals and have no reason to think that they are discriminated based on their ethnic

backgrounds. Other ethnic groups, however, are in absolute minority positions in both organisations and as discussed below, sometimes suffer from perceptions of unfairness.

The organisational structures of the two hospitals compositions of the two hospitals are reviewed based on their employment data and the managerial positions relevant to nursing functions. These include the hospital chief executive officer, medical officer, chief nursing officer, deputy chief nursing officer, and the managers of the units where nurses are based. Medical consultant, as discussed before, are not part of the organisational structure of the two hospitals and are considered partners rather than employees. However, an educated estimate would be that the composition of medical consultant is more diverse than the nursing staff.

Hospital KL employed approximately 500 staff, the ethnic composition of which included 74% Malays, 7% Chinese, and 10% Indians. Comparatively, Hospital JB employed 850 staff of ethnic composition of 87% Malays, 4% Chinese, and 8.5% Indians. according to the management of both hospitals, there are no employment policies based on ethnic backgrounds of individuals, although they would prefer more Mandarin-speaking personnel for practical reasons of catering to their clients. Both hospitals had Malay female chief executive officers, and Malay male medical officers. Table 6.1 compares the make-up of the managerial positions of the two hospitals. Based on Table 6.1 it can be seen that the ethnic composition of the managerial positions in both hospitals are, similar to the employment numbers, heavily skewed towards Malays. It should be clarified that in a Malaysian context, a Chinese Muslim manager can be viewed as Chinese, or Muslim (and hence Malay) in different situations by different people.

**Table 6.1 The ethnic composition of the managerial positions of nursing functions at Hospital KL and Hospital JB**

Position	Hospital KL			Hospital JB		
Chief Executive Officer	Malay			Malay		
Medical Officer	Malay			Malay		
Chief Nursing Officer	Malay			Chinese (Muslim)		
Deputy Chief Nursing Officer	Chinese			Chinese		
Unit Managers	10 Malay	1 Indian	1 Chinese	8 Malay	1 Indian	2 Chinese

Starting at Hospital KL, a senior Chinese nurse reported that while she is treated fairly in the unit by colleagues and the Malay unit manager, the promotions were not so ‘because this is a Malay hospital, so you know, they put, you can see that all in charge is their race’. Another Chinese at the same hospital informed the researcher that: ‘you hardly see Chinese in this [name of the hospital]. We have, but not so many’. Drawing parallels between quotas for university places and promotions in the hospital, she continued: ‘you mentioned promotions, of course the Malay get the better chance. They get the chance.’

Her Indian colleague linked the preferential treatment of Malays in education to the low number of non-Malays in the hospital, and voiced her discontent on the process of promotions:

*They don't tell us. Now I know everything is given to them. Whether you are a good worker or not. They are given. Because you see the top people are their people. So they interfere, their own people up...it's very*

*normal to talk to your [own] people, say so many good things, flatter them...the boss is very happy... [on the information regarding promotions:] Maybe they go out. Because they don't tell us anymore. They go quietly. But somehow, some news comes out. Nothing can be done.*

Both of the abovementioned persons are close to their retirement and seem to have settled and accepted the status quo as they perceive it. The younger nurses who feel they are being discriminated against, however, are not as resigned. For a young Indian nurse who had just completed a post-basic course and seemed enthusiastic at work, the perception that 'the colour is important when promotion' and that there is less chance of promotion for Indians than Malays for the same good performance because 'top is Malay', could result in erosion of work motivations:

*I don't want any promotion. I just want to get knowledge, to get experience, I want to go somewhere else. Like UK... Australia will be my choice as well, but taxes is very much higher.*

And this despite the fact that she shows tolerant attitudes at work and likes her country: 'If I go anywhere for vacation, if feel like when can I go back to my country?' another young Indian nurse views the situation with promotions at work as inequitable:

*Here they more prioritise towards Malays. They will give to the Malays. Malay comes first. Even our Indians or Chinese is very less. Same level, same experience, of course will give Malays to go straight [up]. That is normal.*

At this point the researcher asked 'is it because this is a Malay-management company? The answer could not have been clearer: 'It's a Malay management country!'. The following show the extent of her disillusionment and cannot be interpreted as good news for the organisations:

*Every few months, every month, a colleague leaves. They go to Arab[ia], they go to Australia. My auntie was working here also. She*

*went to Australia. I mean...for me there is two things: I'm going to move out from Malaysia. Second things, if let's say my fate is to be here, maybe I'll open up a business or what...my auntie is errr because she also went through what I went through. She is a nurse educator, higher than unit manager. She told me earlier, but I didn't realise, I thought she was just telling for what...But every single day I'm going through right now, I think I don that also.*

The researcher did not note the same sentiments at the interviews at Hospital JB. There can be many guesses as to the reason, but as no interviewee with the same ethnic background, age, and career stage as the two nurses mentioned above were interviewed in Hospital JB, such hypothesising would not be useful. Instead, a review of the fairness perceptions of ethnic minority staff at Hospital JB for reasons that possibly moderate the relationship between perceptions of societal injustice and organisational unfairness has a better chance of providing insights into the matter.

Starting with a senior Chinese nurse at Hospital JB, she views the educational quota system as unfair:

*They never see your credits. For university, because Malaysian, you can see 75 or 80% is Malays. Also in the intake, they don't see their results. Most of the Chinese students get very good scores, but they can't enter the university, they go abroad. Especially Singapore, even they can get sponsorships from there. Later they work there. Unless you get very very good result, then your chance of getting into local university is [not] high.*

However, she believes that the hospital has been very fair to her in recruitment and afterwards. A quick look at her career progression provides possible clues for the reason. She had joined the hospital with no tertiary education and the hospital has sponsored her in two stages to continue her studies and qualify as an assistant nurse first and then as a nurse. The possible gratitude for the support received from the employer can also be the reasons why a young Indian nurse from a rural background perceives her workplace as fair to her, despite taking issue with the societal status

quo: 'Malays? They have the priority for everything, not like us. The priority is for them, first, they come first.'

Again, her career path shows that she started working at a factory after secondary school and then joined the hospital as a care assistant, following which she was sponsored to study for a diploma in nursing. A transcendent young Punjabi physiotherapist in the same hospital also received a scholarship from Hospital JB to study physiotherapy and start a career he liked, leaving little room for complaint. A slightly different case was that of a Chinese nurse who had applied for positions in two private and a public hospital upon receiving her nursing diploma, to be accepted only by Hospital JB. Going on to a post-basic course and later earn a degree qualification supported by the hospital, she does not feel any discrimination at work.

Finally, the case of a transcendent Chinese senior midwife at hospital JB deserves attention for the interplay of different factors. Coming from a family who could not support her tertiary education, her ambitions to study hotel management was also struck off by the public education quota system, which she believes prioritises non-Chinese as well as rural students. Nonetheless, she was sponsored by a private hospital in Eastern Malaysia to study nursing and later, when she decided to move to Johor Bahru, Hospital JB bought over her contract from the first hospital, enabling the move. Thus, while she might believe that she did not get a fair chance earlier in life, the support she has received from her two employers has resulted in positive work attitudes.

So far, this chapter has discussed the relation between macro-level fairness perceptions and feelings of discrimination at work. Interestingly, there were few mentions of unfairness at the organisational units. Almost all of the interviewees expressed satisfaction with their unit managers, which can be a result of a culture of accepting immediate authority of supervisors and not questioning them or careful selection of unit managers in both hospitals. However, as per important roles in shaping the workflow of the units, diversity attitudes of unit managers are also important. What follows is an analysis of the effects of a resistant attitudes of a unit manager on formal relations at her unit.



HA15 is a resistant Chinese senior nurse and the manager of a Malay-majority unit at Hospital KL. She separates formal and informal lives and does not usually have lunch with her staff, does not invite them to her new year celebrations, and even though she is usually invited to her staff's celebrations, does not attend. Her social isolation, especially not being able or willing to share a meal with her staff means she misses out on valuable bonding and reconciliation chances. For example, when asked how different her job would be if she was a Malay, HA15 answered:

*Ok, so I think that many people are happy that you do a mistake, never mind, scold. After scold already, then go to makan [eating], eat outside. Enjoy...then all this angle will be dissolved.*

When the researcher asked why she wouldn't utilise such an opportunity, she simply replied that 'for me, I really don't like that game.' Not playing the socialisation game is not without consequences. According to her, the Malay staff at the unit do not want to be corrected by her and so do not share their mistakes with her. This causes the escalation of the issues to the mostly Malay top management with which the staff feel more comfortable. Interestingly, one of her Indian staff, whom she commended for being positive minded and open to learning from her mistakes suggested that she is unfair to the Malays at the unit and assigns more work to them than others. This is clearly a case of lost opportunity for improving formal work relations.

#### **6.4 Two spatial factors on workplace relations**

In the course of interviews, the research observed two factors that might have implication for the ability of individuals to socially interact with colleagues. The first point is related to the location of the organisations. When asked on the reasons for non-attendance of colleagues' celebrations, organisational and after-hour unit events, a number of interviewees in Hospital Kuala Lumpur answered by explaining the hectic lifestyle in a major city. They narrated how they had to wake up early to prepare their children for school, get to work themselves during rush hours and then return home

in traffic just to cook and so household chores, which did not leave much spare time for other activities. And if they get a little free time, it would be either for family members or one's close friends. Moreover, many of the Hospital Kuala Lumpur interviewed were not native to the city or state, and this meant that they returned to their hometowns during the festive periods to be with their relatives. This meant that the possibility of one's colleagues attending her/his celebrations is severely limited.

Data from the 2010 population and Housing Census of Malaysia 2010 shows that the area comprising of Kuala Lumpur and surrounding state of Selangor are the most populous region in Malaysia and the destination of the bulk of internal migration (Migration Survey Report Malaysia 2014). The compounded major city lifestyle of a busy routine and festive season leaves is a constraining factor that can be tentatively called 'metropolis effect'. This was compared to Johor Bahru, where Hospital JB is located. While Johor Bahru is the second largest city in Malaysia, it provided the opportunity to compare the results in the relative absence of the metropolis effect because a larger share of the interviewees was local to the state and spent less time in traffic while commuting to work.

The second observation comparing the two hospitals was that of the availability of the commensality spaces. Hospital KL had a small café and two small branches of chain restaurants mainly intended for visitors, they were either too small for a large number of diners, or too expensive to use on a daily basis. The result was that the staff, as per the interviews, either chose to eat their packed lunches at the pantries of their units, or leave the hospital in their lunch hour break and go to the eateries outside the hospital, which were mainly 'Malay' restaurants. With unit pantries too small to host the unit staff and the ethnic spatial identity of the restaurants in the neighbourhood, many of the Chinese and Indian staff reported having lunch alone or in pair at the pantries, only occasionally to join the Malays.

This issue effectively resulted in the loss of precious lunch-break interactional opportunities that could have acted to foster positive feelings and relations among the staff. In contrast, Hospital JB did house a large canteen, which served various types of halal food. While the aforementioned small restaurants also existed in Hospital JB,

this food hall, assisted by the affordable prices, served as a social centre for staff and clients alike and the researcher could see large groups of staff- identified by their uniforms- eat around tables together. Such events are known to be central for cohesion-building and knowledge sharing activities in organisations. While the importance of immediacy of healthcare work may be offered as a reason against commensality during working hours, such was the case only in the accident and emergency departments, which had a policy of having no lunch hours (individuals had to have their food along in the pantry in any free time they had). Other units of both hospitals, though, operated lunch hours of 12am-1pm or 1-2pm.

While there are no data specifically on the spatial factors in this study, these observations are in line with the results that although the three types of interactional attitudes were found in both hospitals, staff at hospital JB showed lower levels of emotional conflict and unfairness perceptions and reported more instances of social activities involving colleagues. These observations observation would point to the effects of the environment as well as the importance of affordable and available commensality spaces where the nature and identity of the food and space would relate to the organisational identity to which all staff can relate.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter focused on the formal interactions among staff in two hospitals in Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru to explore how diversity attitudes of individuals interact with organisational factors to shape the workplace interaction in ethnically diverse settings. A number of effects were found to help moderate individuals' attitudes and assist interactions across social barriers. As expected in a highly regulated industry, the bulk of formal work relations were conducted across lines shaped by organisational hierarchy and professional authority. However, there were also a number of individual factors that influenced these patterns.

The first and foremost such factor was found to be that of professional ethics, which would morally compel individuals to break down barriers and interact with each other

for the good of the patients and the work unit in general. This behavioural pattern cut across the three categories of resistant, tolerant, and transcendent and enabled an effective service in the hospital units. While this was a strong motivation to interact across social barriers, individuals' attitudes and social stereotypes were not totally eliminated and still served to reduce the communication willingness across ethnic groups.

Secondly, the minority ethnic groups' perceptions of social injustice interacted with the organisational representation of their ethnic groups and in some cases, led to perceptions of unfair treatment at work. This was especially pronounced on the issue of promotions, but not so on the daily work relations at the units. This effect was moderated by a sense of gratitude in case of individuals who had at some point been supported by their employers to make-up for the lost opportunities. This appeared mostly in shape of support from the hospital for the staff education and training. While the careful choice of unit managers in the two hospitals helped with creating a positive sense of fairness at the units, it was also the case that the interactional attitudes of a resistant unit manager resulted in less-than-optimal work relations with her staff, pointing to the relative importance of the diversity views and flexibilities of the managers.

Finally, it was observed that a hectic environment in a major city left the staff at Hospital KL with less time and energy to develop positive relations compared to Hospital JB. The availability of a communal canteen also probably helped staff at Hospital JB to develop commensal relations, leading to better workplace connections. Together with the findings of Chapter 5, it can be stated that the interactional attitudes of individuals interact with the representational patterns of ethnic groups in their environment to determine the coping strategies used.

For Malays, due to the large numbers relative to other groups, sub-grouping based on the secondary traits was the predominant way. Transcendent Malays regularly established friendly relationships with individuals from different backgrounds, tolerant Malays kept a limited level of usually shallow interaction with others while

mainly keeping to their co-ethnic colleagues, and resistant Malays actively avoided non-essential interaction with others.

Chinese were by far the least represented ethnic group in the three cases studied. As such, there was very little chance of forming all-Chinese groups and often even pairs. Therefore, the transcendent Chinese chose to assimilate or form their own diverse groups while tolerant Chinese opted to form informal relationships with the Chinese (and sometimes Indian) individuals from other units. The resistant among them kept busy at work and in a state of social withdrawal, reducing unnecessary interactions at work. Indians were in a numerical position between Malays and Chinese. The transcendent among them had no difficulty assimilating into different groups. The tolerant Indians preferred to interact more with their fellow Indian colleagues from the same or different units, while keeping a minimum level of interactions necessary to get the tasks done.

It is important to realise that underrepresentation affects individuals with resistant orientations more than the tolerant ones, who in turn experience more social isolation than transcendent persons. In a similar fashion, lack of flexibility or unwillingness to interact with ethnic others affects individuals from minority ethnic backgrounds more intensely compared to majority groups. Positive diversity attitudes combined with a concern for wellbeing of patients was the key for breaking down ethnic barriers at workplace. As the clearest everyday manifestation of ethnic boundaries, the ubiquitous pork issue has been part of daily Malaysian life for years and shows no signs of abating. However, the experience of transcendent individuals in this study has shown that this barrier is indeed navigable. Intercultural socialisation and understanding, helped by an attitude that is respectful to all religious and ethnic groups in the society goes a long way to help overcome this hurdle.

## Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusions

### 7.1 Introduction

This research explores the dynamics of inter-ethnic interactions in organisational groups in Malaysia. As a society segregated across ethnic lines and with overlapping religious, linguistic, and cultural elements, it was expected that individuals will strongly identify with a narrative of ethnicity that would limit the extent and depth of their interactions with people from other ethnic backgrounds. The previous chapters presented the analysis of findings associated with these dynamics based on interviews with individuals in healthcare settings in Malaysia. The results showed that the expected effects were present, but not as strongly as initially anticipated.

This chapter provides a discussion on the findings of this study in light of the questions it set out to answer. As a study with the individual as the unit of analysis and spanning macro- and meso-level factors, the discussion is divided into four sections. The first part is dedicated to discussing the main theme of the findings of this study, the three inter-ethnic attitudinal categories and how they relate to the societal context that gives rise to them as well as exploring how organisational settings and policies interact with the attitudes and experiences of individuals in the wider society to reinforce or moderate their diversity attitudes.

The adaptation of faultlines concept to explore ethnic diversity in the context of a segregated society helps understand its situational meaning and its elements in social interchanges. Also, the view of ethnic diversity from a faultlines perspective gives rise to a definition of hybridity that helps understand the relative permeability of the spectrum of ethnic identities. To explain these findings, optimal distinctiveness theory and intergroup contact theory are utilised.

As a basic tenet of the social identity approach, social identities of individuals shape their behaviour and attitudes in social exchanges. Ethnic identities are socially constructed, and embedded in them are the stereotypes associated with different ethnic groups. It is argued here that the historical construction of ethnic stereotypes

in the Malaysian context is such that each ethnic group is associated with both positive and negative stereotypes. In other words, the gradients of social, political, and economic power among ethnic groups in Malaysia cut across each other and the resulting divergence inhibits emergence of clear ethnic power relations. As a result, a narrative of ethnic superiority in the form of racism is not present and instead, the divisions can be more accurately called ethnocentrism, culturalism, or racialism.

The presence of hybrid ethnic identities in a significant portion of the interviewees as well as presence of positive and negative stereotypes of ethnic groups paves the way for ambivalent feelings of individuals toward ethnic groups other than their own. This ambivalence, in turn, allows for a form of tolerance that balances urges to separate and integrate in a diverse group. In other words, the pragmatic Malaysian diversity attitudes are results of simultaneous feelings of appreciation and resentment, products of historical social construction of ethnic identities. This is fundamentally different from the context of many diversity studies in North American and Western European societies and allows for an understanding of identity dynamics that goes beyond equality narratives. The results also support the benefits of a unified schooling system that not only caters to a diverse pupil base, but also teaches and advocates inclusive identities and values.

The perceptions of social injustice and how organisations might replicate them, in which case they are seen as a continuation of the society can result in feelings of unfair treatment in the organisation. If, however, organisations are viewed as being fair to individuals regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, there is a better chance of smooth interactions and work satisfaction. The role of work ethics in an industry where individuals show high levels of professional conscientiousness in breaking social boundaries and facilitating interaction is also highlighted as a driving force behind interpersonal interactions among colleagues.

Organisations can also facilitate positive interactions between individuals by providing commensal spaces of their staff. Observations on the effects the environment and organisational policies on the available socialisation opportunities are also discussed in this part. Accordingly, organisational implications are discussed and suggestions

made. The theoretical implications of this study in defining ethnic diversity and introduction of a different definition of hybrid identities, as well as the role of ambivalence in interethnic attitudes of individuals are discussed in the third section of this chapter. The fourth section of this chapter includes practice and policy recommendations for improving inter-ethnic interactions at the macro- and as well as mezzo-levels of analysis. Finally, the limitations of this study are reviewed and suggestions made for future research in this area.

## **7.2 The spectrum of attitudes**

For the purposes of this study, the researcher conducted 58 semi-structured interviews at 2 hospitals and a healthcare college in Malaysia, which yielded 51 usable interview profiles. In a similar fashion to the wider healthcare industry in Malaysia, the interview base was overwhelmingly made of female respondents (47 females, 4 males). Based on interviews, the attitudes of interviewees regarding interactions outside their ethnic group and how these attitudes influenced the patterns of their interactions with colleagues at organisational groups were analysed.

The findings identified three categories of inter-ethnic interactional attitudes along a spectrum of rejection-cherishing diversity. The first, and smallest, of these categories is named resistant, as for the clear drive to resist interactions with people from other ethnic groups beyond the formal on-the-job interactions. Perception of threat to one's social identity, wellbeing, or way of life, and a largely monolithic social circle where characteristics of this category that are in line with predictions based on social identity approach and faultiness theory regarding rigid social boundaries. These boundaries were mainly based on religion and socioeconomics.

The resistant attitudes were explained somewhat differently for the three ethnic groups. For the Malays, it was religiosity and the fear of spiritual impurity mainly by means of touching or consumption of pork, a common food item food for the Malaysian Chinese. For the resistant Chinese, the main issue was that although they perceived themselves- and by and large, perceived by the society- as being more hard-



working, intelligent, and capable than others, they are treated unfairly. There were no Indian interviewees classified as resistant in this study.

The interactional patterns of resistant category consisted of following formal hierarchical lines while performing job tasks and interacting with group members of similar ethnic background for informal interactions and activities outside work hours. Not surprisingly, the most trusted connection for individuals from this category would come from their own ethnic background. The common theme among the resistant category was being brought up in environments that did not provide many opportunities for inter-ethnic interaction, be it in the form of monolithic schools or residential areas with little diversity.

A total of 10 interviewees showed attitudes that were diametrically opposed to their resistant counterparts. More specifically, they saw diversity as an opportunity and by transcending the ethnic boundaries in the society, they approached people from other backgrounds and forged meaningful, trusting relationships. It was either a positive connotation about another ethnic group or a recognition that individuals from other ethnic groups have access to sources of information or possess abilities and characters that one's own group does not possess was found to be the main drive behind the transcendent attitudes. In a few cases, there was evidence of transition from multiculturalism to intercultural interactions.

The largest category in this classification, called tolerant, is marked by tolerating ethnic diversity and pragmatic decision making in shaping one's interactional patterns. The formal interactions of this category were mostly shaped around hierarchical lines, similar to the other two categories but their informal interactions showed elements of both. While the most-trusted friend for a tolerant person was often someone of the same ethnic background, the tolerant individuals could become best friends with colleagues with whom they have been working for a long period of time. Also in the presence of a flexible person from a different ethnic background who was willing and able to accept and adopt to one's way of life, the tolerant individuals were able to forge deep and meaningful friendships.

Overall, though, the interactional patterns of this category were such that the social boundaries largely remained respected. The naming of this category follows the impression of tolerating diversity, which implies viewing ethnic diversity as a burden. More specifically, individuals in this category, while not being against diversity in their environment, were ambivalent, indifferent, or neutral to it. The factors limiting the inter-ethnic interactions in tolerant individuals were similar to the elements introduced for resistance. However, they were either modified by earlier socialisation opportunities, moderated by experience, or of a lower prominence. With this picture in mind, it is time to discuss the mechanism behind such a formation, how it related to the theoretical framework of this study, and why it matters.

### **7.2.1 social stereotypes and ambivalent tolerance**

While the individual attitudes and views of diversity varied greatly among the interviewees, there was little semblance of liberal or individualistic views. The fact to consider here is that most individuals were not neutral to diversity in a way of seeing people as mere individuals- which would probably lead to 'colour-blind' attitudes. Instead, they accepted the social narratives of the inherent differences between ethnic groups. It was the different interpretation of these accounts by individuals that made the difference. As discussed before, the three categories introduced in this study are parts of the same continuum and thus they can be studied using the same mechanism which leads to different attitudes based on individual circumstances. This section explains this mechanism of ambivalence towards ethnic diversity which is based on the historical and social narrative of ethnic stereotypes.

To do this, the focus will be on the tolerant category, which is the dominant middle ground of Malaysian diversity views; the other categories can be considered extreme variations of this middle ground. The pragmatic approach needed to get the work done can be explained, at an individual level, by the need to make a living and thus to get along with one's colleagues. At the social level, though, the tolerant category and can best be described by seeing diversity as a fact of life and adopting a selective approach to one's social interactions, such as choosing to work with other ethnic

groups but socialise with their own. These choices are the embodiment of the wider ambivalence towards Malaysian ethnic groups, linked to the prevalent social stereotypes that date back to the times when none of these ethnic groups had a dominant position in the society.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the negative stereotypes in Malaysia emerged in colonial times at which none of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia today had a dominant social, economic, or political position. Thus, these stereotypes were directed against all of these communities and being accepted in a plural society, mostly continue to be accepted today. The main stereotypes include the myth of the lazy Malay, the selfish Chinese, and untrustworthy Indian. This system of social notions, while unpleasant, is qualitatively different from narratives developed in presence a clear power gradient, especially in situations with clear historical precedents such as the case with White-African American social relations.

The negative Malaysian ethnic stereotypes started to develop positive counterparts to help make sense of socioeconomic and political realities and perceptions in the society. Some of the clearer examples of these positive stereotypes are that of hard-working Chinese, eloquent Indians, and friendly Malays. The net result is existence of pairs of social stereotypes in contemporary Malaysian society which allows for a balancing act of ethnic views and makes sweeping statements on superiority of one group other others less adequate.

This inventory of possible positions is then used by individuals, considering their prior diversity exposure and experiences, to define the optimal level of inter-ethnic interactions. The availability and justifiability of holding simultaneous positive and negative views on other ethnic groups gives rise to a widespread ambivalence that find its best demonstration in the seemingly contradictory position of a tolerant Malay interviewee who would prefer to socialise with her Malay colleagues, but prefer to be looked after by Chinese nurses in case of illness. Even for the transcendent interviewees, the positive characteristics of the other ethnic groups were part of the positive social stereotypes about them, culminating in e.g. preferring to work with the Chinese to learn their work attitudes. The main different was the emphasis on positive

vis-à-vis negative stereotypes in transcendent and resistant groups, and a situational selection among the tolerant.

Another relevant factor in tolerance was that of hybridity. While Malaysian birth certification does not accept hybridity- such that parents of different ethnic backgrounds need to choose one official ethnicity for their child- hybrid ethnic identities were not uncommon among the interviewees. Considering the social settings of Malaysia, this research offers an extended definition of hybridity as any combination of parentage, heritage, or religion that that places the person outside the ethnic faultlines in the society.

Applying this definition of hybrid ethnic identity, a total of 18 interviewees were considered as hybrid, of which 16 individuals were placed in the tolerant category. Hybrid ethnic identities acted as enabler of social boundary crossing and allowed individuals to reach across the ethnic faultlines to a certain degree. This, however, is under threat by a slow transition from the tripolarity explained by Bangura (2006) to the bipolarity suggested by Brown (2010) in the form of Bumiputera/non-Bumiputera or Muslim/non-Muslim dichotomies.

### **7.2.2 Organisational effects**

In organisational settings, it was seen that the actual patterns of interactions in a diverse group depended on a number of factors. While the workload and rotas would determine the possibilities to a certain extent, it was clear that individuals' attitudinal orientations interacted with the group composition to influence with whom and on what level they interacted. Across the three research sites, Malays made up the majority of the organisations with over 70%, Indians were the second largest group with about 10%, and Chinese the smallest with 6% or lower.

This meant that Malays were always in a majority and not having any trouble finding 'one of their own', applied secondary criteria to form friendship circles, ranging from motherhood and neighbourhood proximity, to interests in cooking or sports. For Indians, it was usually possible to find another Indian colleague/classmate or two to

interact with, and this was the main picture. However, in cases where another Indian groupmate was not available, other units in the organisations provided the social partner, effectively crossing organisational boundaries but staying within ethnic boundaries. Finally, for the Chinese, the main picture was that of social isolation and psychological withdrawal, working hard, keeping busy, and leaving immediately after work to one's social network of family and friends. Depictions above, however, did not apply to the transcendent category, who either assimilated in the groups of Malay colleagues, or formed small groups with other transcendent individuals in the unit.

As expected from a highly regulated industry, organisational hierarchy, medical authority, work routines provided the necessary basis needed for formal interactions. This was enhanced by high levels of work ethics, of individuals knowing that they deal with lives, and that personal issues among them should not affect health and wellbeing of the patients. This points to the fact of professional identity, which is an identification that the interviewees had in common. Nonetheless, social barriers were also present in the formal work relations as well.

While the effects were not as strong as they were for informal relations, the widespread view that ethnic background explains one's character and behaviour meant that generalisations were made based on the attitudes of minority staff members taken as representations of their ethnic groups. In cases where the minority staff member showed cultural flexibility and understanding and made efforts to integrate in the social life of the unit, these views took a positive note. Conversely, in the presence of negative attitudes of minority colleagues, and in the relative absence of other points of reference, the views of the majority of unit staff were negatively affected against the minority ethnic group. Other effects were also seen when certain social stereotypes were used to justify the hesitance to engage with individuals from certain ethnic groups based on their inability or unwillingness to accept criticism and to change.

The organisational structure also interacts with the view of individuals regarding social injustice and shapes their view on the organisation. The issues of representation and hierarchy were shown to be important factors on the perceptions of ethnic minority

staff on whether the organisation is a continuation of the wider society. Of special importance was the effect of affirmative action policies that benefitted the majority Malays, leading to the views of societal injustice towards ethnic minorities.

In the organisations studied, the managerial ranks were dominated by the Malays, as was the ethnic make-up of the employment, leading to the potential for perceptions of unfairness in the organisation, especially regarding promotions. Nonetheless, the unit managers were seen as being fair to their staff, a fact which facilitated day-to-day operations. These effects were moderated the support that the organisation had extended to their employees. In cases that minority staff members had benefited from the organisational support in their education and career progression, the organisation was seen as fair to them despite the organisational structure and the perceptions of social injustice.

The focus of the organisations studied on the English language, which is often viewed as a neutral lingua franca compared to the national language was found to have implications for the psychological safety of individuals. The general perception that Malays have lower levels of English proficiency than Indians and the Chinese led to empowerment of individuals from these backgrounds. This was further assisted by the market forces dictating the need for Mandarin-speaking staff, carving out a niche position for the Chinese staff that possibly helped remedy some of the effects of being in absolute minority.

The two organisations can also be compared regarding the two internal and external environmental factors with effects on social interactions among their staff. The first effect was that of availability of spaces where the staff could have a meal together. Considering the central role of commensality in the culture of the region it can be viewed as an important social interface. At the same time, it can be inhibitor of social contact between different ethnic groups due to the religious barriers. This is why a neutral organisational space would be able to act as a social bridge by facilitating commensality. While this effect was not extensively studied, the more positive ethnic relations in the organisation that did provide such a space could be viewed as a piece of supporting evidence.

The other effect was that of an urban lifestyle that included long commutes in rush-hour traffic conditions. Added the fact that a large number of the staff interviewed at the organisation located in the biggest Malaysian city, Kuala Lumpur, the result was reports of limited opportunities for everyday after-hours socialisation as well as festive period absences, limiting inter-ethnic celebration attendance. Comparatively, the hospital staff in Johor Bahru reported more free time to socialise, as well as a higher rate of attending colleagues' celebrations. Once again, this can be linked to better relations and higher satisfaction of staff in the second hospital, suggesting the role of internal and external environment in enabling inter-ethnic interactions.

### **7.3 Theoretical implications**

This study adopted a theoretical framework based on social identity perspective and the faultlines model to explore the inter-ethnic interactional dynamics in diverse organisational settings. Based on the entrenched nature of ethnic categories and their alignment with language, religion, and socioeconomic status, it was predicted that ethnic categorisations would form ethnic-based sub-groups in the organisational groups and hamper interaction across those sub-groups.

An emphasis on understanding the socially-constructed meaning of diversity informed by the faultlines model helped decode ethnic identities and their interactional effects on individuals. Taking such a view, ethnic diversity was seen as more than simply different nominal differentiators among individuals, but rather a complex product of religion, culture, language, and history. Based on this view, ethnic identity is not one of many types diversity in organisations, but rather representative of many possible types of diversity in and of itself.

The findings on the importance of these elements were mixed. Lingual differences were shown to exist but only as a minor irritation in the form of discomfort felt by Malay when their ethnic minority colleagues conversed in their mother tongues in their presence. There was no evidence to suggest a deeper meaning to this feeling than that caused by incomprehension of the discussions. Contrary to the findings of Luring (2009), the ability to converse in a mix of English and Bahasa Malaysia that

was understandable to all involved was sufficient for the purposes of interaction and knowledge sharing.

The element of cultural differences is one that was invoked as the effects of an innocent 'cultural chemistry' on the interactional preferences of individuals. While existence of cultural homophily is not an unexpected one, the difficulty of defining culture, especially among ethnic groups in one country, prohibited exploration of it in this study. The remaining faultline factors of religion and history, in the form of accepted socioeconomic difference of ethnic groups as well as the experience of policies shaping and redefining the socioeconomics of the country were found to be the main elements of a comparative definition of ethnicities.

For the Malays, whose identity is defined more clearly than that of the Chinese and Indians, the defining factor was the main social boundary for them in interactions outside their ethno-religious community. Of the variety of possible facets of religion, the one concerning spiritual pollution directed at pork consumption was found to be the most divisive and for historical and cultural reasons, directed mostly at the Chinese community. To navigate through this boundary, one of the necessary conditions was found in the way of prior experiences in inter-ethnic socialisation, most importantly in early life. This finding is in line with the intergroup contact theory's assertion that even in the absence of equal status, contact between social categories is beneficial in reducing prejudice and bias (Pettigrew, 1998, Pettigrew et al., 2011).

Instrumental in providing the contact conditions was hometown diversity and diverse schooling experience which can also be seen in the light of Vygotski's social development theory (Vygotskii and Cole, 1978) and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, both of which emphasise the importance of early-life interactions in the development of the cognitive system in childhood, drawing attention to the early inter-ethnic socialisation experiences.

The element of the faultline that was more meaningful for the Chinese and Indians was the socioeconomic history of affirmative action policies, which resulted in perceptions of social injustice. In the cases that an individual's personal experiences did not provide examples on the contrary, the feeling of unfair treatment acted as the



social barrier between ethnic minority persons and Malays. Internal diversity of the Indian ethnic group and the looser definition of the Chinese and Indian ethnic labels meant that religion was not a strong social barrier for individuals from these backgrounds.

Faultline also helped develop a definition of hybridity in segregated societies that was shown to be meaningful in understanding dynamics of ethnic relations. This study showed that even under faultline conditions, ethnic identities do not necessarily follow the dominant social narratives. Hybrid ethnic identities were linked to the tolerant diversity attitudes in what can be seen as permeability of social boundaries. This finding supports optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991), which governs the social category salience via its optimal size of the category such that it satisfies both the need for differentiation and for belonging.

While optimal distinctiveness theory applies to categorisations at the group-level, the extended optimal distinctiveness model allows for the individual to form multiple and complex social identifications in order to maintain an optimal level of differentiation and assimilation along the individual, relational, and collective levels (Leonardelli et al., 2010). This way, it can be explained that while a person identifies with a main ethnic group at the collective level, a distant immigrant ancestry provides the necessary basis for differentiation, allowing for ways out of the ethnic social boundaries.

By considering the possibility of ambivalence in diversity views, this study moves the discussion of intergroup attitudes from a binary positive-negative ethnic narrative such as that adopted by Phinney *et al.* (2007) to a spectrum of attitudes with temporal and situational connotations. Instrumental to this development was the contextual operationalisation of ethnic identities and especially the consideration that the historical development of social stereotypes in Malaysia left open the possibility of simultaneously positive and negative attitudes. The similarity of accepted stereotypes among the three attitudinal categories further emphasises the position as parts of a continuum and not fundamentally different viewpoints.

In one way, the application of faultlines model enables an operationalisation of diversity that questions inclusion of master statuses such as ethnicity, race, and gender as one of faultline elements. Findings a diverse range of diversity attitudes and hybrid identities where it was not expected also questions efficacy of clear-cut notions of ethnicity and ethnic identity as prevalent in mainstream social identity research and political discourse. In the light of these findings, it seems imperative to examine the possible inclusion of ethnic myths and the related construct in studying ethnic diversity in organisational settings.

In conclusion, this study has shown that the analysis of complex social categorisation situations requires careful operationalisation in order to surface the underlying phenomena, as well as a cross-fertilisation between different theoretical perspectives. In the specific field of ethnic diversity in organisations, the findings of this research suggest that researchers need to employ both sociological and social psychological strands of diversity research in order to examine the dynamic interplay between the macro-level, meso- and micro-level factors.

#### **7.4 Practice and policy implications**

This research has implications for the diversity management and planning both at the macro- and meso-levels. At the level of the society, the findings of this research unequivocally suggest the importance of early socialisation in a diverse environment for a person to develop flexibilities necessary to interact freely in a multi-ethnic society. While this research does not and cannot suggest demographic engineering of less diverse areas, it is apparent that individual who attended ethnically-diverse schools are better prepared to live and work in multi-ethnic environments. Based on these findings, thus research suggests extending national-type schools in Malaysia in a way that their ethos is one of inclusion and accepting diversity rather than unifying voices towards a single dominant ethnic or cultural group. In other words, while mixed schools provide much necessary opportunity for students to intermingle at an early age and also for their families to have points of inter-ethnic contact, the cultural

curriculum of these schools should be based on equality in diversity in order to protect the psychological safety of all ethnic groups and not incur identity threat.

At the level of the organisations, this research found that not only the studied organisations did not have discriminatory policies, but also, they were actively seeking to hire staff from ethnic minority background to better cater for their diverse client base. This policy of non-discrimination extended to promotions and the researcher could observe the fact that the representation of ethnic minority unit managers matched the share of their ethnic groups in the total workforce. Nonetheless, perceptions of unfair treatment in the society, whether justified or otherwise, prepared the minds of ethnic minority staff to interpret the promotions policy, which inevitably resulted in more Malay staff being promoted because of their share of the total numbers, as biased and unfair.

This, in turn, affected their satisfaction with their work and loyalty to the organisations which can bode badly for retention purposes. The research suggests more transparency in the process of promotions and appraisals in order to alleviate the potential for perceptions of unfair treatment by minority staff. This study also supports the practice of appointing experienced and fair-minded unit managers as well as the positive impact of organisational support for staff education and career progression.

Organisations can also promote social relations among employees by facilitating informal gatherings at different units in the organisation. The observation that a unit in Hospital JB which included the conference room of the hospital enjoyed better relations among the staff suggests that organisations can provide spaces for informal meeting for occasions such as birthdays which can be utilised by the staff after their working hours in a bid to facilitate personnel interaction. This would enhance the group identity at the work unit and bring together staff from different ethnic backgrounds in enjoyable, informal activities. Although gatherings were regularly planned by the management of the organisations and units, they take the form of formal meetings with a top-down structure of activity-planning that does not seem to be of much help with inter-ethnic interactions.

It was also seen that for practical reasons, the management of the two hospitals in this study, devised shifts in such a way that staff from different ethnic backgrounds filled in the gaps of the staff from other ethnic groups during their festive periods. While this is a common sense approach and is sure to enhance the satisfaction of staff for allowing them more time during their festive times, it reduces the chances of their colleagues to participate in their celebrations. This is a point that requires careful organisational design in order to provide much-needed off times for the staff as well as making sure that the possible inter-ethnic interactions are not blocked.

And finally, this research suggests that there is an opportunity for entrepreneurship with social benefits in the form of promoting culinary interaction between ethnic groups in Malaysia. In principle, very few of the interviewees expressed dislike for food associated with other ethnic groups. However, religious worries stopped Malays from venturing out to taste different type of food available. Chinese and Indians, though not as limited in food choice, largely reciprocated by not frequenting Malay eating places. The basis for gastronomic adventurism certainly exists in Malaysia. Many of the interviewees expressed their desire to try and enjoy foodways of other ethnic groups, as long as it did not violate their religious culinary codes. Popularity of Mamak food as well as Western halal food shows the existence of this potential, as does the emergence of Malaysian chains such as Old Town White Coffee and Secret Recipe.

Nonetheless, there is a clear gap in the market for Chinese halal food. A clear majority of the Malay interviewees expressed a positive desire for Chinese food that they could eat and did not contain pork. While such eateries do exist, they are too small in number and not accessible in most localities. A chain of halal food restaurants that offer food prepared in Chinese ways to as authentic a degree as possible could prove to be a successful business. Under Malaysian regulations, obtaining halal certification for a restaurant includes certain criteria and steps that not all businesses are willing to take on. Nonetheless, the economic imperative is potentially significant, as is the social benefits that such a business can accrue. Being able to sit in proximity and enjoy the same type of food that recognises the cultural and culinary ways of minority ethnic groups in Malaysia is certain to help bridge gaps among the majority Malays and the minority ethnic groups and is likely to result in reciprocal steps.

## 7.5 Limitations and recommendations for future research

This research was done under time, access, and resource constraints which inevitably limit its scope. Firstly, this research is a cross-sectional one and as such, cannot account for the change in individuals' attitudes overtime. There are indications both in the literature and in this research that the temporal dimension is an important one in social relations. A longitudinal study tracking interviewees attitudes and interactions over a period of time required for deep-level traits to become salient through workplace interactions could result in interesting and complimentary results.

Secondly, this research was carried out in the healthcare sector in Malaysia. The nature of healthcare work necessitates trust and cooperation for delivering the services. At the same time, healthcare work is a highly regulated one in which routines are in place for most scenarios that staff may face. Moreover, there is a higher possibility of relative importance of work ethics in the healthcare industry compared to the ones with non-human subjects. Research on inter-ethnic interaction among staff in project-teams which need constant problem-solving and innovation can potentially reveal different interactional patterns and lead to a better understanding of identity dynamics at workplace. Conversely, research in areas in which blocks of tasks can be done independently by individuals would be able to help create a fuller picture of task nature effects.

Thirdly, in line with the wider industry, the interviewees in this research was mainly female healthcare staff. The change in the social interactions after marriage linked to increased responsibilities for women suggests that the findings might have been different for a male-majority, or a more gender-balanced sample. While it is plausible to expect gender effects in this study, the data is heavily skewed in the female direction, leave little room for comparison. The theoretical foundation of this research and the research background of the research do not help with gender-specific theorising either.

However, it can be speculated that male interviewees would have more free time to socialise and therefore have more opportunities for inter-ethnic interactions, another factor could alter this picture. The researcher included religious activities such as

attending prayers together as a social activity that would bring together individuals from the same religious, and therefore ethnic groups. However, it turned out that the force of religious duties, beyond covering one's hair, was not an important factor among females. Attending prayers and religious discussions are considered requirements mainly for the Muslim males. Therefore, the balance of more free time and more religious requirement could mean that males would be more insular when it comes to social interactions beyond their ethno-religious group. Future research could examine the effect of religion by focusing on a male-majority sample.

It was discussed that the evolution of ethnic identities in Malaysia and the related social stereotypes created pairs of positive and negative connotations for each ethnic group, paving the way for ambivalent views. A similar research in a society with historic bipolar divisions as well as one that studies ambivalence in the presence of clear power gradients would enhance our understanding of ethnic relations and power dynamics in different societies. Finally, the interviewees in this research came from lower-middle and middle-class backgrounds. Socioeconomic backgrounds of individuals influence their life experiences and with changes in the economic structure of Malaysia, disparity within ethnic groups has increased. Research targeting lower-class samples or the ones from higher socioeconomic backgrounds would potentially uncover meaningful differences.

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## Index i

Interview ID	HA4		Category	Tolerant	
<b>Organisation</b>	Kuala Lumpur Hospital	<b>Unit</b>	---	<b>position</b>	Healthcare assistant
<b>Gender/Age</b>	51/female	<b>Unit Composition</b>	Malay female unit manager, 2 Malay Male Nurses, 11 Malay Female Nurses, 2 Chinese Female Nurse, 1 Indian Female Nurse, 1 Punjabi Female Nurse		
<b>Place of Birth</b>	---		Hospital CEO Malay Female Dr., Medical Director Malay Male Dr. The highest ranking non-Malay position relevant to nurses: Deputy chief Nursing Officer, Chinese Female.		
<b>Marital Status and Family Background</b>	Married, husband also Chinese. Her parents were from china.				
<b>Researcher Observations</b>	Very active. Was talking on her mobile phone to a doctor. I thought she is the unit manager at first.				
<b>Prior diversity opportunities and experiences</b>	<p>She is from a relatively diverse town, where her ethnic group makes up nearly a quarter of the population. Calculate hometown diversity index: 0.5865 HTD</p> <p>She has studied in convent schools for both primary and secondary education; schools were following the national curriculum, which meant that English was not a language of instruction. The classmates were from different ethnic backgrounds. DSE</p> <p>No tertiary education</p>				
<b>Ethnic and religious identity</b>	<p>Chinese</p> <p>Proud? Of course! IDS</p> <p>Is Buddhist</p> <p>When asked about what about being Chinese is good, she replied "every religion has their own good things, hmmm, so for me Buddhist, I think there is a good thing." Thus, equating ethnicity and religion.</p> <p>RLG</p>				

	<p>"You hardly see Chinese in this [name of the hospital]. We have, but not so many." She believes that Chinese are in minority in that organisation. MST Chinese are more hard-working PEH</p>
<b>Professional identity</b>	<p>1981-1989 in a maternity hospital, 1989-present at this hospital LOE She is flexible, experienced, confident, and task-oriented. TFX TOR</p>
<b>Formal interaction</b>	<p>No problem in asking questions from the colleagues OCR If anything related to her specialty (urology), colleagues will ask her (task-related knowledge) OCR TEK Working her is alright, they are quite cooperative. ".... I feel we have to share. You have to share your knowledge." PSM She would take the risk to point out colleagues' mistakes because "the reason is patient". (task-oriented, strong work ethics, pro-social motivation) TOR WET PSM "For me, I feel I have to tell them. It's for the patient's good. You have to improve. WET On difficult tasks, the unit manager if the point of seeking help. (respecting medical authority) RHY</p>
<b>Informal interaction</b>	<p>Everybody is a good friend! "[a colleague's name], you know [---], I think I'm closer to her so I can vomit out my problem." (the friend is around the same age, Punjabi, one of the few non-Malays of the unit) OBF SCD</p> <p>"I always... because why...hmmm... I always take non-halal food. So usually because here all halal, ok... so usually I go lunch by myself." "I go alone. I don't mind eating alone, I don't mind doing work alone. But Muslims here, they are halal [-food eaters]. So it's not nice to join with them." COM SRT RBR</p> <p>"If I'm alone, I can choose whatever I want. But if I go with them, I have to take their food." SRT</p> <p>Others eating beef in her presence: "I don't mind. I don't eat, but I don't mind."</p> <p>Others (Malays) on pork: "yes, they mind, because of pork. "RAC On who she shares her concerns with: "usually I don't bring family problems to work." ..... "just work"</p> <p>No informal discussions, no after-hours time-spending with colleagues: "either I go with my family or I go alone."</p> <p>So you're a lone hunter? "I can do everything by myself." ISOLATION AT WORK. TASK ORIENTATION. SIO WIS</p>



	<p>A recent social exclusion scenario:  “Recently we have a good one who left. Quite a senior staff. She just left. She is good in her work, but one way make me like I’m not happy is because she just went off without telling, ok?  ...Only to certain people she won’t tell. And they have the farewell outside. They give a farewell to her, not telling us. EEX SIO  Others no. Only Malay people know. This people give farewell without like myself, [name of the friend], we didn’t know anything. I mean is ... I feel it [facial expression of pain] ... why they do that to us. Huh... PFJ RAC  We have been working together for so long! Why do they left us... you know... why they have their own group doing things and ... because we all work together... we are working shift, we are working everything together, isn’t it?  The one who left is a Malay. The people who celebrate with her is their people also. They left out <u>us</u>, the Indian and the Chinese. I feel it’s not fair. Why? Why they are doing like that to us. I mean we are working together.” PFJ</p> <p>Do they come to your house at Chinese New Year? “usually they don’t come to Chinese house.... Because of pork... the things we use, the pots and pans.... So they won’t eat.” SIO RBR SRT  “they won’t eat, usually they don’t come also. But those who is not so HOLY TYPE person, sometimes they don’t mind. They will come if we invite them. The open type person they are ok; they can mix with anybody. But those that holy type person... here, more of holy type person.” RLG  Indians are alright (with eating issues) OEA</p>
<p><b>Psychological safety and trust</b></p>	<p>“...we should learn together... don’t keep it to yourself because of you’re not there, then who’s going to do it? We have to share.”  (concern about others) CAO</p> <p>Indian nurses, I think they are still better than the Malays. PEH ABT  Do you think people here care about each other? “Caring for each other? I don’t think they are so... I feel like we come just to work.” RAC  Do they care about each other in their own group (farewell group):  “yeah, I think caring for them.”  “I mix with everybody. I mix... if you got problem, you tell me, I listen.”  (feeling of being let down. Goodwill behaviour not reciprocated by other ethnic members) RAC  (the interviewee was very hesitant to speak about trust or respect issues, skipped the questions)</p> <p>We have to be [hard-working].... You know in school days, we have to study very hard to get a very good result so that you can get a place in a Malaysian university. Of course the cost is less [compared to studying overseas], so we have to study very hard. (indication of perception of unfair allocation of university places)  This is a very sensitive issue... (the education quotas). That’s why Chinese people work very hard, to get a place, to... you know, because</p>

now education is very expensive. You go to local [universities], the fee is more cheaper compared to oversea. "

Do you think that's fair? "of course not! Even though.... Very sensitive issue, better not to tell."

Later: "so it's like the Chinese, even though they get very good results, still cannot get a place, cannot get a course that they want. They would give you a different course that... in another field." (sense of inequity, unfair treatment) .... Same, Indian and Chinese.... The quota is for Malays." PFJ

"... Scholarships also, yeah, give them more to Malays. Majority of scholarships are given to the Malays, unless you get very very good results.

Fairness in employment: employment in the... you see the civil servant, it's mostly **THEIR** people. (you mean Malays? Yes). PFJ

Even you seen in [the name of that hospital]. I don't know why the Chinese, because maybe they think [the name] is under a Malay group.

On equality in promotions: "you mentioned promotions, of course the Malay get the better chance. They get the chance." PFJ

She thinks it's not fair if she takes food containing pork to the pantry. CAO

On sharing knowledge and pointing out others' mistakes: "but certain people they don't like it. Because they think you are teaching them.

"IRS

She tried hard not to make mistakes because it's regarding patients' life. (Strong work ethic). But when mistakes happen, she takes responsibility. WET

"we criticise everyday everyone." Most of criticism takes that form of gossiping.

Asked if she need to change something in herself when coming to work: "that's what say we don't act, there is no need to. You know, people acting. I'm not that kind of person." CON

Power and feeling of usefulness emanating from language abilities: "...majority of the staff here are Malays. So if the Chinese patient who can't speak Malay, so it's very helpful for them. They are very happy that at least someone [is there] that can have, I mean easily to, interact." LGA CON

Does it give you some power? "yeah, at least we can help them." (work ethics over power) WET

-Would you say that your ward is welcoming, accepting you?

"silence, followed by a little giggle"

-they are happy that you are here?

"I don't know [giggling]. I just come and do my work." BNT

Taking risks in doing new things:

"I need to learn any new things. Because I always feel when you touch it with your own hand, then you can learn." (strong work ethic, task-orientation) WET TOR

She thinks that the staff wearing red shirt in CNY is just for marketing purposes (cynical) CNV

<b>Diversity views</b>	Indians, if they need talking, they are very good. OEA
<b>Other</b>	<p>She speaks English, Bahasa Malaysia,  She doesn't speak Mandarin: 'I can't speak Mandarin because I didn't go to school, in the Mandarin school, in the Chinese school, sorry!' (She expected me to expect her to speak Mandarin. Not speaking Mandarin would limit her depth of socialisation with other Chinese individuals of different dialect groups.) LGA</p> <p>She speaks Cantonese (categorised by her as home dialect) and Hokkien.</p> <p>Speaks a mix of English and Cantonese at home</p>