Research Note

Polarisation and inequality in Malaysia: The future of Malay-Chinese relations

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Abstract: This study examines the extent of polarisation and inequality in the two main ethnic groups in Malaysia, Malays and Chinese. After 50 years of independence and 37 years since the implementation of the New Economic Policy, the current study demonstrates that inter-group prejudice continues to be a problem. In a sample of 195 university students (Malays=97, Chinese=98) results from the Bogardus Social Distance Scale indicated that both groups exhibit more inter-group social distance than in-group distance. Differences in racial attitudes are also found, with Chinese being less prejudiced than Malays. Attitudes with regard to income, wealth and political inequality obtained show that while the Malays identifiy tolerance and understanding as ways of reducing tension between the groups, the Chinese ask for fairness. These results are discussed here with respect to both individual and social-structural factors.

Malaysia, with a population of 26.75 million, is a multiethnic society comprising Malays (54.2 per cent), Chinese (25.3 per cent), Indians (7.5 per cent) and others (13.0 per cent).[1] Together with the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, the Malays are collectively known as *Bumiputera* (sons of the soil). All these different ethnic groups are bound together by *"Bahasa Malaysia,"* the national language, although English is taught and spoken widely in the country.

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The history of ethnic pluralism began with the British, who colonised the country in 1726, and with their "divide and rule" policy laid the foundation for communal division in Malaysia. The plurality of the population and the dualism of the economy fell neatly within ethnic demarcations, and constituted the fundamental underlying basis, which shaped the political interactions of the country before and since Independence. To protect and advance their individual interests, the three main ethnic groups formed their own political parties and came together to form the Barisan Nasional (or National Front) which has since evolved a working relationship that has been the hallmark of Malaysian politics. This working relationship was based on the division and balance of responsibilities: the economic prominence of the non-Malays and the political supremacy of the Malays. In 1957, the Barisan Nasional obtained independence from the British.

In May 1969 communal riots erupted in Kuala Lumpur and elsewhere in the country between the Malays and Chinese. The riots were only the tip of the iceberg of a far more serious and deep-seated problem of a structural nature confronting the society as a result of its past. The riots were then taken as a turning point to re-examine the policies of the country since Independence. Past policies were redressed and the New Economic Policy (NEP) was launched with two main objectives: eradication of poverty and correction of economic imbalances among the ethnic groups. Since the highest incidence of poverty was found among the Malays, the majority of whom lived in the less developed rural areas, the thrust of the NEP was to integrate the Malays into the main stream of commerce and industry and to ensure that they have a more equitable share of the country's economic opportunities.

Observations

The NEP is a strategy of peace and nation-building through affirmative action.[2] Indeed, it has succeeded in reducing mass poverty.[3] However, it has been less successful in eradicating the inequality in earnings between the Malays and Chinese.[4] Further, since its implementaion, there has been a rise in polarisation between the Malays and the Chinese in terms of education, job opportunities and housing. In the current educational system, most Malays send

their children to government and/or religious schools, while the majority of Chinese educate their children in Chinese schools. Malays tend to study in public/government universities where the language of instruction is Bahasa Malaysia while most Chinese study in private universities where English is used. Most Malays work in the government sector while most Chinese in the private sector. And because the private sector is more competitive and pays better than the government sector, there is a substantial earning differential between the groups amplifying perceptions of power inequalities. In many instances, members of each group live in housing areas that are predominantly either Malay or Chinese. Thus, many do not know, nor do they interact with, members of the other group.[5]

This polarisation between the Malays and the Chinese does not bode well for the maintenance of peace in the country. Previously the Malays were politically powerful, but in recent years they have come to depend on the economic strength of the Chinese. In other words, the Chinese as the minority is increasingly wielding political power via their increasing economic might (albeit implicitly). Because such issues are considered "sensitive," they are not publicly addressed and discussed. One place where the discontent can be seen is on the Internet, where people of both groups often vent their hostility towards each other. These are examples of pre-conflict conditions and unless something is done, the present level of polarisation may well undermine efforts to maintain communal harmony between the groups.[6]

This exploratory study attempts to examine the extent of polarisation between the Malays and Chinese. Although many observers have noted that polarisation exists, there is little support in terms of empirical studies due to the sensitive nature of the issue. I chose as participants university students who were told that this was a class exercise to see whether they would be open to differences between groups. In doing so, the sensitive nature of the issue was as much as possible depoliticised.

Method

Participants: Using convenience sampling, 195 undergraduates from two local universities, with 97 Malays and 98 Chinese, were identified. The age range of the sample was between 17-28 years

with a mean of 21.55 years (*sd*=1.72). The majority was females (74.4 per cent) and the rest were males (25.6 per cent). While all the Malays were Muslims, most of the Chinese were Buddhists (81.6 per cent).

Measures

Bogardus Social Distance Scale
Social distance was measured by the Bogardus Social Distance Scale.[7] The scale consists of seven items which quantitatively measures the degree of distance a person wishes to maintain in relationship to people of other groups. Each of the "distance" variables is arranged as column heading, while ethnic group names are arranged as row headings. Participants were instructed to check as many of the seven items as feelings dictated.

In all versions, the scale is scored so that responses for each ethnic group are arranged across all participants, yielding a "Racial Distance Quotient," with a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 7. The higher the score, the greater the social distance; a person willing to allow the closest relationship, kinship, is presumed to be the least prejudiced, while the one who would deny admission of a group to his country is considered the most prejudiced.

Quick Discrimination Scale
The Quick Discrimination Index Social Attitude Survey (QDI) developed by Ponterotto et al. measures attitudes towards racial diversity and can examine both cognitive and affective components of prejudicial attitudes.[8] The QDI is a 30-item, Likert-type scale (where 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree) yielding an overall scale score along with three scores (Multiculturalism, Racial Intimacy and Women's Equality); where high scores indicate more accepting and appreciative attitudes towards race and gender issues.[9] Coefficient alphas are reported; 0.88 for the total scale, 0.85 for the first subscale, 0.83 for the second subscale, and 0.65 for the third subscale. The authors also report promising content, construct, and criterion-related validity for the QDI. For the purpose of this study, only the two subscales of Multiculturalism[10] and Racial Intimacy[11] were included. One item from the original Multiculturalism subscale that was deemed irrelevant to the present context was deleted.[12]

   A factor analysis was carried out on these items to determine the underlying factor structure because of possible differences in the cultural make-up of the sample. Two factors corresponding to the original subscales were identified. However, only five of the seven items loaded on the Multiculturalism subscale. Therefore, in the present study, the Multiculturalism subscale had five items while Racial Intimacy remained as in the original. The Cronbach alpha values were 0.72 and 0.67 for Multiculturalism and Racial Intimacy, respectively.

Other questions

Several single-item questions, relating to whether participants think there is tension between the two groups (on a scale of 1=low to 10=high), on four social indicators were asked.[13] Two subjective questions were also posed. These concerned issues that participants think should be addressed to reduce tension between the groups, and how they foresee the Malay-Chinese relations in the future.

Results

Bogardus Social Distance Scale

Paired samples t-tests were carried out on both groups to evaluate whether there were differences on the mean distance between how Malays and Chinese perceive their own group and the other group. As expected, Table 1 shows significant differences in the evaluation of one group towards the other (Malays towards Chinese: $t(96)=11.20$, $p<.0001$; Chinese towards Malays: $t(97)=11.08$, $p<.0001$). The standardised effect size indices, as measured by Cohen's d, were large (1.14 and 1.12 in Malays and Chinese, respectively).

Multiculturalism and Racial Intimacy Scales

Independent samples t-tests were carried out on each of these scales to see if the two groups differed with respect to Multiculturalism and Racial Intimacy. Results indicate a significant difference between the groups ($M=13.41$, $sd=2.47$ for Malays; and $M=17.12$, $sd=3.62$ for Chinese) on the Multiculturalism Scale, $t(192)=-8.34$, $p<.0001$, but no significant difference on the Racial Intimacy Scale ($M=21.74$, $sd=4.06$ for Malays, and $M=20.93$, $sd=4.22$ for Chinese).

Table 1: Mean Distance Between How Malays and Chinese Perceived their Own Group and the Other Group

Group	Distance		*t*-test	Cohen's *d*
	Mean	*sd*		
Malays on Malays	1.03	.17	-11.20*	1.14
Malays on Chinese	3.19	1.91		
Chinese on Chinese	1.02	.20	11.08*	1.12
Chinese on Malays	2.76	1.51		

*p<.0001

Single-item questions

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1=low and 10=high), participants identified tension between the two groups in terms of income, wealth and politics (see Table 2).

Table 2: Tension Between Malays and Chinese on Several Social Indicators

Group	Income Mean (sd)	Wealth Mean (sd)	Education Mean (sd)	Politics Mean (sd)
Malays	7.29 (2.02)	7.68 (1.85)	6.91 (2.03)	5.96 (2.26)
Chinese	6.33 (1.89)	6.58 (2.10)	6.70 (2.20)	7.61 (2.18)
t	3.41*	3.84**	<1, *ns*	-5.16**

*p<.001   ***p<.0001*

Subjective analyses

The items in Table 3 (in order of importance) were identified by participants as critical issues that need to be addressed to reduce tension between the groups. Both groups identified education as the most important issue of concern, followed by economy, politics and business for Malays and politics, economy and social for Chinese. While the Malays called for tolerance and understanding as ways to reduce tension between the groups, the Chinese asked for fairness.

Table 3: Issues of Concern Identified by Malays and Chinese

Malays	Chinese
1. Education (35.3 per cent)	1. Education (38.6 per cent)
2. Economy (28.4 per cent)	2. Politics (24.3 per cent)
3. Politics (13.8 per cent)	3. Economy (14.3 per cent)
4. Business (11.2 per cent)	4. Social (12.9 per cent)

Note: Percentage did not add up to 100 because some participants failed to respond

In terms of how they foresee the Malay-Chinese relation in the future, while most Malays reported that the relationship would be better, most Chinese thought it would remain the same as now or worsen.

Discussion

Although the NEP can be seen as a restructuring of society to enable the disadvantaged majority to compete economically with the more privileged minority, one of its unforseen and undesirable consequence is the polarisation between the Malays and the Chinese. Education, jobs, earnings, housing, as well as religion are currently structured along ethnic lines. This study with university students highlights that though the issue is sensitive and usually not discussed in the open, it is pervasive and affects them; both groups reported greater social distance from the other group than from their own. This finding implies that both groups are more prejudiced toward members of the other group than their own.

However, the mean social distance of Chinese vis-a-vis Malays was smaller than that of Malays vis-a-vis Chinese, suggesting that Chinese are more tolerant and accepting of Malays. A similar finding was observed with regard to the Multiculturalism subscale of the QDI, where the mean score of the Chinese was significantly higher than that of the Malays (M=17.12 for Chinese and M=13.41 for Malays, t=-.8.34, p<.0001). Contrary to expectation, both groups reported high scores on the Racial Intimacy subscale.

In general, responses to the single-item and subjective questions reinforce these quantitative findings and support our contention that the polarisation between the two ethnic groups is widespread.

Because each group lives within its own culture, socialisation of members of the two groups is expected to be different. Attitudes, beliefs and values are transmitted to the young right from birth via socialisation. Once these are accepted and internalised, they become automatic and very resistant to change.[14]

An important aspect of social cognition is the "in-group versus out-group bias" or social categorisation. Tajfel and Turner demonstrated a systematic in-group bias in groups where "the mere awareness of the presence of an out-group is sufficient to provoke inter-group competition or discriminatory response on the part of the in-group."[15] Furthermore, the mere fact of belonging to one group is sufficient to elicit biased judgments and discriminatory behaviour.[16] Such social categorisation often results in the out-group homogeneity bias, i.e. the belief that there is less variability among members of the out-groups than within one's own in-group. The bias against out-groups is especially strong when the differences from in-groups are very salient as in the case of the Malays and the Chinese.

The study by Hewstone and Ward on ethnocentrism in Malaysia provide some support for our findings on the existence of this bias.[17] In their study on ethnocentric attribution, Malays and Chinese were asked to ascribe internal or external causes to the behaviour of in-group and out-group members performing socially desirable or undesirable acts. Their results showed that in-group bias exists only among the Malays, whereas the Chinese favour the out-group. Hewstone and Ward explained their results in terms of the cultural context of the country and the policies of the government. They suggest that the out-group-favouring attributions of the Chinese may be due to their reluctance to express openly any pro-Chinese or anti-Malay sentiments; or, that as a threatened group, they may feel it is in their best interest to make favourable out-group responses.

Our present finding that the Chinese show more tolerant and accepting attitudes towards the Malays may be attributed to the same reasons. The Malays, as the dominant group, have consistently been indoctrinated with nationalistic government ideology; as a result of which they may assume they do not need to tolerate the minority Chinese. In Tajfel's term, the Malays are a group with a rampant positive social identity. The Chinese, on the other hand, consider themselves a threatened group and, given the political scenario, may

feel they have no option but be less prejudiced or more politically correct.[18]

Contrary to expectation, both groups scored high on the Racial Intimacy Scale, implying that on a personal level, they are open to and can accept members of the other group into their own lives. For the Malays, as Muslims, they are supposed to treat everyone equally and to accept people of other groups as their own. In addition, marriages between members of different groups are quite common in Malaysia. Children of such marriages are usually more open and tolerant, and can relate well to members of their parents' groups as well as other groups. The general phrasing of the items in this scale (i.e. "someone from a different race/racial group as opposed to own race") without specific mention of Malays and Chinese may have influenced the respondents to endorse these statements more positively.

As expected, participants identify tension between the two groups in terms of income, wealth and politics. Due to their perception that they have lower income and less wealth, Malays indicate higher tension in these two areas. Chinese, on the other hand, identify politics as the area of concern because of their perception that they have relatively less input in this area. Education was found to be equally important to both groups and this is seen in their endorsement of it as the number one issue of concern.

While the Malays called for tolerance and understanding as ways to reduce tension between the groups, the Chinese asked for fairness. These responses are consistent with the current reality where the Malays feel that they, as the indigenous people should be allowed the leeway and the opportunity to be as competitive economically as the Chinese. The Chinese, on the other hand, are calling for fairness because they feel discriminated against by certain policies of the government that seem to favour the Malays.

Though stereotypes were not considered in the present study, it is another aspect of cognition that may increase polarisation between the groups. As members of both groups do not know each other well, they tend to fall back on stereotypes to fill in the knowledge gaps. A recent survey on ethnic relations indicate that 63 per cent of Chinese agree that most Malays are "lazy" while 71 per cent of

Malays agree that Chinese are "greedy."[19] Such stereotypes may lead to misunderstandings as well as prejudice. Stereotypes are acquired within the wider socio-cultural context as part of people's socialisation, and prejudices can be affected by historical specificities. For example, present-day Chinese Malaysians, who are citizens born and bred here, would view government policies that seem to discriminate against them very differently from their ancestors, who came here as immigrants. This difference in perception would in turn affect their attitudes towards the Malays.

In terms of how they foresee the Malay-Chinese relation in the future, while most Malays reported that the relationship would be better, most Chinese thought it would remain the same or even deteriorate. These replies again reinforce the previous findings; Malay students will probably acquire jobs in the civil service where, as policy makers, they can assume that relationship between the groups would be better. The Chinese, on the other hand, are not as optimistic because they feel slighted by these policies.

The implication is that in the interest of national unity, the issue of polarisation and its underlying causes should not be allowed to remain sensitive, unaddressed and suppressed. Mahathir Mohamad, the former Prime Minister, once remarked "Malaysia has all the ingredients for racial and religious conflicts." Given this scenario, it is indeed remarkable that the only major incident of racial conflict since Independence has been the May 1969 riots.

Implications and Recommendations

The findings of our study suggest that to some extent policies adopted by the government after the 1969 riots have not entirely succeeded in laying the foundation for a peaceful and united nation. Although at present, the Malays and the Chinese are able to co-exist in a non-violent way, there is clearly a need for a concerted effort to address the unspoken conflicts giving rise to discontent and uncertainties on both sides of the ethnic divide.

A number of measures that can be taken are suggested here.

- Being aware of the social-psychological processes and how they can influence people's behaviour. Both Malays and Chinese need to take an active and conscious stand when dealing with the

other to avoid categorisation, reduce inter-group bias and conflict. Because stereotypes play a central role in prejudice, both Malays and Chinese can be encouraged to treat members of the other group as individuals to reduce their tendency to rely on stereotypes. However, while decategorising people is useful in seeing others as individuals, inter-group stereotypes are not likely to be diminished as long as individuals continue to be seen as representative cases of the group as a whole.

- Treating people as individuals would reveal variability in the members of the other group. Interaction, therefore, has to be personalised on the basis of more intimate, personally relevant information. Hopefully, group boundaries between Malays and Chinese can be reduced to create a new and larger in-group with a common identity as in the proposed "Bansa Malaysia." Another way of reducing group boundaries between Malays and Chinese is through intermarriage, which is historically and contemporarily fairly common.

- Learning to be open, tolerant and accepting of differences in others. This diversity should be used to one's advantage, rather than in terms of discriminating between people. Different ideas, outlooks and views should be encouraged to enrich the larger group. Because children acquire attitudes and prejudices from parents, other adults, peers, and the media, these models must be able to show open and tolerant characteristics. Of course this is easier said than done because many people (especially parents) do not see themselves as prejudiced.

- Since attitudes, beliefs and values are learned, they can be unlearned. However, as these are acquired over a long period, one has to bear in mind that the unlearning and relearning of new attitudes and beliefs may also take time. The school system must, therefore, adopt as part of its curriculum a multicultural education, teaching children about the values of ethnic and religious diversity.

- Amending the education policy by doing away with Chinese and Tamil schools to follow a national school system where non-Malays can opt to study their mother tongues as a second language.

- Increase opportunities for inter-group contact and cooperation. Conflicts between groups have been shown to diminish if both are working towards the same objective and need each other for its attainment.[20] In the Malaysian context, a good example is the *Rukun Tetangga* or the Neighbourhood Watch Program where people living in the same housing area work together taking turns to patrol their neighbourhood to prevent and reduce crimes. This exercise was initiated in the 1970s when there was a spate of thefts and break-ins in many newly developed housing areas. Doing so enabled members of different groups to get to know one another and many inter-ethnic friendships have been formed as a result. This example can also be seen as providing opportunities for contact and interaction between members of different groups who in normal circumstances would not meet and interact with one another thus promoting bonding and friendships.

It is encouraging to note that concerned groups (e.g. NGOs) are taking up the issue of polarisation in various contexts. For example, the Center for Civilizational Dialogue, University of Malaya, together with the Academy for Civilizational Studies, met in July 2005 and drafted a proposal for an inter-religious/inter-ethnic ethics and morality curriculum for national schools. The Movement for a Just World, Malaysian Interface Network *and Insaf,* all hold frequent dialogues on these issues in the hope of making people more aware of the problem so that something can be done about it.

In conclusion, the most serious consequence of the NEP is the growing polarisation currently observed between the Malays and Chinese. This polarisation in education, job, housing, income and wealth inequality, as well as ethnic tension between the groups is a recipe for conflict. Measures to counter this concern are proposed but there must be concerted efforts by members of both groups to ensure that unity is achieved.

Notes

1. Economic Planning Unit, Prime Minister's Department, *Ninth Malaysia Plan 2006-2010*, (Kuala Lumpur: Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad, 2006).

2. D. Christie, "The Practice of Peace Psychology: Entry Points for Peacebuilding Opportunities." Paper presented at the Ninth International Symposium on the Contributions of Psychology to Peace (Portland, Oregon, USA: Portland State University, June 19-29, 2005).

3. From an overall 49.3 per cent in 1969 to 7.5per cent in 1999, MCA: Data and profile on Malaysian characteristics and society, 2005 [online] available from www.mca.org.my/services/printerfriendly.asp?file=/articles/exclusive/2005/3/8, accessed May 10, 2006.

4. In 2002, the average household income of Bumiputras was RM2376 compared to Chinese at RM4279, MCA: Data and profile on Malaysian characteristics and society, 2005 [online] available from www.mca.org.my/services/printerfriendly.asp?file=/articles/exclusive/2005/3/8, accessed May 10, 2006.

5. In trying to achieve the aims of NEP, programmes of "radical affirmative action" were implemented to benefit the majority of poor Malays through a quota system in policies governing education, housing, finance, military, administration, and rural development. Over the years, although the Malays have benefited from such programmes, they have also become increasingly more dependent on government help and subsidy. The Chinese, on the other hand, have adapted to the situation by becoming more independent, resilient and competitive. See M.L. Rogers, *Local Politics in Rural Malaysia: Patterns of Change in Sungai Raya* (Kuala Lumpur: S.Abd. Majeed, 1993).

6. D. Christie, "The Practice of Peace Psychology: Entry Points for Peacebuilding Opportunities."

7. Bogardus Social Distance Scale, 1925 [online] available from www.csudh.edu/dearhabermas /bogardus02.htm, accessed February 9, 2005.

8. J.G. Ponterotto, J.C. Potere & S.A. Johansen, "The Quick Discrimination Index: Normative Data and User guidelines for Counseling Researchers," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development,* 30 (2002): 192-217.

9. J.G. Ponterotto, A. Burkard, B.P. Rieger, I. Grieger, A.A. D'Onofrio, A. Dubuisson, M. Heenechan, B. Millstein, M. Parisi, J.F. Rath & G. Sax, "Development and Initial Validation of the Quick Discrimination Index (QDI)," *Education and Psychological Measurement*, 55 (1995): 1016-1031.

10. Eight items measuring cognitive attitudes with regard to racial diversity and multiculturalism.

11. Seven items measuring affective attitudes toward racial diversity in relation to one's personal life.

12. I think White people's racism toward minority ethnic groups still constitutes a major problem in Britain.

13. Income, wealth, education, and politics.

14. One needs to remember this point because people's attributions or cognitions as adults are dependent on past experiences.

15. H. Tajfel & J. C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory ofIntergroup Conflict," in *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations, eds.* W. C. Austin & S. Worchel (Monterey, California: Brooks/Cole, 1979), pg. 38.

16. M.B. Brewer & R.M. Kramer, "The Psychology ofIntergroup Attitudes and Behaviour," *Annual Review of Psychology,* 36 (1985): 219-243; H. Tajfel ed., *Social identity and intergroup relations* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

17. M. Hewstone & C. Ward, "Ethnocentrism and Causal Attributions in Southeast Asia," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 48 (1985): 614-623.

18. H. Tajfel ed., *Diferentiation Between Social Groups* (London: Academic Press, 1978).

19. *New Straits Times*, March 20, 2006.

20. Sherif's summer camp studies is a good example where conflict is reduced in the groups by introducing a series of super-ordinate goals.