Predicting interethnic bridging social capital in youth ethnic-diversity engagement: the role of interethnic interaction and intercultural sensitivity

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In this study, the authors examined the relationships between interethnic interaction, intercultural sensitivity and interethnic bridging social capital among students of different ethnicities at a Malaysian public university. Results of the regression analysis on data from 447 self-administered questionnaires revealed that while interethnic interaction and intercultural sensitivity are significantly correlated with interethnic bridging social capital at the bivariate level, only intercultural sensitivity has a direct relationship and significantly predicts interethnic bridging social capital. The finding underscores the role of intercultural sensitivity on interethnic bridging social capital development through ethnic diversity engagement.

Keywords: interethnic bridging social capital; interethnic interaction; intercultural sensitivity; youth engagement; undergraduates; Malaysia

Introduction

In youth development studies, youth engagement is increasingly an important issue as youth find themselves in ‘rich choice’ diverse social environments that present development opportunities and challenges affecting their well-being as individuals and members of society. Past studies have shown that youth engagement in a community and society is associated with a number of outcomes such as democratic values (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013), leadership development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007), community-level change (Share & Stacks, 2006), social change (Christens & Dolan, 2011), social competence (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Shernoff, 2010) and social cohesion (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012). In a multiethnic society, interaction and socialisation across ethnic boundaries is a form of diversity engagement and is essential because it influences personal and relational development. From the social theory perspective, interethnic contact and ties are useful for personal and social development because they constitute a form of bridging social capital (Goddard, 2003). Social capital has been defined as the ability of an individual to establish and maintain relations with groups and networks in order to benefit from their resources (Portes, 1998). Pierre Bourdieu was the first scholar to have expounded his analysis on social capital, highlighting the advantages of participation and sociability by contending that ‘the profits which accrue from membership in a group are the basis of the solidarity which makes them possible’ (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Every society has some form of inequality in terms of race relations, ethnic divide or gender differences which may impede or facilitate their

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access to social capital (Cemalcilar & Gökşen, 2014). In pluralistic nation states, the nature of social capital embedded in the cross-ethnic ties hinges on interethnic interaction. Past studies have suggested a theoretical linkage between interethnic interaction and social capital embedded in cross-ethnic ties (Rydgren & Sofi, 2011). While we acknowledge the issue that distribution and accumulation of social capital is affected by socio-economic power and inequality factor (Bourdieu, 1986), the focus of the present analysis is more towards bridging social capital embedded in cross-ethnic ties for youth development in relation to the role of interethnic interaction as a form of diversity engagement. The issue of socio-economic power and inequality, though important, is beyond the scope of the study.

In assessing the theoretical relationship between interethnic interaction and interethnic bridging social capital (defined as the degree to which individuals are integrated in a multiethnic environment and are able to mobilise resources embedded in cross-ethnic ties), the role of intercultural sensitivity needs to be considered as well. This is because interethnic contact and interaction in itself may not be enough or directly affect the development of interethnic bridging social capital. As interethnic bridging social capital is essentially about interaction, connection and access to resources from culturally dissimilar others, intercultural sensitivity in interethnic interaction is assumed relevant. However, empirical evidence on the contribution of intercultural sensitivity and interethnic interaction, both individually and collectively, on interethnic bridging social capital is lacking. Given the knowledge gap and social-educational relevance of interethnic bridging social capital for youth development, the present study set out to test the hypothesised theoretical relationships between interethnic interaction, intercultural sensitivity and interethnic bridging social capital using university students as study sample.

**Social-educational relevance of bridging social capital and interethnic interaction**

Universities with multiethnic student bodies offer opportunities for students of different ethnicities to develop cross-ethnic ties. These ties are important because they constitute a form of bridging social capital (Goddard, 2003). Sandefur and Laumann (1998) assert that social capital carries benefits through the provision of information, influence, control and social solidarity. Fernandez and Nichols (2002) and De Souza Briggs (2007) argue that bridging social capital connects individuals to the social world and resources that exist outside their inner circles. Putnam (2000) declares that bridging social capital leads to the facilitation and creation of new information and ideas, and facilitates social cohesion in a diverse society. Consistent with the above conceptions of bridging social capital, interethnic bridging social capital is defined as the degree to which individuals are integrated in a multiethnic environment and are able to mobilise resources embedded in the cross-ethnic ties. This conception incorporates the idea of individuals’ inclusiveness in a multiethnic society. This conceptualisation of interethnic bridging social capital is consistent with Bourdieu’s (1986) and Coleman’s (1990) conception of social capital at the individual level.

The significance of interethnic bridging social capital to students’ development can be inferred from the educational-social benefits derived from weak ties. Cross-ethnic ties enrich the structural diversity that is present in a multiethnic university setting and creates richer and more complex social and learning environments than ethnically homogeneous environments (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002). Interethnic interaction and social capital embedded in cross-ethnic ties have been found to correlate with a number of positive outcomes, such as reducing ethnic prejudice (Engberg, 2007), developing multicultural navigation skills (Carter, 2005, 2011), increasing egalitarian values (Sidanius, Levin, vanLaar, & Sears, 2008), a more positive self-concept, growth in
problem solving skills and leadership skills (Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006) and commitment towards civic engagement and democratic values (Kurlaender & Yun, 2007).

The relevance of interethnic interaction and civic engagement in fostering interethnic integration and cross-cultural understanding is well supported in the literature. Hurtado (2005) found that students who had the opportunity to have substantial interactions with dissimilar peers were more inclined to engage in social activities to bring about change in society. Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez (2004) demonstrated through their research that students who were exposed to diversity in academic settings were not only more geocentric in their approach but also acquired complex thinking skills to effectively manage conflicts and resolve issues through conciliation. Furthermore, based on a long-term study of six racially integrated schools, all graduates reported that as a result of diversity related experiences in academic settings, they were able to acquire cross cultural sensitivity and understanding – making them better prepared to function in a pluralistic society (Holme, Wells, & Revilla, 2005; Wells, Holmes, Revilla, & Atanda, 2009). And in cross-ethnic ties students can use socio-cultural identities as resources for intercultural understanding and collaboration (Arellano, Torres, & Valentine, 2009; Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004; Hurtado, 2005; Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005).

Interethnic bridging social capital is a social phenomenon that is centred on interaction, connection and resource acquisition-sharing across ethnic boundaries. The positive impact of positive interaction across cultural boundaries has been observed in many past intergroup contact and intercultural friendship studies. According to intergroup contact theory, positive frequent contact across cultural boundaries can be seen in terms of improvements in interpersonal relations across cultural identities (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007; Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009). Accordingly, it is reasonable to expect that individuals who are actively involved in interethnic interaction and socialisation with peers of different ethnicities experience a higher level of bridging social capital.

Linking sensitivity to interethnic interaction and interracial bridging social capital

A discussion on the possible influence of interethnic interaction on interethnic bridging social capital must take into consideration one’s ability to enact positive interethnic interaction and relations. From the social cognitive theory perspective, ability is an important factor that affects behaviour and functioning (Larsen et al., 2004). In the context of interethnic communication and relationship development, one such ability is intercultural sensitivity. Intercultural sensitivity implies the ability to produce a positive outcome of intercultural interaction (Chen & Starosta, 2000) and the capability for managing barriers to effectively work with people across cultural identities (Bennett, 1993). Past studies have suggested that individuals with higher intercultural sensitivity tend to do well in intercultural communication and relationship settings (Matkin & Barbuto, 2012; Peng, 2006).

In examining the relationships between interethnic interaction, intercultural sensitivity and interracial bridging social capital, it is also important to consider the probable confounding influence of self-identification orientation – seeing self either in ethnic identity first or in nationality terms first. Past studies have found that communication and relationships across cultural boundaries are affected by strength of identification with racial or ethnic identity (e.g. Gudykunst, 1991; Stearns et al., 2009; Verkuyten & Martinovic, 2006).

Despite the presumed importance, little is known about the nature of relationship between intercultural sensitivity, interracial interaction and interracial bridging social
capital. To address this knowledge gap, the present study employed multiple regression analysis for examining the contribution of intercultural sensitivity and interethnic interaction on interethnic bridging social capital among students of the three major ethnic groups in a public university in Malaysia. Within the framework of students’ educational benefits and interethnic relations, this study adds to the theoretical understanding of the role of interethnic interaction and intercultural sensitivity in predicting interethnic bridging social capital among students of a university with a multiethnic student body.

**The study context**

In Malaysia, interethnic bridging social capital is an important subject because student bodies in most universities are multiethnic, thus emphasising the relevancy of interethnic integration among students. Promoting and sustaining interethnic integration has been an important nation building agenda in Malaysia and educational institutions have an important role in that. The country is ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse with about 29,906.3 million people in 2013 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2013). Muslims and other indigenous groups represent 65% of the population, followed by Chinese, who mainly practice Buddhism and Taoism (26%), and Indians, who mainly are Hindus (8%). The majority Malay Muslims (54% of the population) hold the most political power, while the minority Chinese holds the most wealth. The country is a relatively young nation, with 41.5% of the population between 15 and 40 years of age and a median age of 26.8 (Population Reference Bureau, 2013). In a published national education statistics for higher education sector 2012 report, the numbers of youth enrolled in institutions of higher learning in the country is estimated around 659,973 (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012) which is about 9% of the youth population. Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dr. Mahathir’s ‘vision 2020’ highlights the significance of interethnic integration and social cohesion in order for the country to be recognised as a fully developed nation among the world body (Islam, 2010). In conjunction with vision 2020, the ‘1Malaysia’ initiative espoused by the current Prime Minister Najib Razak also emphasises the importance of interethnic integration and harmony for political, economic and social stability (Muis et al., 2012).

In order to achieve interethnic integration and cohesion among the youth, institutions of higher learning (a microcosm of a larger multiethnic society), are at the forefront in facilitating interethnic communication and implementing diversity related policies to foster interethnic interaction and sensitivity. Tamam and Abdullah (2012) argue that:

To sustain and further improve harmonious relations among Malaysians of various ethnic groups and religions and to meet the demand for a culturally competent workforce, universities must partake a greater role and assume the responsibility for providing students with diversity experiences. All this is necessary in preparing the young people to be not only technically competent but also culturally competent. (p. 521)

However, it is relevant to note that ethnic diversity in the student body does not necessarily mean students will naturally experience ethnic-related diversity engagement. Universities must provide and promote an environment that facilitates interethnic interaction and enhances cross-ethnic ties. The role of universities in preparing young people to function effectively in an increasingly diverse society is well recognised (Heyneman, 2005; Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012). Even though promoting and sustaining positive cross-ethnic contacts and ties is important, and student–student interethnic interaction is strongly endorsed and promoted by public universities in Malaysia, not much is known on the nature of the relationships between interethnic interaction, intercultural
sensitivity and interethnic bridging social capital among students of various ethnic groups in Malaysian public universities.

The university under study is a premier public research university with a multiethnic student body. Ethnic breakdown of the student population closely reflects the 6:3:1 national ratio of Malay to Chinese to Indian, the three main ethnic groups in Peninsular Malaysia. The university is not only multiethnic in its student population but also multiethnic in its academic staff population. Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnic groups are quite well represented among members of the academic faculty.

**Research hypotheses and question**

Drawing on the above discussion, the present study addresses the following hypotheses and research question.

H1: Interethnic interaction is positively related with intercultural sensitivity.

H2: Interethnic interaction is positively related with interethnic bridging social capital.

H3: Intercultural sensitivity is positively related with interethnic bridging social capital.

RQ: What is the contribution of interracial interaction and intercultural sensitivity, individually and collectively, on the students’ interethnic bridging social capital?

**Method**

**Sampling and data collection procedure**

Self-administered survey questionnaires were used to collect the data. The respondents were randomly drawn from a list of undergraduate students obtained from residential colleges of the selected university. The university is located close to the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Although these colleges had a multiethnic student population, the Malays were the dominant group – about 60% of the undergraduate students were Malays and this matched the ethnic ratio in the country. Three colleges were randomly drawn from a total of 17 residential colleges. These residential colleges were contacted for a list of students and their student room numbers. Only Malay, Chinese and Indian students, the three major ethnics in Peninsular Malaysia, were included in the sampling frame. Random sampling was done from the sampling frame and based on the last three digits of the students’ matriculation number. Approval to carry out the survey was first sought from the college directors prior to data collection. As the university involved in the study did not require ethics approval for non-medical social science survey research, ethics approval from the college directors was sufficient following their review of the questionnaire contents. Trained research assistants met the respondents on an individual basis to invite their voluntary participation. Those who gave consent were requested to complete the questionnaires. The respondents received a token amount of money for their participation. Out of the 460 students approached for the survey, a total of 193 Malay, 165 Chinese and 72 Indian students participated giving a survey response rate of 97%. The samples represent all levels of undergraduate students – first-, second-, third- and fourth-year students, 29.5%, 35.1%, 30.2% and 5.2%, respectively.

**Measurement**

All respondents completed an eight-item interethnic bridging social scale developed for the purpose of this study. The items were specifically developed but ideas for the items
came from Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe’s Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) social capital scale. The eight-item interethnic bridging social capital scale assesses the extent to which students were integrated in the multiethnic environment and were able to draw resources and get support from others of different ethnicities. The respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to the following eight items: At this university, getting to know people with ethnic backgrounds different from my own has been easy; I’m able to find out about happenings in the university from friends of a different ethnic group; if I needed to, I could ask my student friends of a different ethnicity to do a small favour for me. I would be able to get necessary information from friends of a different ethnicity. There is someone of a different ethnicity in the university I can turn to for advice about making important decisions. There is someone of a different ethnicity in the university I can turn to for advice in solving a problem. Reliability analyses of the scale provided evidence of the internal consistency of the items (α = 0.90) for the entire sample.

Frequency of interethnic interaction was indexed using two items with a 6-point scale. The respondents were asked ‘How frequently do you interact with peers from different ethnic groups on this campus?’ and ‘How frequently do you socialise with peers of different ethnic groups on this campus?’ The response scale for both items was: every day, 3–5 days per week, 1–2 days per week, once every week and less often or never. A higher mean composite score on the scale indicates a more frequent interethnic interaction. The alpha reliability of the scale is 0.72.

Intercultural sensitivity items were those from Chen and Starosta’s Chen and Starosta (2000) intercultural sensitivity scale. The respondents were asked to indicate their degree of agreement, on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), to the items on the scale. The scale includes five sub-scales – interaction engagement, respect for cultural differences, interaction confidence, interaction enjoyment and interaction attentiveness. The items were related to individuals’ feelings about interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. The 24-item scale includes the items ‘I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures,’ ‘I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterparts during our interactions with each other,’ ‘I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.’ The alpha reliability of the scale is 0.90. Higher mean scores on the scale indicate higher ability.

The respondents were also required to state their year of birth and the number of semesters they had been at the university, and to mark the appropriate category pertaining to their gender, ethnicity and how they preferred to identify themselves. Responses to the question on orientation in self-identification were categorised into two different groups – identity of self as a member of his/her ethnic group first or seeing him/herself as Malaysian first.

Analytical approach
Descriptive analyses and zero-order correlations were performed prior to the stepwise multiple regression analyses. The descriptive analyses explored variations in the dependent and independent variables. The data were segregated by ethnic group in the regression analyses.

Results
With regard to the sample characteristics, as summarised in Table 1, the mean age for the Malay sample group was 21.09 years (SD = 1.45), Chinese was 21.13 years (SD = 1.31)
and Indian was 21.81 (SD = 1.42) years. There were more female respondents than males in all three samples – 64.9%, 64.3% and 73.7% females for the Malay, Chinese and Indian samples, respectively. The three sample groups were similar in terms of the number of semesters they had been in the university (M Malay = 4.09, SD = 1.66; M Chinese = 4.08, SD = 1.74; M Indian = 4.63, SD = 1.82). More of the Malay samples identified in ethnic terms first. More of the Chinese and Indian samples, on the other hand, identified as Malaysian first, 61.8% and 73.6%, respectively.

The frequency of interethnic interaction with peers differed across ethnic groups. The Indian sample had a higher mean (M = 5.13, SD = 1.203) than that of the Chinese (M = 4.70, SD = 1.224) with the Malays having the lowest mean (M = 4.29, SD = 1.211) [F (2,427) = 13.528, p = 0.000]. Level of intercultural sensitivity also differed across ethnic groups. The Indian sample had the highest mean (M = 3.95, SD = 0.608), followed by the Malay (M = 3.77, SD = 0.479) and Chinese sample (M = 3.70, SD = 0.477) [F (2,427) = 6.295, p = 0.002]. With regards to level of interethnic bridging social capital, the Indian sample had the highest mean (M = 3.89, SD = 0.641), followed by the Malays (M = 3.63, SD = 0.689), with the Chinese sample having the lowest mean (M = 3.45, SD = 0.749) [F (2,427) = 10.467, p = 0.000].

Table 2 presents zero-order correlations between the variables. As shown in Table 2, age was positively and significantly related with the two independent variables – frequency of

| Variable                                      | All (n = 447) | Malay (n = 193) | Chinese (n = 165) | Indian (n = 72) |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|---------------|
| Age (year) Mean                              | 21.22         | 21.09          | 21.13            | 21.81         |
| SD                                           | 1.431         | 1.45           | 1.311            | 1.429         |
| Range                                        | 18–27         | 19–26          | 19–27            | 20–27         |
| Gender Male                                  | 33.80%        | 33.10%         | 35.70%           | 26.40%        |
| Gender Female                                | 66.20%        | 64.90%         | 64.30%           | 73.70%        |
| No of semester Mean                          | 4.18          | 4.09           | 4.08             | 4.63          |
| SD                                           | 1.73          | 1.659          | 1.741            | 1.821         |
| Range                                        | 2–8           | 02-Aug         | 02-Aug           | 02-Aug        |
| Self-identification orientation             |               |                |                  |               |
| As member of ethnic group first              | 44.60%        | 56.90%         | 38.20%           | 26.40%        |
| As Malaysian first                           | 55.40%        | 43.10%         | 61.80%           | 73.60%        |
| Frequency of interethnic interaction Mean    | 4.58          | 4.29           | 4.7              | 5.13          |
| SD                                           | 1.25          | 1.211          | 1.224            | 1.203         |
| Range                                        | 1–6           | 1–6            | 1–6              | 1–6           |
| Intercultural sensitivity Mean               | 3.77          | 3.77           | 3.7              | 3.95          |
| SD                                           | 0.518         | 0.479          | 0.77             | 0.608         |
| Range                                        | 2.6–5.0       | 2.7–5.0        | 2.6–5.0          | 2.7–5.0       |
| Interethnic bridging social capital Mean     | 3.61          | 3.63           | 3.45             | 3.89          |
| SD                                           | 0.72          | 0.689          | 0.749            | 0.641         |
| Range                                        | 1–5           | 1.5–5          | 01-May           | 2.1–5         |

Note: Higher means indicate more frequent interethnic interaction and high level of intercultural sensitivity and interethnic bridging social capital.
Table 2. Zero-order correlations (overall sample).

| Variable                                      | (2)  | (3)  | (4)  | (5)  | (6)  | (7)  |
|-----------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| (1) Age                                       | 0.025 (0.299) | 0.586 (0.000) | −0.018 (0.350) | 0.104 (0.014) | 0.081 (0.043) | 0.104 (0.014) |
| (2) Gender (1 = Male)                         | −    | −0.015 (0.379) | 0.017 (0.360) | 0.011 (.406) | −0.064 (0.088) | 0.015 (0.379) |
| (3) No of semester                            | −    | −    | 0.012 (0.404) | 0.058 (0.110) | 0.038 (0.214) | 0.063 (0.094) |
| (4) Self-identification (1 = Ethnic group first) | −    | −0.159 (0.000) | −0.099 (0.019) | −0.102 (0.015) | −         | −         |
| (5) Frequency of interethnic interaction       | −    | −    | −    | 0.284 (0.000) | 0.219 (0.000) | −         |
| (6) Intercultural sensitivity                 | −    | −    | −    | −         | 0.473 (0.000) | −         |
| (7) Interethnic bridging social capital       | −    | −    | −    | −         | −         | −         |

Note: Figures in bracket are p values.
interethnic interaction \((r = 0.104, \ p = 0.014)\), intercultural sensitivity \((r = 0.081, \ p = 0.043)\) and the dependent variable – interethnic bridging social capital \((r = 0.104, \ p = 0.014)\). Gender and number of semesters were not significantly correlated with the independent and dependent variables. Self-identification orientation was negatively related with frequency of interethnic interaction \((r = -0.159, \ p = 0.000)\), intercultural sensitivity \((r = -0.099, \ p = 0.019)\) and interethnic bridging social capital \((r = -0.102, \ p = 0.015)\).

As expected, frequency of interethnic interaction was positively and significantly related with intercultural sensitivity \((r = 0.284, \ p = 0.000)\) and interethnic bridging social capital \((r = 0.219, \ p = 0.000)\). It was found that intercultural sensitivity was positively and significantly correlated with interethnic bridging social capital \((r = 0.473, \ p = 0.000)\). There was no multicollinearity problem because none of the main variables highly correlated with each other.

Results of stepwise regression analyses by ethnic group are presented in Table 3. The frequency of interethnic interaction, self-identification orientation and age were excluded variables. As shown in the Table 3, only intercultural sensitivity was found to significantly contribute to interethnic bridging social capital. The findings hold true for all three ethnic groups. Nevertheless, the strength of contribution varies across the three ethnic groups. Intercultural sensitivity explained 23.4% of the variance \([F (1,191) = 58.237, \ p = 0.000]\) in interethnic bridging social capital for the Malay group. The same predictor explained slightly less, 19.7% \([F (1,163) = 33.175, \ p = 0.000]\) and 16.9% \([F (1,70) = 17.150, \ p = 0.000]\) of the variance in interethnic bridging social capital for the Indian and Chinese samples, respectively. The findings clearly indicate that intercultural sensitivity is the only significant predictor of interethnic bridging social, although frequency of interethnic interaction correlates significantly with interethnic bridging social capital at the bivariate level.

### Discussion and conclusion

This study was carried out to examine the relationships between interethnic interaction, intercultural sensitivity and interethnic bridging social capital among university students, taking one Malaysia public university with a multiethnic student body as the study site. The impetus of the study comes from the gap in the literature on factors affecting students’ interethnic bridging social capital. Intercultural bridging social capital is conceptualised as an indicator of integration and inclusiveness in a multiethnic society, and seen as an outcome of ethnic-related diversity engagement experiences. Results of the bivariate correlations analysis lend support to the hypothesised positive relationships between frequency of interethnic interaction and intercultural sensitivity (H1), and between frequency of interethnic interaction and intercultural sensitivity with interethnic bridging

| Variable          | Malay         |  | Chinese        |  | Indian        |  |
|-------------------|---------------|  |               |  |              |  |
|                   | \(\beta\)     | \(t\)-value | \(B\)          | \(t\)-value | \(\beta\)     | \(t\)-value |
| Intercultural sensitivity | 0.483         | 7.631\*       | 0.411         | 5.760\*       | 0.444         | 4.141\*       |
| \(R^2\)           | 0.234         | 0.169        | 0.169         | 0.197        |
| \(F\)             | 58.237        | 33.175       | 17.150        |
| df                | 1, 191        | 1, 163       | 1, 70         |
| \(P\)             | 0.000         | 0.000        | 0.000         |

Note: \(^*p < 0.01\); Frequency of interethnic interaction, self-identification orientation and age are excluded variables.
social capital (H2 and H3). The findings are in line with past studies suggesting the positive role of ethnic-related diversity communication experience in higher education practices (e.g. Arellano et al., 2009; Chang et al., 2004; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Hurtado & Ponjuan, 2005; Milem et al., 2005; Saenz et al., 2007; Stearns et al., 2009). The present findings suggest that students who experience ethnic-related diversity through frequent interaction and socialisation with peers of different ethnicities are more likely have a higher level of intercultural sensitivity. We are not assuming causal relationship as development in intercultural sensitivity could further enhance engagement in interethnic interaction and socialisation. Both interethnic interaction and intercultural sensitivity are correlated significantly with interethnic bridging social capital.

However, the nature of relationships of interethnic interaction and intercultural sensitivity with interracial bridging social capital are not the same. Results of the stepwise regression analysis clarify the relationships further. Intercultural sensitivity is the only variable to have a direct positive relationship with interethnic bridging social capital and is a significant predictor. The relationship of frequency of interethnic interaction to interethnic bridging social capital, on the other hand, is indirect and interethnic interaction is not a significant predictor. This means frequent interethnic interaction is not enough but it is the quality that matters more with regards to level of interethnic bridging social capital. The argument here is quality of interaction is much associated with abilities to interact and relate to culturally dissimilar others effectively, that is intercultural sensitivity. This reasoning is in line with findings of past studies that individuals with higher intercultural sensitivity tend to do well in intercultural communication and relationship settings (e.g. Hurtado, 2005; Peng, 2006; Matkin & Barbuto, 2012).

Overall, the major contribution of the present study lies not only in providing evidence but more importantly in clarifying the role of interethnic interaction and intercultural sensitivity on interethnic bridging social capital, thus underscoring the theoretical and practical significance of intercultural sensitivity for the purpose of cultivating students’ interethnic bridging social capital through ethnic-related diversity engagement. What the findings mean is engagement in interethnic interaction as a form of ethnic-related diversity experience for bridging social capital development is facilitated by intercultural sensitivity. The practical significance of intercultural sensitivity to students of the university being investigated is thus obvious. Hence, what the university can do is to reasonably enhance intercultural sensitivity which, in turn, will heighten interethnic bridging social capital among the students. In addition to endorsing, promoting and enhancing greater positive cross-ethnic interaction among students, the university should provide students with greater opportunities for intercultural sensitivity development through well-designed programmes. The university should implement soft skills development instructional programmes both in and out of classroom activities to enhance students’ intercultural competencies in which intercultural sensitivity is one of the core domains of intercultural competencies. Programme such as cross-ethnic pairing in campus dormitories (Espenshade & Radford, 2009), cross-ethnic buddy project (Campbell, 2012) and ethnic-related service learning have found to impact positively on students’ cultural competencies (Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, & Yee, 2000) and civic-engagement (Bowman, 2011). If the universities want to improve or strengthen interethnic bridging social capital among the students, they must deliberately provide the students greater access to ethnic-related diversity experiences by increasing opportunities for greater interethnic contact and interaction beyond classroom settings. Certified ethnic-related diversity co-curriculum programmes should provide added value to the students from their engagement in the co-curriculum programme.
In view of the growing diversity and democracy in the society, among the many important roles that university educators must play today is to assist students in engaging fully with ethnic-diversity rather than acknowledging or appreciating it from a distance. Having an ethnically diverse campus environment will not, by itself, necessarily promote interethnic contact and interaction and develop cultural competencies. Universities must prepare them with social competencies to navigate the diversity that surrounds them, and get them interested in and drawn to ethnic-related diversity. The students must be able to interact with ethnically dissimilar others in a way that promotes growth, understanding and inclusiveness that enhances social capital.

The present study was carried out in a public university with predominantly Malay students. Although this study is a step towards raising important questions and revealing the critical factor influencing interethnic bridging social capital among students, the generalisability of the findings is limited to universities with a similar context. In addition to replicating the study in other public universities with a similar context, a similar study should be replicated in private universities where Malay Muslim students are the minority to see whether the patterns in the findings can be replicated. It is also important to note that studies in a university context may have limited generalisability to other settings in Malaysia. University students may have common characteristics that facilitate the formation of social capital. Because the generation of social capital is of wider significance in the country, replication studies should be done with other social groups. Finally, to enable a better and more comprehensive understanding of the issue at hand, a model of drivers of and barriers to interethnic bridging social capital in an increasingly diverse campus environment, both individual- and institutional-level variables, should be developed.

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