Interracial communication and perceptions of the compatibility of different races among Malay and non-Malay students in a public university in Malaysia

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Abstract

Drawing on contact theory and the theory of cognitive development, educators and policy makers have encouraged students of different races to intermingle. However, the benefits of such contact in a Malaysian multiracial public university in which there is no real racial majority have not been adequately assessed. This study examined the extent to which interracial communication with peers contributes towards students’ perceptions of the compatibility of different races. A total of 377 students participated in this self-administered survey. The results of the stepwise regression analyses showed that the quality of the students’ interracial communication with their peers (not the intensity of the interracial communication) was a significant predictor of their perceptions of the compatibility of different races. This applied to both the Malay and the non-Malay students. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings were discussed.

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1. Introduction

Interracial interaction in a multicultural university is an important practice and a significant area of inquiry. This is because a multicultural university setting is a microcosm of a larger multicultural society (Marcus et al., 2004), and because interaction between students of different races is a form of diversity in an educational environment (Gurin & Nagda, 2006) which provides opportunities for students to experience cultural differences, learn about students who are different from themselves, and develop positive interracial attitudes. Positive cross-race social experiences during university should lead to more fruitful cross-race relations later in life.

While there is substantial evidence supporting the benefits of intergroup contact, it is not clear whether the benefits observed in the West would be replicated in non-Western settings, or what aspects of this interaction are particularly important. In the context of multicultural public universities in Malaysia, what effects do the intensity

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and the quality of students’ interracial communication with their peers have on their perceptions of the compatibility of Malay and non-Malay students?

1.1. Research context

Previous studies in Malaysia (e.g. Jamil et al., 2004; Yeoh, 2006) have not yet examined the relationship between interracial communication and perceptions of the compatibility of different races among students at multicultural universities. Interracial communication studies need to go beyond descriptive analysis in order to gain a better understanding of which aspects of this interaction are more important. In addition, previous studies suffer from methodological shortcomings. The construct frequency of interracial contact has been inadequately measured, as the questions used did not specify the timeframe in which the frequency of interaction was to be measured.

Interracial contact has been extensively studied in the West, primarily in terms of host-immigrant/sojourner relations, and usually within a framework of assimilation or adaptation. In Malaysia, the context in terms of race relations is different. There is no such host-immigrant relationship, and there is no ‘real’ majority or minority; the Malays have the political power, but the Chinese possess the economic power (Baharuddin, 2005). This type of multicultural society thus provides a good foundation upon which to examine the effects of students’ interracial interaction with their peers on their perceptions of the compatibility of undergraduate students of different races.

1.2. Theoretical perspectives

Intergroup contact brings about a range of positive outcomes. In institutions of higher education, it should lead to educational outcomes such as cultural awareness, racial understanding, and positive perceptions of the compatibility of different races (Saenz & Misa, 2006). According to cognitive-developmental theories, interracial interaction enables students to deepen their own understanding of themselves and others, and allows them to experiment with new relationships. This allows students to discover that basic values are consistent across racial groups, and to believe that differences are not inevitably divisive to the social fabric of society (Gurin & Nadga, 2006).

Interracial interaction does not, in itself, guarantee the aforementioned positive outcomes. Several conditions must be present in order for this contact to bring about positive outcomes (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003). These conditions, it is assumed, are present in universities, as universities are supposed to provide equal opportunities for participation in educational programs, and to promote collaborative learning among students of different races, so that they benefit from the resulting diversity. In examining the influence of interracial communication, the factor of quality needs to be included alongside the factor of intensity (Saenz and Misa, 2006).

Students from different racial groups are likely to experience diversity on campus in different ways (Smith, Bowman, & Hsu, 2007), and it is likely that such contact affects different racial groups in different ways (Hulualani et al., 2004). The racial composition of the university program and the residential colleges, classroom diversity, age and gender are all potential confounding variables (Marcus et al., 2004; Saenz & Misa, 2006). Therefore, these variables need to be factored into the analysis of the relationship between interracial communication and perceptions of the compatibility of different races.

1.3. Hypotheses and research questions

Drawing on the discussions outlined above, the present study tests the following hypotheses, and will determine the extent to which the variation in perceptions of the compatibility of difference races among students can be explained by the intensity and quality of the students’ interracial interaction with their peers.

H1: The intensity of interracial interaction with peers is positively and directly related to the perceived compatibility of different races for both Malay and non-Malay students.

H2: The quality of interracial communication is positively and directly related to the perceived compatibility of different races among both Malay and non-Malay students.
2. Method

2.1. Sampling and data collection procedure

The participants comprised 164 Malay, 158 Chinese and 55 Indian students who completed the self-administered questionnaires. They were randomly selected (based on the last three digits of their matrix number) from a list of the students in three residential colleges of a multicultural public university. Although these colleges were multiracial, Malay students make up about 60 percent of the student population.

2.2. Measurement

The intensity of the students’ interracial communication with their peers was measured using a single question: “On average, how many minutes per day [(1) none; (2) fewer than 15 minutes; (3) 16-29 minutes; (4) 30-59 minutes; (5) 60-120 minutes; (6) more than two hours] do you spend interacting with peers of other races on campus?” The quality of the students’ interracial communication with their peers of difference races was indexed with three questions. A composite score was computed, providing an index of the quality of the students’ interracial communication with their peers. The questions were: “Overall, how do you rate the quality of your interaction with your peers of difference races on campus?”, with the following options for response: (1) very superficial to (5) very meaningful; “In general, how comfortable are you in your interaction with your peers of difference races on campus?”, with the following responses: (1) very uncomfortable to (5) very comfortable, and “In general, how would you rate the quality of your interaction with your peers of difference races on campus?”, with the potential responses: (1) very poor to (5) very good. The reliability coefficient of the scale was .75.

The students’ perceptions of the compatibility of different races were measured with eight Likert items on a five-point scale, ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Examples of the items on the scale include: “Since coming to this university, I have enjoyed learning about the experiences and perspectives of other racial groups”, and “My experiences since coming to this university have led me to become more understanding of racial differences”. The scale was shown to be reliable, with a coefficient value of .90.

The respondents were also asked “What is the racial make-up of your residential college?” The respondents reported that more than 60 percent Malays were categorized in predominantly Malay student residential college. Classroom diversity was indexed with two questions, with possible responses of (1) none; (2) very little; (3) some; (4) lots and (5) a great deal: “How much exposure have you had in classes to information/activities devoted to understanding others of a different race?” and “How much opportunity you have had for contact and interaction with other students of different races in classes?” A composite score was computed, with a higher score indicating greater classroom diversity. The scale had a reliability coefficient of .60. The respondents were also asked to provide their race, gender and year of birth.

2.3. Data analysis

The participants were categorized into two groups—Malay and non-Malay. A t-test was performed in order to determine whether there were any significant differences between Malay and non-Malay students in terms of the variable studied. Separate stepwise regression analyses were performed on the Malay and non-Malay samples.

3. Results

The Malay and non-Malay were comparable and were not significantly different with regard to age, gender ratio, the racial composition of the academic program or classroom diversity (see Table 1). The Malay and non-Malay differed significantly in their mean scores regarding the intensity and quality of their interracial communication. The non-Malay had a higher mean score for the intensity of their interracial communication with their peers ($M_{\text{non-Malay}} = 3.07$, $M_{\text{Malay}} = 2.47$, $t = -3.451$, $p < .05$), and a higher average quality of interracial communication with their peers ($M_{\text{non-Malay}} = 3.36$, $M_{\text{Malay}} = 2.22$, $t = -1.917$, $p < .05$). Although the mean scores for the non-Malay were significantly higher than the mean scores of the Malay, all of the mean scores were slightly below the theoretical mid score of
suggesting a less satisfactory level of the intensity and quality of interracial communication with peers among the respondents. The Malay and non-Malay were not significantly different in terms of their perceptions of the compatibility of different races (\(M_{\text{Malay}} = 3.26\) and \(M_{\text{non-Malay}} = 3.56\)). The mean scores of both groups were above the theoretical mid score of 3.0, suggesting that both groups had favorable perceptions of the compatibility of different races.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of variables

| Variable                                      | Mean (Overall (N = 355)) | Mean Malay (N = 164) | Mean Non-Malay (N = 213) | t-value |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|---------|
| Age (year)                                    | 22.29 (1.433)            | 22.18 (1.442)        | 22.38 (1.464)            | -1.297  |
| Gender (1 = male)                             | .32 (.467)               | .26 (.444)           | .33 (.472)               | -1.370  |
| Racial composition of academic program (1 = predominantly Malay) | .56 (.496)               | .59 (.494)           | .54 (.499)               | .972    |
| Classroom diversity\(^1\)                     | 2.47 (.536)              | 2.47 (.536)          | 2.46 (.530)              | .043    |
| Intensity of interracial communication\(^2\) | 2.88 (1.330)             | 2.81 (1.032)         | 3.07 (1.105)             | -3.451* |
| Quality of interracial communication\(^3\)    | 3.31 (.719)              | 3.22 (.690)          | 3.36 (.712)              | -1.917* |
| Compatibility of different races\(^4\)       | 3.59 (.739)              | 3.62 (.698)          | 3.56 (.754)              | .777    |

Note. \(^1\) Scores ranging from 1 to 4, where a higher score means greater classroom diversity; \(\alpha\) (two items) = .60.
\(^2\) One-item scale: scores ranging from 1 to 6, where a higher score means a greater intensity of interracial communication.
\(^3\) Scores ranging from 1 to 6, where a higher score means a higher quality of interracial communication; \(\alpha\) (three items) = .75.
\(^4\) Scores ranging from 1 to 5, where a higher score means a greater perceived level of the compatibility of different races; \(\alpha\) (eight items) = .90. Figures in brackets are standard deviations. * Significant at .05 level.

The intensity and quality of interracial communication and the students’ perceptions of the compatibility of different races were significantly correlated for both racial groups (r ranges from .19 to .48, \(p < .05\)). However, the results of the stepwise regression analysis showed that only the quality of the interracial communication with the students’ peers had a directly significant relationship with their perceptions of the compatibility of different races for both the Malay (Beta = .479, \(t = 6.943\), \(p < .05\)) and the non-Malay samples (Beta = .399, \(t = 6.319\), \(p < .05\)). The quality of the students’ interracial communication with their peers explained 22.5 percent (\(F = 48.203\), \(p < .05\)) and 15.5 percent (\(F = 39.930\), \(p < .05\)) of the variance in the perceived compatibility of different races for the Malay and non-Malay samples respectively. The analysis failed to find support for H1 but found support for H2.

Table 2. Stepwise regression predicting the perceived compatibility of different races

| Predictor                                      | Malay (N = 155) | Non-Malay (N = 180) |
|------------------------------------------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Quality of interracial communication\(^*\)     | .479*          | .399*               |
| Adjusted R-square                              | .225           | .155                |
| F-value\(^*\)                                  | 48.203*        | 39.930*             |

Note. * Significant at .05 level. The variables of age, gender, the racial composition of the academic program, classroom diversity and the intensity of interracial communication were excluded in the analysis.

4. Discussion

This analysis has determined the influence of two aspects of students’ interracial interaction (intensity and quality) with their peers on their perceptions of the compatibility of different races among the student in a multicultural university in Malaysia. This study has shown that the intensity of interracial communication was not a predictor of perceptions of the compatibility of different races for both the Malay and the non-Malay groups, suggesting that simply having contact with other races is not enough. Instead, the quality of the interracial communication is more important than frequency of interaction. The quality of the interracial communication has a significant, positive and direct relationship with the students’ perceptions of the compatibility of different races. These findings suggest that students may be engaged in interracial communication on one level. However, on another level, students may not benefit from frequent interaction when the interaction is of a poor quality. These
findings support the claims made in previous research, in that the nature of the contact (rather than the amount of contact) will lead to positive contact outcomes (Berryman-Fink, 2006).

From an educator perspective, ensuring that students are able to engage in quality interracial communication is more important than frequent interaction. High quality communication is characterized as personalized, meaningful and non-superficial interaction. The quality of the interracial communication alone explained approximately 23 percent of the variance in perceptions of the compatibility of racial differences. The level of variance explained by this variable was much lower for the non-Malay participants (approximately 16 percent). The reason for this difference is unknown. Nevertheless, these findings show that quality has a differential influence on the outcome variable, which is consistent with the assertion that students of difference races may experience interracial communication and race relations in different ways (Smith, Bowman, & Hsu, 2007). These findings are also in line with one of the principles of positive intergroup contact, which is the provision of opportunities for personalized interaction (Berryman-Fink, 2006; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003). We reasoned that when students engage in personalized and meaningful interracial communication, they are communicating at an interpersonal level of cross-race communication, rather than at an intergroup level.

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that variation in students’ perceptions of the compatibility of different races as an outcome of interracial interaction is more closely connected to individual differences, rather than group differences, and is also linked to the quality of the interracial communication. Regardless of the age and gender of the students and the structural diversity of the environment in which they lived, the quality of interracial communication had a significantly effect on their perceptions of the compatibility of different races. The implication of this study is, in addition to instructing students to engage in more interracial communication and to socialize with their peers, universities should focus on enhancing the ability of students to engage in meaningful cross-race interaction. Specific intervention programs must be designed in order to enhance their interracial communication competencies. Students need to know what communication styles and interactional strategies allow cross-race communication to be mutually satisfying.

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