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 multicultural 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 contributed towards students' perceptions of the compatibility of different races. A total of 377 students participated in the 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 interpersonal 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.

Keywords: Interracial communication; compatibility of different races; students; Malay; non-Malay; Malaysia

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 (Ouirieh & 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...