A Review of Racial Microaggression in Malaysian Educational System and Its Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

This paper reviews other forms of racial oppression among Malaysian students in the business of their school and campus life day. It begins with a brief demographic background of Malaysia as a pluralistic country together with explanation pertaining to the aspirations of its diverse society. Then, it reviews some literature and findings revealed from previous studies concerning various racial microaggression issues in Malaysia with reference to schools and higher learning institutions. The challenges reviewed in this paper may be relevant to the administrative parties concerned and educational practitioners mandated to manage and train these diverse students. Other than that, this paper also provides insights into the multiracial Malaysians, especially the majority race students concerning the sense of oppression and discontent that their other ethnic peers may feel resulting from the present distinctive practice of ethnic polarisation. This paper argues that microaggression is on the rise among Malaysian youngsters and this problem stems from the environment that shapes their learning landscape.

Keywords: Malaysian university student, microaggressions, racial background, ethnic group

1. Introduction

A and B are excellent students in Malaysia who studied with gusto for they knew that only through education could they secure a bright, promising future to escape from their low socioeconomic status. However, when the time came for them to pursue their studies at university, Student A was offered financial support from government's matriculation program which Student B stood only a 10% chance of getting despite their equally outstanding results. So, Student B had to look for and compete for a university place elsewhere. Since Student B was not offered a government scholarship, he had to rely on his family as the sole funder for his tertiary education. What is so special about Student A that Student B could not compete with him? They are both top scorers and all-rounds in various areas. The only criterion that sets them apart is that Student A is a Bumiputera (Note 1) (son of the soil) whereas Student B is non-Bumiputera. The matriculation programme is a pre-university course exclusively created with the purpose of optimising the chances for Bumiputera to study in the fields of science, technology and applied arts (Yi, 2019). This is in line with a statement by former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad who claimed the Matriculation as a "back door" to access public university education for Malays so that they stood a higher chance of entering university (Augustin, 2019). The poly-ethnic population in Malaysia is being governed through policies that appear to favour certain ethnic group over others. As a result, Malaysian education and schooling system can be classified as "highly politicised and ethnicised" (Joseph, 2008, p.183).

In Malaysia, more than 80 ethnic groups live in close proximity to each other with complete freedom to maintain their separate cultural identities and religion, as stated in Article 11 (1) of the Malaysian Constitution (Adil, 2007). In reality, ethnically diverse societies are extremely difficult to govern, and Malaysia has proven to the world that multi-ethnic citizens can live harmoniously together despite their differences. Malaysia Unity Foundation trustee, Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye once said,

> In the new Malaysia, playing the race card is no longer acceptable and all Malaysians must look beyond race and religion for the larger interest of the nation and its future development while respecting the constitutional rights of all …We must remember that tolerance and respect between the ethnic groups as enshrined in the Federal Constitution and Rukun Negara holds the key to peace and harmony in a multiracial and religious country like Malaysia (The Star, March 11th, 2019).

The above statement implies that Malaysians from all ethnic groups are called to unite in order to propel national aspirations. The existing peaceful relations need to be properly maintained to avoid any unwarranted conflict or racial polarisation that could lead to racial discord, lack of understanding and mutual respect (ibid). This goes in line with Mustapha et al. (2009) who claimed that issues related to the ethnic division are highly debatable due to the existence of various social boundaries stemming from the various privileges granted to individual ethnic groups. They referred to the tragic "bloody ethnic cleansing" in Yugoslavia in 1992 as an example of the disastrous consequences that could occur if diverse ethnics are overly protective of their "ethno-political supremacy" (p.35). This tragedy is in fact similar to the racial riot we had back then in 1969 known as the 13th May Tragedy which serves as an extremely tragic date in the history of the nation (Coletta, Lim & Kelles-Viitanen, 2001). Besides territorial conquest or the killing of community members referred to above, another form of threat which is less visible, yet may result in inter-racial conflict is the "suppression of society's expression of its own identity and interference with its ability to reproduce itself" (Collin, 2006, p.299). This is the central point of this paper. It stresses that there has been another form of suppression existing between the races in this country resulting from the ever-changing and imbalance in the educational system's administration. It stems from the basis that schools and universities are the centre grounds where racial identity and culture are transmitted and thus the constantly changing policy certainly impacts on individuals, particularly those belonging to minority group. Undoubtedly, education policy and practice are viewed as the reasons for the protest movements of vociferous groups and organisations like the Chinese educationalist group who claim to be pressure groups to safeguard their identity within the national education system.
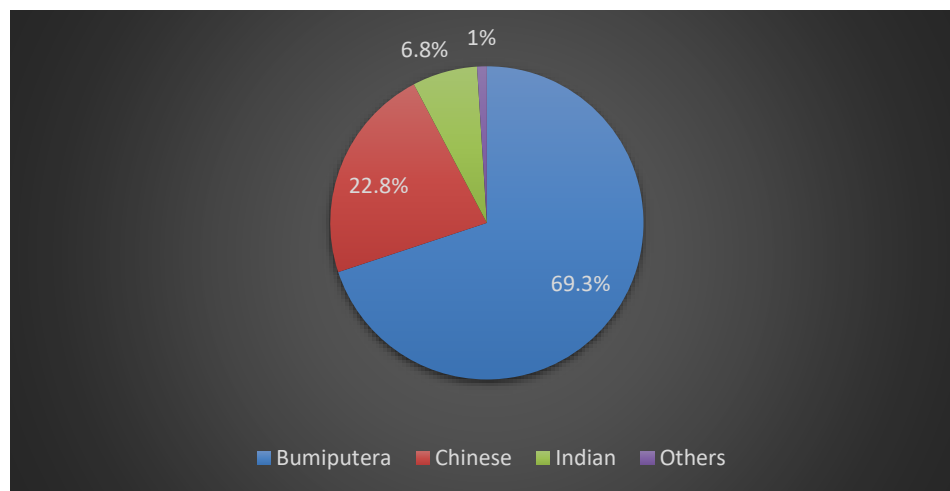

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of population by ethnic group, Malaysia, 2019

As of July 2019, the population of Malaysia was 32.5 millions (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2019) with the Bumiputera (sons of the soil) dominating at 69.3% followed by the Chinese (22.8%), Indians (6.9%) and others (1.0%). Bumiputera is the largest ethnic group comprising of the Malays and other indigenous peoples of South East Asia, with more than half the total ethnic population of Malaysia. According to Coletta, Lim and Kelles-Viitanen (2001), the integration of all the multiracial Malaysians is very vulnerable as they are prone to inter-ethnic clashes because of their respective ethnic practices. They assert the culture of "Malays remain Malays, and non-Malays remain non-Malays" (p.227) as the key factor that inhibit racial integration in the country and thus ignite the racial tension. According to Albury and Aye (2016), Malaysia is on its way to being known globally as "superdiverse" among sociolinguistic thinkers for its blend of "ethnicities, languages and religions" (p.71) that shapes the introduction and implementation of constantly reviewed policies for its citizens.

In relation to the government's mission of creating a sense of unity at the heart of all Malaysian citizens despite their diverse racial and cultural background, the role of educational institutions is undeniably important. Education can provide the clay from which future Malaysian leaders are moulded into a nation which is free or at least less prone to interethnic clash and prejudice for its conducive environment where unity and social interaction are highly supported and emphasised (Mustapha et al., 2009). Essentially, the strength of a multiracial society can only be maintained if the nation can fulfil the racial rights of all its citizens equally. Crouch (2001) listed education opportunities and government assistance at the top of the lists where ethnicity has always been a controversial topic in the mind of a mixed society. Such concerns are regarded as the tools of social stratification, and failure to respond to the challenge they present may harm the health of the nation.

Tajfel (1974) and Rashid (2016) pointed out that a pre-requisite for recognition as members of a particular "ingroup" is to develop a fundamental emotional need known as *belongingness* through which they are able to differentiate those they are not happy to be with as their "outgroup". Since not everyone has the same life and interests, people are compartmentalised themselves into various groups across all cultures on different types of people (Yunus & Saifudin, 2019; Rashid et al., 2016). For instance, the multi-ethnic students in Malaysian national schools tend to stick to their same-race friends than mixing freely with those of different ethnicity origin. Over time, such sense of ingroup and outgroup will instigate various issues including those related to racial microaggression (Lino, Hashim & Ricardo, 2017). In fact, the literatures in various fields have proven that having the shared outgroup members would further strengthen the group affiliation. In other words, the close attachment among the ingroup members stems from the symbiosis of the ingroup against the outgroups (see Tajfel, 1974, p.67).

Generally, Malaysian schooling system is regarded as the bedrock where junior Malaysians are grown and nurtured. However, the governance protocol has always been controversial with constantly changing policies from time to time that eventually affect the children of various ethnic groups. Joseph (2008) views Malaysian education system as highly politicised and ethicised resulted from the widely spread ethnic identification practice. At a very young age, these children are racially segregated in national and vernacular schools, and consequently, they grow up with the notion that they are different and can never group together because they are birds of different feather. This culture carries on and the situation remains the same even when they enrol in higher education institutions. In fact, various issues relating to inequality between the diverse ethnic in higher learning institutions have been long debated, but minority group students still value their situation, though seems to be grasping at straws (Hurtado, 2002). Hurtado points out that even if these students are enrolled in a "race neutral" campus where a neutral, non-biased policy is implemented, the campus society will not easily do away with these issues (p.127). This is because, all ethnic groups have been brought up in different environments since they were little. On the basis that racial preferences practice contains within them certain degree of threats despite any safeguarding advantages used to ensure the survival of the diverse ethnic group and the solidarity of the nation, this paper reviews the reality of microaggression among different ethnicities attending schools and higher learning institutions in Malaysia.

2. Defining Microaggression

Microaggression refers to the small, seemingly innocuous daily acts that can have a significant negative effect on the recipients. It is defined as "brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership" (Sue, 2010, p. 24). Microaggression is expressed through verbal utterances, behaviours or even environmental messages that communicate harmful or insulting attitudes to people who are different than the actor. Solorzano, Ceja and Yozzo (2000) define microaggression as "subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward people of colour, often automatically or unconsciously" (p.60). This implies a lack of awareness on

how articulation may consciously or unconsciously affect those around us negatively. Nadal et al. (2014) stressed that students who encounter microaggression in their everyday lives can be overwhelmed by the pressure experienced, especially when some "protective factors" are present that camouflage the woes (p.58). Microaggression can occur in various forms, shaped by various factors including race, gender and sexual orientation (Sue, 2010) as well as religion, disability and social class (Sue, 2017).

Basically, microaggression can be divided into three forms; microassaults, microinsult and microinvalidation. These categories, according to Allen (2013) help to identify the "various textures of microaggressions and the ways in which race is embedded in the fabric of one's life" (p. 176.). Microassault is a "verbal or nonverbal attack meant to hurt the intended victim through name-calling, avoidant behaviour, or purposeful discriminatory actions" (Sue et al., 2007, p. 278). It is claimed to be very much alike "old-fashioned" racism (ibid, p. 274) and classified as a 'violent' form of microaggressions by Sue (2010, p.29). Allen, Scott and Lewis (2013), in the same vein described microassault and as an "explicit racial derogation", in line with Nadal et al. (2014) who refer to it as more overt in nature and the perpetrators might not realise that they have actually attacked other students on racial grounds. For example, a teacher makes some Islamophobic comments during class while a Muslim student is present.

A microinsult, on the other hand, is said to occur when one shows an indifferent behaviour or expressions that cause the recipients to feel as if his/her "racial heritage or identity" is being mocked (Nadal et al., 2014, p.57). This could include complimenting a non-English for having good speaking skill in the language. In this case, some people may view it as a form of compliment to the recipient. However, it also sends an indirect message that the speaker is still a foreigner despite her good command in the language because she was not born, for example, as an American. Allen, Scott and Lewis (2013) refer to such acts as "actions that convey insensitivity and are belittling to a person's racial identity" (p.118).

Microinvalidation on the other hand is said to occur when a person is told that his "thoughts, feelings, or experiences" are not based on his experienced reality like being told "racism doesn't exist anymore" or "stop complaining about racism" when he in reality experiences it on a regular basis (Nadal et al., 2014, p.57). Microinvalidation rejects the view and experiences of the other through various forms of "communication that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of colour" (Sue et al, 2007, p.274).

3. Racial Microaggression in Malaysian School Setting

As explained earlier, research related to microaggression so far has centred heavily on the western context, ignoring the local context in Malaysia. According to Norries (2009), when more research studies are conducted in a particular discipline, the comparative framework is widened. By contrast, when documentary evidence and insights are limited, the archival dataset is inadequate and of less value as a resource. In fact, a pluralistic country like Malaysia is in a dire need of a relevant and established data set as well as information related to this issue to propel towards the country's aspirations of a harmonious society despite the fundamental differences- different but equal. This study aims to contribute to a more robust body of knowledge concerning the indirect and subtle forms of racial discrimination that can occur in a diverse nation like Malaysia. In fact, the study of microaggression in Malaysia is still new. Information from the literature, particularly, in an eastern context, is extremely thin on the ground despite the fact Malaysia is a pluralistic country. Researchers in the field have limited choices of references in the literatures and findings, most of which are generated from "the western perspective and culture" (Lino, Hashim, & Ricardo, 2017, p.477).

Coletta, Lim and Kelles-Viitanen (2001) cite on Malaysia's 3rd and 6th Prime Minister's futuristic vision of 2020, announced in 1991 regarding the establishment of Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian Race). The authors suggest that most Malaysians are ready for this development, but, they note, "unequal citizenship rights" need to be neutralised (p.92).

In addition, they suggest that all the ethnic groups should be moulded together into a "liberal and tolerant future society" where legitimate affiliation exists (ibid). This idea was also proposed by former Prime Minister Najib Razak, in 2010 who suggested to liberalise the existing affirmative action measures under New Economy Policy (NEP) so that the national economy could benefit (Tan, 2018). In fact, performance in areas like language, education, government employment, business licences, immigration, internal security, and foreign policy are seen to be greatly affected and shaped by ethnicity and social background that one belongs to (Wen & Chibundu, 2018). Consequently, non-Malays are often seen to publicly express their sense of discontentment at being treated unfairly by government policies which often appear to favour the Malay ethnic, for instance, pertaining to housing policy and land ownership, financial aid as well as better access to education. The broadly understood concept of Ketuanan Melayu (Malay Supremacy) is seen as another reason that has further increased the tension between the various ethnic groups in this country. This concept basically stresses Malays' special rights in Malaysia as this country has been inherited from their Malay forefathers, and that the Chinese and Indians (brought migrant workers at that time) should be grateful that they have been granted citizenship.

The Malaysia primary education system offers another clear example of the polarisation in the country, despite the fact that education could be the key to unity (Segawa, 2019). Segawa suggested that the establishment of vernacular schools- namely for Chinese (SJK-C) and Tamil (SJK-T) speakers- along with National schools was the key contributor to ethnic division in this country. Musa (2018) also links the existence of such racially segregated school system as the crux that keeps on dividing the young Malaysians. In fact, this highly debated issue was highlighted in The Barnes Report (Malaya, 1951) prior to Independence, stressing the need for "racially segregated vernacular" schools to "cease to exist …. It is an event of the undated future" (p.6, section 21). This suggests that the committee members believed in the urgent need to abolish the vernacular schools so that all Malayan children had the chance to grow up under the same roof regardless of their ethnic background. In this way, the next young generation would be able to interact and mingle with each other and thus ethnic differences could be reduced within the public education system. Ironically, those in favour of vernacular schools were reported to fear of ethnic discrimination should the vernacular schools be abolished or assimilated into single-stream schools (Chan, 2019). In addition, minority students are at high risk of being academically disadvantaged as they would have to struggle more to become assimilated to a multi-ethnic school environment (Mahzan, Alias & Ismail., 2020) where there are still some possibilities for them to be treated differently.

In fact, various issues related to the existence of "multiple streams of primary schools" have been long debated concerning whether the establishment would tally with the aspirations of the whole nation where national integration is set as the point of convergence (Wen & Chibundu, 2018, p.88). Wen and Chibundu claim that the great emphasis upon legitimisation of the Malay language as the national and official language particularly in education has stirred anxieties among the minority ethnic groups like Chinese who view this as an inescapable threat to their culture and language identity. Therefore, when vernacular schools are allowed to operate, the Chinese and Indians consider such implementation as a course of action that could help to preserve and keep up their cultural and ethnic identity. Since mother tongue is officially used as the language of communication in these stream schools, they are regarded as the "key actors in the transmission of a society's identity from one generation to the next" (Collins, 2006, p.299). Thus, it is not a surprise to learn that quite a number of ethnic Chinese secondary school students are willing to opt for the Chinese Independent Schools where their native language is used as the medium of instruction even though these schools are not authorised by the government (Gill, Keong, Beng, Ong & Yan, 2013). On top of that, these stream schools are safeguarded by certain authorised bodies like the United Chinese School Committees' Association (UCSCA) and the United Chinese School Teachers' Association (UCSTA) under the Dong Jiao Zong (Note 2) (DJZ-the Federation of Malaysian Chinese Schools Board Associations) (Collins, 2006), a Chinese educationist association

where 60 Chinese Private High Schools are governed and protected. The Indians on the other hand is supported by the Tamil Foundation Malaysia, an organisation which is built to protect and empower Tamil education within National Education System of this country (Tamil Foundation Malaysia, n.d.). As a matter of fact, national schools and vernacular schools operates with differences in terms of financial assistance from the government, advocacy of respective ethnic community, resources as well as enrolment in tertiary educational sector (Joseph, 2008).

By contrast, the main ethnic Malays see Chinese and Tamil vernacular schools as responsible for cultural and racial polarisation among the multi-lingual Malaysians. Thus, they believe that the education system should be maintained in a single system for all learners, irrespective of language and ethnicity background. Gill et al. (2013) pointed out that the use of languages (like Mandarin or Tamil) other than the national language as the medium of instruction has been perceived as a potential threat to the national unity of the people. This underpin the view that all educational institutions in Malaysia should be standardised and use the same language so that national unity values, rather than ethnic differences, could be inculcated in all learners regardless of their family origin. Gill et al.'s study discovered that the sense of unity as united Malaysia among Chinese students in vernacular schools is extremely low. This finding goes in line with Jalaluddin (2011) who contends Bahasa Melayu as "the essence and soul of the national identity" (p. 1043) and those who are not exposed much to the national language are prone to be developed into Malaysians with poor sense of patriotism.

The implementation of PPSMI (the teaching and learning of science and mathematics in English) back in 2002 manifest a clear example of a change in delivery system from mother tongue to a second or third language (English) triggered an outcry from all Malaysians, the ethnic Malays as well as the minority racial groups (Rashid, Rahman, Yunus, 2017). PPSMI was identified as the cause that slowed down leaning among the students as they had more difficulties to learning materials (Ward, 2019). Teachers, on the other hand, had to struggle to teach the subject content using a language that they are not competent in. Eventually, both parties had increased level of anxiety which lead to less classroom interaction (ibid). Nine years after the full implementation of PPSMI, Malaysia's performance was ranked the third bottom of the global ranking through the Programme for International Student Assessment (Aziz, Rashid, & Zainudin, 2018). Through the assessment, PPSMI was identified as the key reason for the failure before it was phased out in 2012 by Muhyidin Yassin during his stint as Education Minister (ibid). The PPSMI is looked upon as a threat to an ethnic race identity and was used by various parties as a basis for protest (Collins, 2006). Collins recounted how ethnic Chinese educationist who claimed PPSMI as the agenda of the Malay dominated government aimed to ruin their effort to get Mandarin to be recognised as part of Malaysia's national linguistic identity. Thus, many efforts were made to show their objection to the implementation of PPSMI so that the policy was phased out.

4. Racial Microaggression in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions

College campuses are the centres where things like civic awakening and identity development are grown. However, governing tertiary educational institutions in the Malaysian context is an arduous challenge for the ruling party. Following the racial riots in 1969, the ethnic quota was set at a ratio of 55:45 Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera for every programme in public universities nationwide through the Malaysian New Economic Policy (NEP). This policy is managed and handled by the Ministry of Education to supervise the smooth running of its implementation (Wan & Sirat, 2018) which focuses mainly on increasing opportunities for the Bumiputera to enter university through the quotas and scholarship system (Arshad & Bin, 2016), rather than being based on individual merit.

Bahasa Malaysia is the official language of Malaysia and used alongside English in all public and private universities. However, efforts have been made by certain organisations to modify the policy relating to the medium language of instruction (Collins, 2006) but so far none of these attempts has succeeded. The idea of establishing Merdeka

University back in 1967 is a clear example of the step by the UCSCA and UCSTA through DJZ to set-up the first tertiary education institution where Bahasa Malaysia was not the main operating language. This university would be the first Chinese-medium university using Mandarin as the official language. The petition created drew a greater support from the Chinese community. Nevertheless, the plan was rejected by UMNO (Collins, 2006) as it contravened Article 152 of the national constitution (Wai, 2005) pertaining to the use of the National and other languages.

Nowadays, education members are not in charged solely with being as the content experts in their respective disciplines, but also with constructing hospitable and supportive learning environments for all students regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. In Malaysia, university serves as the hub where knowledge is transmitted along with some other skills and expertise including economic growth and development through technological transfer, skill development and preparation of skilled workforce (Wan & Sirat, 2018) as well as for nation-building (Ahmad, 1980). However, when the institutions are not properly organised and controlled, the population is disunited and the effect could be disastrous for the whole nation. In this case, microaggression is part of the turmoil that would keep on dividing the young generation who will lead the country at some point in the future.

According to Solorzano et al. (2000), microaggression affects students not only in their studies but also threatens their survival in the society. An environment where they are oppressed or singled out just because of their colours or ethnicity can result in a host of problems such as mental health concerns, poor academic attainment, low self-esteem and even school dropouts.

Lino (2014) is among the key researcher who initiated and brought to light the views of the multi-ethnic groups within the rare eastern literature pertaining to microaggression issue among Malaysian college students. The study examined the views of a single ethnic group under seven themes including 'second-class citizen', 'ethnocentrism within different racial groups' and 'perceived and maintained ethnic exclusiveness' to name a few. Lino based this study on the assertion that the members of culturally plural environments are exposed to both "overt and covert forms of racism" known as racial microaggression" (ibid, p. 157). These concerns, if ignored, can wear the students out emotionally throughout their study lives (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Lino et al. (2017) conducted further research that helps fills the gap in the existing research by expanding the scope to elucidate the views of participants from all the ethnic groups in Malaysia to produce a more "balanced racial microaggression findings" (ibid) within the literature. This study is a valuable addition to the "rarity of racial microaggression literature on eastern context" as it is "pertinent to the eastern perspective and culture particularly from Malaysian context" (p. 477).

Malaysian higher education institutions are the melting pot for Malaysian young people of various ethnic, cultural, language and religious background. Here, they can share the same aspirations of equipping themselves with the knowledge that they acquire in their final phase of formal education. The students come from various backgrounds and as citizens, they will soon collaboratively work together to further the national aspirations, promote national unity- an important agenda that the party in power should take very seriously. The introduction of Islamic and Asian Civilisations "TITAS" (Tamadun Islam dan Tamadun Asia) and Ethnic Relation (Hubungan Etnik) as compulsory national university subjects are good, positive, proactive step taken by the government to promote and orchestrate the diverse learner groups into a national whole (Nasir, Ghani, Salamat, & Husain, 2018). However, the effectiveness of these measure has been debated by researchers in the field as they found that the integration of the inter-ethnic students is still not as hoped and ethnic division is even getting worse over time (Ab Rahman et al., 2011).

Earlier, Segawa (2007) claimed that higher education institutions in Malaysia are not conducive in bringing together their diverse student populations, especially after the implementation of Malaysia's 1996 Education Act despite,

claimed to be more accommodating to integration. This act allows other non-Malay languages to be used as the medium of instruction. This amendment, however, was seen as confusing, creating increased ethnic polarisation and "impact one way or another on national integration". However, in a pluralistic society context like Malaysia, "unity in diversity based on harmonious apartness" is more practical (ibid, p.30-33)

According to Iskandar (2007), the polarisation of university students in the country is quite obvious because the Malays and non-Malays are segregated in many aspects like accommodation and their socialisation pattern. The Malays were reported to incline towards other Malays as their friends by preference compared to other ethnic group peers and vice versa. Rabushka (1971) revealed that Malaysian university students were highly disunited even though they attended multiracial institutions, the melting pot of Malaysians. Integration attitudes among the major ethnic groups (Malays, Chinese and Indians) was said to be imbalance as the percentage of those who portrayed themselves as non-mixers (described as ethnocentric) was greater than those who perceived themselves as mixers (described as more integrated people). This corresponds with Lino et al. (2017) findings that Malaysian university students practice extensive 'in-group exclusivity', 'insensitive towards the existence of other races', and offer 'differential treatment towards people from different races and religion' (pp.479-480).

Another interesting study by Ketab, Tamam, Bolong and Sharif (2015) concerning the effect of ethnocentrism on the students' interethnic interaction revealed similar findings that further strengthen the claim of the gaps between university students from different ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia. They revealed that some of the students believe that the inherent superiority has consequently affected their attitude to others as well as their ethnical integration within the whole community, despite the campus environment claims of symbiosis among the multi-ethnic society. According to Siti Kassim (2019), a race-based quota system and recruitment in education is the main issue that the current government needs to pay close attention to so that only those who are educationally qualified, regardless of their racial background, populate Malaysia's higher learning institution. Siti Kassim claims that students need to compete from the foundation level of educations (in schools) and their recruitment (to universities) should be made on merit basis instead of the racial-based allocated quotas. Such major amendment is the first necessary step that the current ruling government should take, so the best qualified students are put in the right place to lead the nation. The ethnic quota for admission to the government matriculation program is a clear example of the struggle non-Bumiputeras have to compete for places in the governments' funded pre-university program. The Malaysian Matriculation programme, or Matrikulasi is the aim of all SPM (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia- Malaysian Certificate of Education) passers who want to pursue their first degree in the leading universities nationwide. It is in the most cost-effective medium for university preparation as the major portion of the operating costs are financed by the government. For these reasons, the students' recruitment quota has always been provocative for its race-based selection process as the quota is set at 90% for Bumiputeras and 10% for the non-Bumiputeras. The huge ratio-gap is deemed as discriminatory and further restricts accessibility possibilities for the most disadvantaged students (Ash, 2019).

Mustapha et al. (2009) on the other hand look at this issue the other way round. They contended that social integration among Malaysians university students of various ethnicities was at an average level. They did not deny some resentment revealed by the multiple-races students, particularly concerning the acculturation and assimilation aspects, but they claimed that it was relatively good. As a matter of fact, they suggested that the multicultural background stemming from the diverse communities of the campus members offers the students a great opportunity to build a rapport as well as to learn and understand the culture of other ethnic groups. This cross-racial interaction, they added, is greatly stressed in Allport's theory, where multiracial interaction is claimed to be the key to positive outcomes, provided the appropriate conditions are present. Allport's theory claims that positive race relations are proportionate

to inter-racial interaction provided all the environmental conditions (i.e. "equal group status within the situation, pursuit of common goals, intergroup cooperation, and with the support of the authorities, law or custom)" are fulfilled (ibid, p.39).

5. The Way Forward

The reality that Bumiputeras are the original inhabitants of Malaysia, which they inherited from their forefathers should be honoured by all and thus certain privileges, as mentioned in Article 152 of the Malaysian constitution, should continue so that their special position within the country is properly safeguarded. No one can deny that the Malays (generally referred as Bumiputera) have tolerated a lot to other races and accommodated the immigrants (referring to the Chinese and Indians who were brought in before they are given citizenship) to survive in this country. The accommodations include changing the country's name from Malaya to Malaysia, the Jawi script (Old Malay Script in the Arabic Alphabet) to the most widely used alphabetic writing system, the Roman alphabet. Other than that, the Chinese may proudly say that they go to a Chinese-Type School, and the same goes for Indians who attend Tamil Type-schools. However, Malays do not go to Malay school as they can only study in National schools where there are Malaysians of all languages and ethnicities are in. Obviously, it does not sound as native as the Chinese and Indians at all for them. On top of that, the Malays have also agreed for their Malay language to be changed to Malaysian language as a means to unite the nation by inculcating a sense of belonging in all citizens, irrespective of the race types. These are among the sacrifices that the original Malays have made in order to build Malaysia together, based on mutually agreed principles at the negotiating table.

Taking into account the considerable sacrifices of the Malays, they deserved some privileges as a token of gratitude. However, considering the other ethnic groups as Malaysian citizens standing on the same ground as the Malays, the level of these privileges should be not be set in stone and has to be constantly reviewed from time to time, in case modifications are necessary.

In fact, being an ethnically diverse country demands respect for and from people concerning the various attitudes or beliefs that every ethnic group is devoted and committed to. Being part of and respecting ethnocentric diversity indicates beings who respect their own race, origin and bloodline of others. However, ethnocentrism should be practiced and maintained as a normal way of life. Thus, any negative elements such as various types of microaggression and racially-motivated attitudes should never be allowed to pierce the hearts of citizens. The various kinds of potential threats that can jeopardise efforts toward interethnic interaction shall be identified and reacted to accordingly (Ketab et al., 2015). Otherwise, the boundary of healthy interaction would be crossed and bring about extremism that can jeopardise the opportunities to prosper alongside each other.

Shamsuddin, Liaw, and Ridzuan (2015) put "solidarity, harmony and unity between ethnic" groups as the three main elements necessary for sustaining equilibrium (p.136). In fact, universities are the centre where these three elements are nurtured in young people who will eventually govern the country. Any form of microaggression directed at college students can have negative emotional consequences in them and hamper their social and academic lives (Solorzano et al., 2000). By exploring university students' views of microaggression, we are provided insights into how the different racial groups view the ways they are treated by other racial groups. In fact, we all make mistakes and may lack awareness of how our words and actions could affect those around us. Furthermore, we also have unconscious biases that influence how we interact with one another especially those with different origins from us. All university members, particularly the students and the staff, must be made aware of the importance of recognising their own conscious and unconscious biases that can impact on their multiracial, multilingual and multicultural campus mates. Therefore, future research should focus on possible ways to initiate such awareness and educate Malaysian citizens to curb any forms of

microaggression that can possibly ignite racial tensions. Overall, more coordinated efforts should be made to bring all young Malaysian citizens closer in of any differences that might arose.

6. Conclusion

In summary, ethnicity-related issues have always been controversial. There have been attempts made by both non-Bumiputera and even the Bumiputera groups and individuals for a review of the current policy to evaluate whether it is still relevant to meet the present needs of all Malaysians. They argue that the policy, introduced in 1971, is no longer relevant to Malaysians who need to gear themselves towards a highly competitive society. Therefore, any programme proposed and developed should not favour any ethnic groups to the detriment of another, especially in the field of education. Alatas (2019) points out that the people of a country are its greatest asset and thus a meritocracy-based system is more feasible than the present quota system. This is in line with Men (2019) who suggests the quota system favouring Bumiputera in education will inhibit Malaysia's advancement. If the Bumiputeras are awarded special privilege to protect Bumiputera's quota in public education institutions, nevertheless, the quality of education itself should be the main priority. Thus, if providing equal access for all Malaysian students is impossible because we are bound to the policy, the existing qualified resources should often be considered.

For educationists, discriminatory issues are detrimental to the advancement of a country. They claim that outstanding students who are put away just because they do not belong to the majority race would be a loss to the country. Besides losing useful resources that could contribute to move the country forward, resentment is bound to flourish in ignored or disadvantaged people. As a result, more discontentment and conflict among different races can be triggered; worsening the inter-ethnic relations of the society. Hence, the multiracial Malaysians must come to an agreement that they all are born with equal dignity and rights to contribute to the well-being of society. To achieve this, all groups must contrive to adopt the best narrative regardless of the foundations each belongs to. The differences should no longer be regarded as a boundary that sets people apart. Instead, the underlying issue that produce such boundary should be thoroughly scrutinised so that the most sensible foundation can be established. So, just as happy the Chinese and Indians are to have the freedom to run their vernacular schools in this once Malay Land, the same goes for the Malays who are delighted to have privileges.

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Notes

Note 1. Bumiputeras are Malays and other indigenous people with indigenous status that guarantees attendant privileges in Malaysia.

Note 2. Dong Jiao Zong (DJZ) is an association established as the spokesperson for Chinese Education in Malaysia and the leading organization for Chinese-community-run education. The establishment aims to lead in the sustainable development of Chinese Education in Malaysia, to safeguard, develop Chinese education and to strive for equal educational status.