

# Ethnic Stereotype And Prejudice

## Introduction

In this assignment, we will first discuss about the differences between ethnicity and race, as well as between stereotype and prejudice. It will be followed by the general applications of sociological perspectives in ethnic relations and overview of ethnic groups in Malaysia. “Social forces that brought about ethnic stereotype and prejudice in Malaysia” will be the most important section for this assignment. Lastly, we will talk about the efforts made in improving ethnic relations in Malaysia.

### 1.1 Ethnicity and Race

Ethnicity refers to cultural factors which differentiate people by nationality, culture, ancestry, language and beliefs (Diffen LLC, 2012). The people in the same ethnic group share the same cultural practices and values that would distinct them from other ethnic groups. Cultural heritages are not inherited, but learned through the shared group history (CliffNotes.com, n.d.).

On the other hand, races are supposed to be related to physical characteristics such as eye color, hair color, skin color, average height, bone structure etc. However, studies show that the scientific basis of racial genetic differences is weak except in skin color, and skin color is considered as socially significant (Diffen LLC, 2012; CliffNotes.com, n.d.).

### 1.2 Stereotype and Prejudice

Stereotype means a preconceived perception (Ismail, Abdullah, & Ahmad, 2009). It is a neutral and oversimplified view to an object without an accurate understanding (Thio, 2009). When it is applied to ethnic groups, it is a mental image that everyone who belongs to the ethnic group will have the same characteristics and behaviors (Kreidler). In contrast, prejudice is a negative judgment against a group due to misunderstanding (Ferguson, 2004).

## Ethnic Relations under Sociological Perspectives

### 2.1 Functionalist – Cohesive Relation

Under functionalist theory, the social functions of ethnicity can be divided into three main categories named assimilation, amalgamation and multiculturalism (Thio, 2009). Assimilation is “the process by which an outsider, immigrant or subordinate group becomes indistinguishably integrated into the dominant host society” (Marshall & Barthel, 1994). For instance, ‘Mamak’, or Indian Muslim in Malaysia adapted to Malay culture and religion. They lost their own culture after getting used to the culture of

Malays (Merican, 2011). Conversely, amalgamation describes the situation when all minority ethnic groups blend their subcultures to form a new culture which is different to their original cultures (Thio, 2009). For example, Baba Nyonya is the fusion of Malay and Chinese cultures (Destination To Malaysia, n.d.). On the other hand, multiculturalism, which is also known as cultural pluralism, describes that “several different cultures can coexist peacefully and equitably in a single country” (The Free Dictionary, 2012; Thio, 2009). Malaysia will be the best example for this paradigm. All major and minority ethnic groups are practicing their own culture while living harmoniously in such a big family.

## 2.2 Conflict – Abusive Relation

According to Thio (2009), ethnic conflicts can be divided into segregation, expulsion and extermination. Segregation is the separation of dominant and minority groups in an area or a country. There are two types of segregation - de jure segregation which is allowed by law, and de facto segregation caused by traditions and customs. De jure is no longer practiced in most of the countries, while de facto can still be found, for example, in the housing cases for African Americans. Next, expulsion exists when the dominant group expels minority groups from certain areas or countries. Uganda expelling Asians and Vietnam forcing Chinese to leave the country are some of the examples. The third conflict, which is the most radical one, is extermination. The dominant group abuses the minority groups by killing all of them, like The Holocaust which was the massacre of Jews during World War II (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2012).

## 2.3 Symbolic Interactionist – Perception and Interaction

If the dominant ethnic group sees minority groups as inferior and prefers to interact with people in the same group, the interaction between people from the dominant group and the minority groups will likely be superficial. Symbolic interactions can result in a positive or a negative way. The interaction could be cooperative when everyone is willing to work together to change negative perceptions to positive ones, but it could be negative as well if people do not make efforts to correct the stereotype and prejudice against each other (Thio, 2009).

## General Overview of Ethnic Groups in Malaysia

According to Table 1 and Figure 1, Malay Bumiputera is the major ethnic groups in Malaysia, which makes up almost 50% of the total population in Malaysia. The next biggest ethnic group is Chinese, which accounts for 23% of the total population. It is followed by other Bumiputera in Sabah and Sarawak (12%), Indians (7%), and other minority ethnic groups (1%). Non-Malaysians takes up 8% of the total population in Malaysia (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2012).

## 4.0 Social Forces / Socialization Agents That Brought about Ethnic Stereotype and Prejudice in Malaysia

### 4.1 Family

Family acts as the primary socialization agent because it has the most essential influence in the socialization process of an individual (Bourne, 2006). According to most of the sociologists, the term “family” is referring to the persons who have blood connection, marriage, or adoption and share a common residence (Family, n.d.).

Family plays a crucial role in nurturing children. Children will first learn what is good or bad, as well as what is black or white, followed by norms, moral values and ideas of a society, from their families. Expectations, attitudes, values, beliefs and habits are instilled into children's mind since they are young. Senior members of the family will pass the family culture to the younger generation and this cycle is repeating from time to time (Family, n.d.). “Human personality is a unique and relatively stable patterns of behavior, thoughts, and emotions that are influenced by the family and the environment” (Baron, Byrne, & Branscombe, 2006). From here, we can conclude that the ways that parents socialize their children are vital because different ways of nurturing the children will produce different types of children.

Senior members play a big role in influencing the mindsets and behavior of the younger ones. If some negative stereotype and prejudice are passed down from the elderly to other family members especially children, the children tend to perceive that the certain stereotype and prejudice are true, and the beliefs will be difficult to be corrected in future. This is usually the main factor that causes ethnic segregation and the lack of amalgamation in Malaysia. For example, interethnic marriages, for instance, marriages between Chinese and Malays, rarely happen in Malaysia (Tyson, 2011), and are not well-accepted by most people in the society, especially the elderly.

### 4.2 Peer Group

Peer group is another important socialization agent that would influence ones throughout their lives, especially during childhood and adolescence, as those are times that will form their very own personalities (Encyclopedia of Mental Disorders, 2012). A peer group is a group of people who have the same age, education or social class. While they usually share a mutual interest and background, they may also be very different in their races, cultures and economic backgrounds (IIT Roorkee, 2011).

Peer pressure is the main aspect of peer group influence. Peer pressure encourages one to change her or his behavior to conform the group norms. A peer group may have positive or negative influences. Academic motivation and social skill developments are the positive influences while drinking, drug addiction and vandalism are some negative cases. Conflicts will usually occur between parents and peer groups due to different values to practice in routine. The peer group influence would be more critical if the

family relationship is not supportive (Encyclopedia of Mental Disorders, 2012; IIT Roorkee, 2011; Thio, 2009).

Certainly, peer groups have a great contribution on the stereotype and prejudice against other ethnic groups. While a family is the one that implemented a certain stereotype or prejudice, peer groups will strengthen the belief as if it is factual when the peer groups have an identical thought. Stereotype and prejudice affect people and it leads to ethnic polarization, which is so common in Malaysia especially among university students (Tyson, 2011). Language barrier could be another reason that contributes to ethnic polarization, as a language is the most common communication medium, especially among people from different ethnic groups.

#### 4.3 Mass Media

Mass media is defined as the channel of communication that transmits information to a large number of people (Sociology Central). The way and form of the information transmitted vary based on the media used. Mass media is easily accessible with the current technologies. Such availability has made mass media an agent in transmitting information that contains stereotypic and prejudiced elements embedded within it.

Due to the restriction enforced in Malaysian mass media, prejudice elements are usually filtered or removed while stereotypical elements are still acceptable in public through mass media especially in the film production. A very clear cut example would be Namewee, a notorious figure in Malaysia for his ethnic stereotyping or his prejudice over the mass media. His first film production "NasiLemak 2.0" and recent production "Hantu Gangster" had slotted in few scenes that contain stereotypical elements. For instance, he stereotyped that Indians usually hide behind the trees or flowers and they like to drink alcohol. Fortunately, such trivial stereotypes do not actually affect ethnic relations.

However, there are critical cases that put forth ethnic relations to a test. The prejudiced statement towards two ethnic groups – Chinese and Indians, which will be further mentioned in the politics session, had brought about serious aftermath upon revealed to the public. Upon influenced by the statement through mass media, the principal of SekolahMenengahKebangsaanTunku Abdul Rahman Putra in Kulai, SitiInshahMansor stated:

"Pelajar-pelajarCina tidak diperlukandan boleh balik ke China ataupun Sekolah Foon Yew. Bagi pelajar India, talisembahyang yang diikat di pergelangantangan dan leher pelajar nampak seakan jing dan hanya anjing akan mengikats eperti itu." (Malaysia Today, 2010).

From the statement, it shows negative connotations towards the two ethnic groups mentioned. Conflict arises when Namewee showed his dissatisfaction through his song "Nah" that badmouthed another ethnic group, causing ethnic tension in 2009 over that

issue (Hookway, 2011). Hence, we notice that how mass media can be an influential tool in spreading ethnic stereotypical and prejudiced elements in our social life. Conflict and symbolic interactionist are both applicable on the ethnic relations in Malaysia due to the influence of mass media in disclosing ethnic stereotype and prejudice publicly.

#### 4.4 Politics

According to John R. Bowen, ethnic relations vary among states and territories depending on the history of interethnic tension, geographical distribution of ethnic groups, degree of differences and intra-ethnic group cohesion, and how the government is committed to resolve the conflict through appropriate policies. Moreover, the same policies may result in different outcomes depending on varying context and further affect the ethnic harmony (Haque, 2003).

During Malacca Sultanate era, the ethnic groups in Tanah Melayu mostly consisted of Malays, Chinese, Indians and Arabs. Most of them were maintaining contact with each other for the trading purpose. Subsequently this had indirectly resulted in a certain level of assimilation and amalgamation. When foreign traders came here for business, some of them got married and adapted to the local culture. Existence of Baba Nyonya community in Malacca is an example of amalgamation at that time. During the Portuguese Colonization, there were no related policies that brought effects on the ethnic relations. Most of the ethnic groups were free to practice their own culture and functionalist perspectives were analyzed (Ismail, Abdullah, & Ahmad, 2009). However, drastic changes had happened when British arrived in Tanah Melayu. First and foremost, British Labor Policy had brought in Chinese and Indian labors from their original countries and this had led to an increase in the number of people from these ethnic groups. Stimulated by the “divide and rule” policy, occupational segregation within ethnic groups had started due to the inequality in economic backgrounds. Such segregation had prevented solidarity among the ethnic groups and eventually led to a mindset that categorized them through their occupations. In addition, this had brought about ethnic stereotypes that Malays are lazy, Chinese are bold and Indians are docile (Brown, 1994). This marked a significant impact in Malaysian history as the policies implemented had brought about ethnic stereotype and prejudice during that era (Zainal, Abu, & Mohammad, 2009).

Stated clearly on the Malaysian Constitution Article 153, Malays are bestowed with special privileges in terms of education, economy and public welfare. However, these constitutionally guaranteed privileges became the major source of discontent among all ethnic groups (Haque, 2003). Malays are still dissatisfied especially in terms of economy that was controlled by other ethnic groups mainly Chinese and Europeans while non-Malays perceived it as discriminatory measures in terms of national language and Malays’ status as the rulers (KetuananMelayu). Even though 1969 Riots was considered as a sensitive issue that is hardly being disclosed to the public and media, but it was an important event that provided explicit reasoning on how it turned into an event that posts inevitable effects on ethnic relations. Both opposing perceptions had

led to negative feelings towards each other among different ethnic groups and subsequently transformed into prejudice.

Secondly, the implementation of National Culture Policy in 1971 tried to assimilate other ethnic groups under cultural hegemony of Malay culture (Ahmad, 2011). Cultural hegemony defines the domination of ruling class in manipulating the cultures of other ethnic groups in terms of beliefs, values, perceptions and norms (Merriam-Webster). In other words, the national culture, which was the privileged Malay culture, had three principles applied on it. According to Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport in 1971, the first principle was the national culture must be based on the origin of the culture of Malaysia. Secondly, suitable and acceptable elements from other cultures can be accepted as part of the national culture and the third principle stated that Islam is crucial in molding national culture (Ahmad, 2011). From these principles, the policy seemed to be questionable. In fact, "suitable elements" deemed to be a contradicting statement with what had happened in the past. For instance, Lion Dance was not taken into consideration to be the component of national culture at first and Ghazali Shafie, the Home Affairs Minister during that time considered it as "foreign". He suggested changing it to Tiger Dance with the playing of Malay music (Guan, 2000). From the example, we must now understand the rationale on how an ethnic group's culture was being challenged. Taking the general overview of this event had concerned the ethnic groups and such cultural conflict would have led to dissatisfaction, accompanied by prejudice towards other ethnic groups.

Besides government policies in the past, politicians are also important personnel in a society as they are the representatives of every ethnic group. Unfortunately, politicians can be the root in spreading ethnic stereotype and prejudice through their verbal and non-verbal messages. On 23 August 2008, Datuk Ahmad Ismail had voiced out that Chinese and Indians are "immigrant" or "squatter" (Dzulkifly, 2010). This issue had instilled a mentality on ethnic groups and ethnic prejudice bombardments like "Balik Cina" and "Balik India" were lurking in the society. This issue had its sequel when Zulkifli Nordin disclosed another similar statement that was reinforced by the word "haram". On 2 February 2010, Nasir Safar, the prime minister's former assistant stated that "Indians came to Malaysia as beggars and Chinese especially the women came to sell their bodies" (Dzulkifly, 2010). These argumentative and controversial statements have challenged the existing ethnic relations, making ethnic stereotype and prejudice more viable among the ethnic groups. As long as these kinds of mindsets prevail, segregation of ethnic relations might be irreversible.

#### 4.5 Economy

Other than politics, economy is said to be another most important influence on ethnic relations in Malaysia (Zainala, Abua, & Mohamada, 2010). Chronologically, there was an economic policy which was implemented even before the independence of Malaya by the British government that time – "divide and rule" policy. Under the policy, the economic development in Tanah Melayu was based on ethnic groups, where the

Chinese were mostly involved in business field, Malays were doing farming activities and Indians were mostly the workers in the rubber and palm oil states (Ismail, Abdullah, & Ahmad, 2009). That was the social order when people did not oppose the policy. However, this policy had left a very crucial effect on Malaysian society, because it formed a multiethnic society in Malaysia, but a segregated one. This policy indirectly contributed to the current occupational segregation. For example, currently, the participation rate of non-Malays in public sector is still low. Out of 1.12 million new public sector job applications, almost 80% were by Malays, 3.3% were by Indians and Chinese only made up about 2% of the applications (The Malaysian Insider, 2012). It is also commonly said that Chinese are still actively participating in business sectors, while a lot of clinic doctors and surgeons are Indians.

Furthermore, New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced by 'The Alliance', which is Barisan Nasional nowadays, in 1970, with the objective of distributing country's wealth among people equally. However, while NEP was said to be developed to eliminate the identification of ethnic groups with occupations, apparently it was just established to increase the economic shares of Malays, especially in certain more attractive jobs, which further led to discontentment among ethnic groups, and the dissatisfaction grew into a strong prejudice against the each other (Ahmad, 2011).

#### 4.6 Education

This is another institution that plays an important role in determining ethnic relations in Malaysia. First and foremost, vernacular schools are thought to be the major contribution on ethnic conflicts in Malaysia. We have two types of vernacular schools, which are also known as national-type schools – national-type school (Chinese) or SJK(C) and national-type school (Tamil) or SJK(T). Vernacular schools are only available for primary education. Vernacular schools enable teaching and learning in one's own mother tongue (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012a; Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012b).

The existence of vernacular schools often sparks debate among people. Interestingly, Tun Dr. Mahathir once said this: "if we recognize Chinese education and their certificates, we will have three different people, each talking in a different language. I think we will not be able to even live together if we don't understand each other" (Kamal, 2010). However, statistics show that Malays make up 13% of 600,000 SJK(C) students nowadays. In some urban schools, non-Chinese can even make up a third of the student population in SJK(C). In contrast, according to most parents, majority of teaching professions in national schools are from a single ethnic group and it does not reflect a multiethnic composition of Malaysia (Nair, 2012). While people who want vernacular schools to be abolished accused that vernacular schools emphasize a single ethnicity, the fact is vernacular schools are getting more and more multiethnic these days, while national schools failed to achieve multiethnic interactions. It is too arbitrary to conclude that only Chinese study in SJK(C) and only Indians study in SJK(T).

Furthermore, regardless of the types of schools, every Malaysian is required to learn Malay language as well as English (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2012c).

Secondly, ethnic quota system in higher education is certainly another main reason that caused ethnic conflicts in Malaysia. Ethnic quota system was implemented in 1973 by the Malaysian government and in effect, 55% of the university places were reserved for Malays, while the remaining 45% are for other ethnic groups. After displeasing non-Malays for years, this quota system was officially announced to be abolished, and replaced by meritocracy system, which the matriculation system was also introduced (Aihara, 2009). However, in reality, the discrimination toward minority ethnic groups is still there. Generally, most Chinese study STPM to prepare for tertiary education, as the matriculation system has still implemented another ethnic quota system. Other than negative impacts such as brain drain, ethnic quota system definitely intensified the ethnic relation tension (Aihara, 2009; Lyen, 2009).

Now, we have come to this crucial factor under education – medium of education. We will concentrate on the History textbooks used by secondary schools. History textbooks are so heavily influenced by politics, and most of the contents focused primarily on one ethnic group, Malays. Contradicting with the educational objective – to shape national unity, contents in History textbooks are so biased that Chinese and Indian's major events such as immigrations are not even sufficiently mentioned. Indian's involvement in the rubber industry was only cited in a three-sentence acknowledgement. Furthermore, there are major events which are omitted by the History textbooks, and among these, the most important event is 1969 Riots. This does not make sense to omit such an important incident in Malaysian history from a History textbook. Doubtlessly, 1969 Riots is the black dot in Malaysian history, but it does not mean it should be omitted from History textbook like it has never happened. Another common criticism is about the omission of Kapitan Yap Ah Loy's contribution as the Kuala Lumpur founder. Interestingly, even our first prime minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman was dissatisfied and he criticized that the textbooks used in schools are "obviously an attempt to put party politics above the historical facts" (Lim, 2011; Ong, 2012).

To conclude the influences of various social forces on ethnic relations in Malaysia, we will talk about the general effects caused by stereotype and prejudice shaped by the social forces mentioned. First off, "racism" is such a popular word in Malaysia, especially when certain events brought about tension among ethnic groups. Racism, in Malaysian context, is defined as the overprotective behavior of one's own ethnic group until certain negative attitudes or behavior could be developed towards other ethnic groups when there is a conflict happened. On the other hand, ethnocentrism is the superior feeling of one's own culture over another. The sense of superiority could make someone perceive other cultures, especially those which totally oppose their own culture, to be bad, wrong, negative or even dangerous (Ismail, Abdullah, & Ahmad, 2009). Racism and ethnocentrism will further result in unity contradiction. In other words, stereotype and prejudice might strengthen intra-ethnic relations as they share

the same belief, however, it will seriously worsen interethnic relations, for example, ethnic polarization, which was discussed in peer group section.

## 5.0 Efforts and Conclusion

### 5.1 1Malaysia & Media Power

1Malaysia concept is an approach to strengthen ethnic relations in Malaysia and further achieve an identity of “Malaysian People” by challenging Malaysians from all different ethnic backgrounds to rise above the differences among each other and unite under one nation and flag. In order to achieve such an ideal vision and multiculturalism in Malaysia, efforts have been done. Our prime minister is not hesitated to set up 1Malaysia network. This main website has uploaded info about 1Malaysia concept. Furthermore, our prime minister’s “blogspot” allows permitted freedom of speech in commenting on government policies and initiatives. Those comments are monitored and there will be replies or answers to satisfy the needs of Malaysians (1Malaysia, 2012). Moreover, acceptance is one of the core values that emphasizes on how we should embrace the differences between ethnic groups and not merely tolerate with them. Hence, government usually promotes togetherness of multicultural ethnicity during the festive seasons through open house party to learn about an ethnic group’s culture and accept it as part of society (1Malaysia, 2009).

In order to improve ethnic relations in Malaysia, mass media is put to good use. Besides the social network, there are some movies and short films made to promote ethnic relations. In collaboration with the National Day, we can usually see such short films are aired publicly. For instance, 1Malaysia advertisement by Proton in 2010 showed a clear cut message that Malaysia is multiethnic and we should embrace the differences of each other. In those series of advertisements, the director was trying to correct the stereotype phenomena in Malaysia (YouTube, 2010). When it comes to film production, we definitely cannot forget the remarkable contribution of Yasmin Ahmad in incorporating ethnic unity elements into her movies. Moreover, she was daring to challenge the ethnic stereotypes in Malaysia by portraying the weaknesses of such stereotypes (Bergan, 2009). Last but not least, ethnic relations would be implemented to replace Malaysian Studies at the university level. All the efforts show how hard the government is trying to ensure multiculturalism in Malaysia.

### 5.2 National Service

National Service is definitely another effort made by the government to enhance social and ethnic integration. “To encourage national integration and ethnic unity” is one of the main objectives of National Service program (National Service Training Department, 2012). National Service is a type of resocialization, as it attempts to alter the values and roles of Malaysians in maintaining harmonious ethnic relations, as well as to correct negative perceptions or prejudices by allowing people from various ethnic groups to

interact with each other. It is considered as a cooperative interaction under symbolic interactionist (Thio, 2009), and it fits into 1Malaysia concept.

### 5.3 Conclusion

“Many Malaysians still do not necessarily feel like Malaysians” (Chong, 2009). Even though our harmonious relationship among ethnic groups is always one of the featured characteristics that Malaysia is proud of, but in reality, according to a research, Malaysia at its best, is only able to achieve accommodative level (Ismail, Abdullah, & Ahmad, 2009), which is still not at the ideal stage – multiculturalism. Like other countries in the U.S. and Soviet Union which also have a lot of ethnic groups in the countries, we are lacking in true cultural pluralism (CliffNotes.com, n.d.; Thio, 2009). Anyways, we believe that all Malaysians who have the firsthand experiences of ethnic stereotype and prejudice sincerely hope that someday, Malaysia will be able to achieve the ideal and true cultural pluralism, which is not only about tolerance, but also acceptance of each other’s existence and culture.