



## Articles

# Factors Predicting Inter-Ethnic Friendships at the Workplace

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## Abstract

This study explored factors that may contribute to inter-ethnic friendships, both in terms of quantity and satisfaction with those friendships. Participants were 200 working adults who were studying part-time in a long-distance program in a university in Malaysia. In general, demographic factors (gender, ethnicity, education, and income) had no significant relationships with number of inter-ethnic friends and satisfaction people had with inter-ethnic friendships. Ethnic identity and stress at work also did not have significant relationships with number of inter-ethnic friends. However, they were significantly related to satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships. People with higher ethnic identification were more satisfied with inter-ethnic friendships whereas people with more stress at work reported lower satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships.

**Keywords:** friendships, inter-ethnic friendships, ethnic identification, friendship satisfaction

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Friendships can be used as a measure to improve inter-group relations in society with different sub-groups. Friendship that exists among people from different groups can be associated with more positive inter-group attitudes (Pettigrew, 1998; Feddes, Noack, & Rutland, 2009). Ethnicity represents a major construct by which a society can be divided into. Friendships between people of different ethnicities can be an indicator of the health of inter-ethnic relations in that particular society or country. The issue is especially important in multi-ethnic, multi-cultural Malaysia where efforts to maintain and improve inter-ethnic relations have always been considered an important national agenda (Tamam, 2009; Mohd Yusof, 2006; Santhiram, 1995). People of Malaysia are divided into various ethnicities and within this set-up of ethnic divide, each ethnic group generally practices a different religion, speaks a different language, and adopts fairly different customs. For instance, the Malays who represent around 63% of the Malaysian populations (Tamam, 2009) are mostly Muslims, use mainly the Malay language and have distinctive customs in comparison to the Malaysian Chinese, who represent about 25% of the Malaysian population (Tamam, 2009), are mostly Buddhists, use mainly various Chinese dialects including Cantonese and Hokien as their mother tongue and practice their own unique customs and ways of life. In daily context, research has shown that these various ethnic groups are further polarized and this is evidenced from friendship patterns among school children which mainly consist of in-group preference (Mohd Yusof, 2006; Santhiram, 1995). Looking at these unsettling segregations and considering the potential conflicts, there is a pressing need for more work to be done in understanding and promoting friendships between people of different ethnic groups in Malaysia.

However, current research on issues related to ethnicity in Malaysia tend to take a more sociological and/or political approach. Some of the most current studies on inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia tend to focus on more

sociological-related concepts such as ethnic alignment (Mansor, 2010) and pluralism (Ho, 2010; Huang, 2010). Others take a more political perspective by investigating how inter-ethnic relationships can be understood within Malaysian political scenarios (Puyok & Bagang, 2010). Even the studies of inter-group relations within psychology in Malaysia tend to be more sociological in nature. For example, Aminudin and colleagues (2006) studied prejudice and stereotypes of 3 major ethnic groups namely the Malays, Chinese and Indians from various zones in Malaysia. Their findings indicated that people from the eastern zone of Malaysia have the highest level of inter-racial prejudice and stereotypes compared to people from other zones. Aminudin et al. (2006) represents a more 'typical' study on inter-ethnic relations within the context of social psychology in Malaysia, focusing more on the structure of the society and the general attitudes directed at particular groups within the society rather than carrying out the more micro-level analysis of people's actual behavior in a more naturalistic context.

We argue that limited studies on ethnic relations in Malaysia have taken into account the interpersonal interactions between people of different groups that can potentially lead to much improved inter-ethnic relationships. Even the studies discussed earlier on inter-ethnic friendships in Malaysia, for example Santhiram (1995) and Mohd Yusof (2006), tend to be restricted to children's friendships that occur within the school context. Yet, it is likely that studies which focus on the relationships between people of different ethnic groups can benefit from a more interpersonal approach by looking at how individuals of different ethnic backgrounds (and particularly adults), actually interact and form a personal relationship with each other within the everyday social environment including work settings. Research focusing on inter-ethnic friendships, especially ones that occur in public domains such as the workplace can help identify factors that can encourage beneficial relationships beyond children's friendships that mainly occur within the school environment. The present study explored possible factors that contribute to inter-ethnic friendships at the workplace both in terms of quantity and satisfaction with those particular friendships.

## Intergroup Contact Theory

Allport's (1954) intergroup contact theory suggested that contacts between people of different groups can be beneficial in order to reduce prejudice and potential conflicts between them. He also postulated optimal conditions in which contacts can be most beneficial. These optimal conditions include equal status between all parties involved in the interactions, all members working towards a common goal, cooperation and people working together, and available support from authorities, laws or customs (Allport, 1954).

In the context of Malaysia, workplace situations offer these optimal conditions. At typical workplaces, the positions of people of different ethnicities are more or less equal. Of course, there are the usual hierarchies of super-ordinates and subordinates but these groups are more likely to be mixed rather than of just one particular ethnic group. Organizational goals and aims provide common goals for people to work on and for certain goals: People must work together in smaller groups and in these groups, cooperation between members is highly desirable. Also, institutions or organizations are likely to support the contacts and positive interactions between employees. As such, workplace situations should be seen as ideal in promoting positive contacts between people of different ethnicities that can eventually lead to more harmonious inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia.

In a more recent review of contact theory, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) found clear evidence that intergroup contact can generally reduce intergroup prejudice. The mean effect increases substantially for experiments and other rigorously conducted studies. In his research on that inter-ethnic contact among Malay- and Chinese-Malaysians,

Tamam (2009) also found support for the inter-group contact theory. Contact appeared to significantly contribute toward more positive interethnic attitudes.

## Theories of Inter-Ethnic Friendships

While contact does not necessarily equal friendship, friendship represents a more meaningful interaction than mere contact. Friendship in general can be characterized as consisting of companionship, help, security, closeness, and conflict (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). Although, conflict is always recognized as a significant element in most conceptualizations of friendship, friendship offers other positive elements which include intimacy and supportive behavior. Interactions between friends are mainly personal in nature and often filled with mutual regards and affection (Hashim & Khodarahimi, 2012). Furthermore, inter-ethnic friendships can also be seen as a sign of tolerance that can facilitate more positive inter-ethnic relationships, especially in a potentially conflicting area (O'Loughlin, 2010)

There are a few factors that can influence whether or not people will develop friendships with those of different ethnicities. Fong and Isajiw (2000) proposed an analysis of friendship choice that can be associated with individual characteristics, experience of working in ethnic economy, previous inter-group contact, neighborhood characteristics and one's own ethnicity. In their analysis, Fong and Isajiw (2000) focused more on the friendship choice between majority and minority groups. Firstly, they suggested that individuals from minority groups are less likely to develop friendship ties with the majority group if they come from lower income groups and lower educational backgrounds (Fong & Isajiw, 2000). In their study which employed analysis of secondary data from three different sources, they found evidence for these two patterns.

In a study on intergroup friendship on campus, Schofield, Hausmann, Ye, and Woods (2010) found ethnicity and gender to be important predictors of inter-ethnic friendships. African Americans were more likely to develop intergroup friendships that include both close and casual categories compared to their White peers. Male students were also more likely to report intergroup friendships compared to female students.

Ethnic economy in which ethnic business owners are more willing to hire workers and do business with those of the same ethnicities may also be a contributing factor that hinder intergroup friendship (Fong & Isajiw, 2000). Those who are more involved in ethnic economy are less likely to develop friendships with other ethnics.

Another important factor in determining whether or not people choose to make friends with those of different ethnicities is the existence of previous contacts (Schofield, Hausmann, Ye, & Woods, 2010; Fong & Isajiw, 2000). Childhood exposure and positive experience with people from different groups and growing up in a racially diverse environment all tend to increase potentials for inter-ethnic relationships (Fong & Isajiw, 2000).

In their review of the contact theory, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) also suggested for future research to focus on identifying factors that can hinder prejudice from being reduced even when contacts are already well established. In this study, two other constructs have been identified as possible factors hindering inter-ethnic friendships and they are group salience and stress. In high group salience situation, ethnic identity becomes more central and important. For instance, common in-group identity model suggests how transforming the way people socially categorize others can minimize intergroup prejudice and bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). This model implies the importance of identity in determining whether or not people will develop friendships with those of different identities. Ethnic identity can be considered as feelings of belonging to one's group, clear understanding of what it means

to be a member of that particular group, a general positive attitude toward other members and understanding of its history, culture and practice (Phinney, 1992). Ethnic identity is likely to play a role in that those with stronger ethnic identity are more likely to form a stronger relationship with those of the same ethnic group, an act that will be inconsistent with inter-ethnic friendships.

While the relationship between ethnic identity and inter-ethnic friendships is more or less clear, the relationship between stress and inter-ethnic friendship may not be so. In a study on the significance of inter-ethnic friendships in buffering against peer victimizations among children, Kawabata and Crick (2011) found evidence for the unique role of such friendships. Friendship with children of other ethnicities is associated with peer support. This study provides evidence for the positive role of inter-ethnic friendships that is consistent with the positive role of intra-ethnic friendships (Bukowski, Hoza, & Boivin, 1994). Higher level of inter-ethnic friendships is associated with lower level of stress. On the other hand, stress can prevent people from making friends. Too much stress in the context of the workplace can put a strain on existing friendships due to competing time demands (Parris, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2008). The same demands are likely to be made on both inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic friendships. In this regard, higher level of stress is associated with lower level of quantity and quality of inter-ethnic friendships.

## The Present Study

The main objective of the present study was to explore how demographic factors, ethnic identity, and stress at work may influence the number of inter-ethnic friends and the satisfaction people may have with these friends. Demographic factors including ethnicity itself, gender, education, and income may play an important role. How people relate to their own ethnic identity may be another factor influencing whether or not people develop, maintain and feel satisfied with friendships with people of different ethnicities at the workplace. Finally, stress may influence whether or not people will develop and maintain inter-ethnic friendships at the workplace. On the other hand, friendships can help buffer workplace stress. In both situations, stress and inter-ethnic friends are likely to be negatively correlated with one another.

## Method

### Participants

Participants were 200 working adults who were doing long-distance studies at a university in Malaysia. Sixty-six were male while 134 were female. They ranged in age from 22 to 53 ( $M = 32.28$ ,  $SD = 6.75$ ). Majority were married (68.2%). Respondents tended to be Malay (70.6%) but with other groups adequately represented (6% Chinese, 15.4% Indian and 8.0% of other ethnicities). A majority of respondents identified themselves as Muslims (76.6%) while 4.5% as Buddhists, 4.5% as Christians, 13.9% as Hindus and .5% as of other religion. All of the respondents were working at the time of data collection with a large proportion working as teachers (51.2%). Other occupations included government officers and technical/clerical positions. Average years of working was 8.9 ( $SD = 5.68$ ) with income ranging from RM600/USD196.5 to RM6500/USD2128.75 ( $M = RM2,405/USD787.63$ ;  $SD = RM866/USD283.61$ ).

### Procedure

Participants were recruited while on-campus as part of their course requirement. They were randomly approached outside lecture halls and asked if they agreed to answer a set of questionnaires. Upon agreement, they were

given the questionnaire to complete there and then. They were paid RM10 for participating. Recruitment stopped when the number of participants reached 200.

## Measures

*Multiethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992)*. This is an 11-item measure of how a person identifies with his/her ethnic group. The measure comprises two factors: developmental and cognitive component of ethnic identity search and affective component of affirmation, belonging, and commitment (Phinney, 1992). The questions include whether the respondent feels s/he belongs to his/her ethnic group and whether s/he is happy or proud to be part of his/her ethnic group. This measure is one of the most widely used instruments on ethnic identity (Yoon, 2011).

*Inter-ethnic friendship assessment at work place*. In this section respondents reported two items related to inter-ethnic friendship assessment at the workplace. Firstly, they indicated the number of people from different ethnicities they considered as friends at the workplace and secondly, the level of satisfaction with these inter-ethnic friendships. Participants rated these relationships from 1 (not satisfied at all) to 5 (extremely satisfied).

*Workplace Stress Scale (WSS; de Mello Alves, Chor, Faerstein, de S Lopes, & Werneck, 2004)* short version of Karasek's 49-item questionnaire that involves aspects of stress at the workplace. The WSS includes three factors: demands (5 items, e.g., "Do you have to work very fast?"), control (6 items, e.g., "Do you have the possibility of learning new things through your work?"), and support (5 items, e.g., "There is a calm and pleasant atmosphere where I work."). Respondents reply to demand and control items using a scale ranging from 1 (Often) to 4 (Never/almost never). They reply to all other items using a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly agree) to 4 (Strongly disagree). Reliability by Cronbach's alpha for all domains ranged from .63 to .86 (de Mello Alves et al., 2004).

## Results

ANOVAs and standard multiple regression were run to understand how demographic factors (gender, ethnicity, education, and income), ethnic identity, and stress at work may influence number of inter-ethnic friends and the satisfaction people may have with these friendships 2 x 4 (Gender x Ethnicity) ANOVAs indicated no significant effects and interactions of gender and ethnicity on number of inter-ethnic friends and satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Number of Inter-Ethnic Friends and Satisfaction With Inter-Ethnic Friendships by Gender and Ethnicity*

	Number of Inter-Ethnic Friends	Satisfaction With Inter-Ethnic Friendships
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	7.32 (9.50)	4.03 (.67)
Female	6.80 (10.11)	4.03 (.53)
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Malay	6.32 (9.87)	4.05 (.55)
Chinese	6.50 (8.28)	3.70 (.68)
Indian	8.43 (9.94)	3.93 (.58)
Other	10.67 (11.46)	4.26 (.59)

Pearson's correlations showed that only ethnic identity and stress at work were significantly correlated with satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships,  $r = .197, p < .05$ , and  $r = -.301, p < .01$  (see Table 2). Standard multiple regression showed that age, education, income, ethnic identity, and stress at work were not significant predictors of number of inter-ethnic friends (see Table 3). However, ethnic identity and stress at work were significant predictors of satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships,  $F(5, 138) = 4.223, p < .001, R^2 = .133$  (see Table 4). The higher the participants' ethnic identity ( $\beta = .201, p = .013$ ) and the lower their stress at work ( $\beta = -.279, p = .001$ ), the higher their satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships.

Table 2

*Correlations Between Age, Education, Income, Ethnic Identity, Stress at Work and Number of Inter-Ethnic Friends, and Satisfaction With Inter-Ethnic Friendships*

	Number of Inter-Ethnic Friends	Satisfaction With Inter-Ethnic Friendships
	<i>r</i>	<i>r</i>
Age	-.091 ( <i>N</i> = 172)	.082 ( <i>N</i> = 167)
Education	.049 ( <i>N</i> = 182)	.118 ( <i>N</i> = 178)
Income	.097 ( <i>N</i> = 180)	.051 ( <i>N</i> = 176)
Ethnic identity	.020 ( <i>N</i> = 170)	.197* ( <i>N</i> = 166)
Stress at work	.006 ( <i>N</i> = 165)	-.301** ( <i>N</i> = 162)

\*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3

*Regression Coefficients for the Model Predicting Number of Inter-Ethnic Friends*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Age	-0.169	0.154	-.109
Education	-0.516	1.024	-.042
Income	0.002	0.010	.140
Ethnic identity	0.105	0.229	.039
Stress at work	0.053	0.139	.032

Table 4

*Regression Coefficients for the Model Predicting Satisfaction With Inter-Ethnic Friendships*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$
Age	-0.002	0.008	-.028
Education	0.065	0.006	.087
Income	-2.730E-005	0.000	-.043
Ethnic identity	0.033	0.013	.201*
Stress at work	-0.027	0.008	-.279**

\* $p < 0.05$ . \*\* $p < 0.001$ .

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine the role of demographic factors, ethnic identity, and stress at the workplace as predictors of inter-ethnic friendships at the workplace. In general, we found that demographic factors including



ethnicity, gender, academic background and income to have no significant relationship with the number of inter-ethnic friends and the satisfaction people have with these friends. This is not consistent with previous research findings that indicated that certain ethnic groups (such as White Americans), females, and people of lower education and income are less likely to develop inter-ethnic friendships (Fong & Isajiw, 2000; Schofield, Hausmann, Ye, & Woods, 2010). One explanation for this contradictory finding can be associated with the occupations and workplaces of the respondents. A large proportion of the respondents in this study worked as teachers or government officers who shared more or less similar environments (such as schools and government offices). These similar environments could have played a much more important impact that somehow minimized the effect of demographic backgrounds. Future studies on ethnic-friendships at the workplace need to take into account the importance of the nature of the workplace in contributing to whether or not people will form inter-ethnic friendships.

Ethnic identity and stress also had no significant relationships with the number of inter-ethnic friends. They, however, were significantly related to satisfaction with the inter-ethnic friendships. People with stronger ethnic identity were more likely to be satisfied with inter-ethnic friendships whereas people who experienced more stress at work reported lower satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships. This finding is somewhat inconsistent with our earlier prediction that stronger ethnic identity can lead to a lower number of and less satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships. Further studies need to be conducted to understand the seemingly “positive” effect of ethnic identity on inter-ethnic friendships. It is likely that people who feel positive about their ethnic groups also feel positive about people from other ethnic groups and that translates into higher level of satisfaction reported for inter-ethnic friendships.

However, we found a negative correlation between stress and inter-ethnic friendships and this provides evidence for two possible links between stress and inter-ethnic friendships; inter-ethnic friendships as buffering against stress (Kawabata & Crick, 2011) and stress as minimizing the potentials for friendship development and maintenance (Parris, Vickers, & Wilkes, 2008). Just like their intra-ethnic counterparts, high number of inter-ethnic friendships may protect individuals against stress and high level of stress may put a strain on inter-ethnic friendships.

This study highlights several important implications. One is the importance of ethnic identity as a construct that can predict satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships. Instead of having a negative impact, ethnic identity has a positive effect, i.e., people who identify more with their own ethnicity are more satisfied with their inter-ethnic friendships. More research needs to be conducted to fully understand this positive correlation. This study also outlines the importance of stress in predicting whether or not people are satisfied with their friends at the workplace. If inter-ethnic friendships are to be encouraged, then stress level at the workplace must be kept at minimum.

There are a number of limitations in this study. The respondents in this study were working adults doing long distance studies at a university. While they adequately represented working adults, they represented only a certain type of working adults. The respondents in this study may represent struggling working adults who are motivated to improve their life situations but at the same time may be experiencing a substantially higher level of stress compared to their peers who are not studying while working. This may influence the level of stress and the number of friends they reported. Future studies need to include the more “ordinary” working adults who do not have additional commitments related to studying part-time. The other limitation of this study may be related to the way inter-ethnic friendships were measured. In this study we used a single measure of frequency and satisfaction with inter-ethnic friendships. This may have been inadequate in capturing a broader range of qualities associated with inter-ethnic friendships. Future studies may use more rigorous measures of this construct. These limitations notwith-

standing, findings from this study highlight the importance of examining more complex issues related to inter-ethnic friendships.

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