

# ENHANCING INTERETHNIC BRIDGING OF GEN Y WORKFORCE

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**ABSTRACT:** Society and the workplace experience transformation with every emergence of new generation. The partaking of Gen Y or 'Millennials' into the workforce since the new millennium had resulted in multigeneration of workforce, each with their own features. Malaysia, being a multi-racial nation, is susceptible to the societal and workforce changes with the advent of Gen Y. Interethnic relations among Gen Y in Malaysia is vital in ensuring amity and peace as Gen Y make up the imminent future leaders. However, general characteristics of Gen Y being individualistic, challenge the norms of society as well as overtly conceding to racism would impede racial integration. This study examines the factors of interethnic bridging social capital of Gen Y. The results showed that while Gen Y are generally satisfied with ethnic integration and areas affecting ethnic groups, there were issues which require improvement to enhance interethnic bridging of social capital.

**Keywords:** Interethnic Bridging; ethnic integration; Gen Y; economic equalities; education opportunities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Peaceful co-existence among diverse ethnic groups in Malaysia is crucial to ensure harmony, prevent aggressions and hostilities disrupting the nation. Efforts have been made by the government to unite Malaysians and strengthen the spirit of nationality. Regardless of the efforts of incorporating elements of unity through the education sector, ethnic relation among youth in Malaysia was still found to be at a moderate level [1]. It is perturbing that Gen Y who currently make up a substantial percentage of youth in Malaysia were found to be open in admitting racism [2]. Given that Gen Y participation is more than 60% of the total Malaysian workforce [3] and that Malaysians spend a vast amount of time at workplace, it is essential that they are able to work peacefully among diverse ethnic groups. Interethnic bridging among Gen Y workforce is vital in shaping the economy of the nation. Hence, this paper examines the factors that help strengthen inter-racial relationship among Gen Y workforce in Malaysia. The findings revealed various issues require actions from the government and policymakers in order to increase integration among ethnic groups in Malaysia.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Workforce: multi-generational and multi-ethnic relations.

Globally, the workforce at present consists of at least three generations: baby boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1980), Generation Y or the Millennials (born 1981-1999). Mannheim presented the theory of generations where the categorization of generations is based on the birth years and societal role [4]. Various earlier research had shown that each generation has its idiosyncrasies and work characteristics [5] and [6]; where the millennials were found to be a contradictory generation [7]; self-enhancement, self-transcendence, conservation [8]; challenge the status quo and motivated to work in a non-conformist environment [9]; and high technical competency [10]. Understanding their general characteristics would enable employers and the industry in capitalizing their strength [11], provide better trainings to enhance their skills [12], ensure better recruitment and retainment of millennial professionals [7], as well as

managing generational gaps in workplace to ensure productivity [13-15].

Changes in the workplace environment can be seen in terms of the demographics, economics, culture and technology [16]. The emergence of a new generation in a workplace, poses challenges as generational differences may lead to conflicting generational behaviours [17]. Hence, it is pertinent to recognize the impact of diversity in the generation of workforce, particularly when they are of different ethnicity as diversity in the absence of unity may affect productivity.

In a multi-ethnic workplace, racial discrimination is inevitably a common issue of dissatisfaction. A meta-analysis [18] found that perceived racial discrimination at work is negatively related to (among other things), job attitudes and diverse climate and positively related to coping behaviour. Racial bias was found to be a problem in workplace at the hiring phase, which has resulted in technology offering ways to eliminate biasness by initial screening of candidates and evaluation pass the hiring stage [19].

Ethnic diversity, however, may not necessarily be destructive. According to McKenna et al [20], ethnic diversity does not have a detrimental effect on any social cohesion variable and that it was positively related to generalized trust through the mediators of intergroup contact and perceived threat. facilitating opportunities for positive contact in diverse communities. Olawepo [21] found that there was a significant relationship between diversity climate and workplace friendship. Bond, & Haynes [22] posit that the benefits of diversity are directly shaped by the organizational context, and that would materialize realized when the value for diversity is integrated throughout organizational practices. The essential task is for organizations to establish diversity programs in workplace to close the gaps of diverse culture or ethnicity.

### B. Malaysian setting: Gen Y and multi-ethnic workforce.

In Malaysia, the Economic Census 2016: Employment and Salaries & Wages Statistics revealed that there were 8,732,238 workers in Malaysia and out which 7,298,139 were Malaysian citizens [3]. Gen Y make up the majority, with more than 60% of the workforce. Malaysians were reported to work an average of 15 hours more than their contracted

hours each week surpassing Singapore, Hong Kong and Australia but suffered high productivity loss [23] despite clocking in more working hours. With long hours at work, it is important that one maintains good working relationship with multi-generational and multi-ethnic colleagues to ensure productivity as well as personal achievement.

Research on multi-ethnic relation and social integration in Malaysia tend to focus on schools and those pursuing tertiary education as education institutions have been entrusted with the task of promoting national unity through education syllabus. A study on history curriculum in school found students' awareness on racial unity based on previous knowledge and students' experience [24]. Nevertheless, the lessons in school are not sufficient to ensure interethnic integration when students pursue tertiary education. Said [25] states that ethnic polarization at the universities are partly due to unclear policies on nation building at higher education level causing natural social integration difficult to materialize on campus. In a study on key stakeholders in the education process [26], it was found that diversity awareness among the stakeholders, national identity formation, as well as equitable and inclusive practices are essential for intercultural education. According to Awang, Ahmad and Rahman [27], the majority of Malaysian multi-ethnic youth practised social integration behaviour such as social acceptance and cultural appreciation, but the levels of social integration are "still work-in-progress" requiring continuous actions on promoting unity. There is a dearth of research on integration among multi-ethnic Gen Y workforce. This has led to the current study.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The current study used a survey research design with open-ended questions. The population of the study involved four regions in Malaysia, namely the northern region (Penang and Kedah), the eastern region (Kelantan and Terengganu), the central region (Kuala Lumpur and Selangor) and the southern region (Melaka and Johor). A questionnaire was used to collect data from 796 multi-ethnic working Gen Y. Sampling design is Purposive Sampling with inclusionary criteria of working Gen Y and to ensure representative data from each ethnic group. The survey was designed, among other things, to determine the respondent's perceived interethnic bridging, drawing on the strength of social capital. Open-ended questions were asked to assess the respondent's satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on their experiences and opinions on racial related issues. Their answers were categorized into 7 themes discussed in the following.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Surveys distributed via online and hardcopies had yielded 796 responses. The age of the respondents are spread out from as young as 19-23 years old (32%) and 34-38 years old (20%). The respondents sufficiently represent the ethnic groups in Malaysia: 69% Malay, 22% Chinese, 6% Indian and 3% others. Majority of the respondents (62%) possess tertiary education, either diploma or degree. More than half of the respondents (63%) work in a mixed ethnic workplace, with slightly more respondents in the private sector (35%) as compared to the public sector (31%). 68% of the respondents reside in a neighbourhood with mixed ethnic. Only 29% of

the respondents had family members with inter-racial marriages. The following illustrates the responses on the open-ended questions on the respondents' experiences and opinions as regards interethnic bridging.

#### A. Ethnic integration

There were mixed reactions when respondents were asked to describe their experience or opinion on ethnic integration. However, commonalities can be seen in their perception on politics in relation to ethnic integration. The respondents perceived politicians and political parties responsible for causing disintegration of interethnic relations as shown in Table 1 below:

ETHNIC INTEGRATION
<i>...isu perkauman dan sensitif tidak boleh dipolitikkan oleh orang-orang dalam politik utk mendapat kepercayaan... (...racial and sensitive issues should not be politicized by politicians to garner trust...)</i>
<i>...Ahli-ahli politik sepatutnya berhenti menyebarkan kebencian antara kaum dan masyarakat sepatutnya menilai, mengkritik seseorang secara individu dan bukannya bangsa dan agama individu tersebut (Politicians should stop inciting hatred among ethnic groups and the community should assess and criticize a person individually and not because of the person's ethnicity and faith).</i>
<i>... Politics ruined the harmony we uses [sic] to have.</i>
<i>... Political parties should not encourage ethnic distance and make bad comments about other ethnic.</i>
<i>... Abolish race-based politics and rhetoric, and instead embrace and emphasize our uniqueness as Malaysians and our shared cultures.</i>

Table 1: Ethnic Integration

In addition, the respondents also called for monitoring of social media postings which incite racism or sensitive issues. Aside from politics and social media, Malay respondents attributed the lack of ethnic integration to vernacular schools and the usage of language. Apart from fostering the usage of Bahasa Malaysia, some of the respondents suggested that all students in school should learn three languages: Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil. To achieve integration, interethnic relation has to begin at a young age. Segregation of young children at school based on ethnicity would impede interethnic bridging. The findings in the current study is aligned with the findings of Burgess and Platt [28] which corroborated the Casey Review Report 2016 conducted by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government UK where it was found that lack of social mixing was a barrier to integration. It was further found that even small moves away from largely mono-ethnic schools towards more mixed ones had produced positive changes. While abolishing vernacular schools may raise sensitivities among ethnic groups in Malaysia, actions need to be taken in closing the divide between these schools.

#### B. Economic equality

Of all the items, the respondents perceived economic equality the least improved. The respondents who described their experience or opinion on economic equality were divided into three: the Malays were of the view that the economy is monopolized by the Chinese while the Chinese perceived government policies in business favoured the Malays at the disadvantage of other races while the Indians feel marginalized. Nevertheless, the overall sentiment was that there should be equality and fairness in terms of business or economy among all the ethnic groups.

#### C. Economic opportunities

The respondents called for better economic opportunities, disregarding race or religion and there should be a “transition from race-based blanket economic policies to needs-based targeted economic policies”. While non-Malay respondents urged for “Malay quota to be abolished” or equal opportunities be given, there were also Malay respondents who concurred that economic opportunities be available to all, irrespective of race and religion (Table 2). Although the Malay respondents conceded that the Chinese monopolized the economy, some relented that Malays need to learn from the Chinese in order to advance and not take for granted the financial assistance and economic policies which benefited them.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES
<p>... membuka peluang ekonomi kepada semua kaum dan menilai berdasarkan individu tersebut bukan terhadap pegangan agama individu tersebut (...to open economic opportunity to all ethnic groups and to assess based on the individual and not based on a person's faith).</p> <p>...Tidak dapat dinafikan bahawa ekonomi kaum cina lebih tinggi berbanding kaum yang lain. Oleh itu kita perlu mengambil nilai positif seperti rajin berusaha supaya semua kaum sama-sama maju ke depan (...it is undeniable that the economy for the Chinese is better than that of other ethnic groups. We should adopt the positive values such as hardworking...)</p> <p>... the Malays enjoy more privileges [sic] than others, they have better opportunities to work for gov (due to quota), they have better opportunities to have an education (due to quota), yet showed on recent statistics, poverty, education level, and others, the Malay is at the bottom of the chart. We are taking for granted.</p>

Table 2: Economic Opportunities

#### D. Education opportunities

Respondents who shared their opinions and dissatisfaction raised issues on enrolment in public universities: that the enrolment quota based on ethnicity for public universities should be abolished and that acceptance to public universities should be based on merits instead of ethnicity. The suggestion for equality in education opportunities and university enrolment also came from Malay respondents who believed in healthy competition to promote interethnic integration.

#### E. Employment opportunities

The respondents' dissatisfaction which were mainly divided into two: the Malays were largely unhappy with companies requiring candidates to be able to speak Mandarin in job applications and the non-Malays were disappointed with insufficient employment opportunities for non-Malays in the government sector. However, a common issue raised by the respondents irrespective of ethnicity was biasness of the employers (or whoever in charge of recruitment) as they usually tend to employ candidates from their own ethnic group. The respondents asserted that recruitment of workforce must not be based on ethnicity and suggestions were made on employment policy of multi-ethnic employees in every organization.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES
<p>...Employment should be base [sic] on their experience and attitude, not their ethnics and religion. A workplace should consist of all ethnics and religion so that, as generations go by, we would have more acceptance and see the equality among ethnics.</p> <p>...I'd say, whichever ethnics who dominates the top will also dominate the whole system.</p> <p>... Kebanyakan syarikat mengambil kaum sendiri untuk bekerja berbanding kaum lain (...most companies will employ people from their ethnic group instead of other ethnic groups).</p> <p>...Kebanyakan organisasi majikan menetapkan syarat berbahasa mandarin. (...Most organizations impose a condition on proficiency in Mandarin).</p> <p>...Should have mix ethnicity in all sectors...to balance all &amp; competitive...</p>

Table 3: Employment Opportunities

#### F. Religious acceptance

Although religious acceptance in the eyes of Gen Y appears to be good, the respondents with dissenting views described experiences which illustrate religious extremism, lack of monitoring on social media postings regarding religious issues and unwarranted fear of other religion. Lack of openness in discussing religious matters is also said to contribute towards prejudice in other religion.

#### G. Acceptance of different cultural practices

Respondents generally displayed a high level of acceptance of different cultural practices with a majority of the respondents. Tolerance of different cultural practices were frequently cited by the respondents and suggestions were made to increase the number of activities, programs and events which would cultivate acceptance of different cultural practices.

ACCEPTANCE OF DIFFERENT CULTURAL PRACTICES
<p>...In Malaysia, we have multi languages and races which make Malaysia a diverse country with it [sic] uniqueness so we should surround and embrace each other's cultures.</p> <p>...It is good as it is right now, respecting religion will automatically respect other's culture.</p> <p>...We respects other's culture &amp; should not criticize. Example should be set through our actions &amp; characters.</p> <p>...Setiap kaum menerima kepelbagaian budaya di Malaysia. Saya sendiri berasa seronok untuk mempelajari budaya kaum yang lain (...Each ethnic group embraces multi-culture in Malaysia. I feel excited to learn the culture of other ethnic groups).</p> <p>...Semua kaum boleh berkongsi budaya yg tidak bertentangan dengan agama (...All ethnic groups can share the culture which do not go against a person's religion).</p>

Table 4: Acceptance of Different Cultural Practices

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Over the years, the Malaysian government had formulated numerous efforts to achieve unity and social cohesion such as the formulation of Rukunegara (national principles), 1Malaysia, implementation of Program Latihan Khidmat Negara (National Service Training Programme) and

incorporating national unity curriculum in schools and universities. However, much work is still required for interethnic bridging, particularly among the Gen Y workforce who are the future leaders and nation builders of Malaysia. This study corroborates earlier findings [27] that interethnic integration is still 'work in progress' but adds on valuable information on Gen Y's perceived aspects of interethnic integration which necessitate various actions. Observation on Gen Y's perception on matters affecting interethnic bridging as well as previous literature can be summed up as follows:

1. Comprehensive and not piecemeal solutions.

Piecemeal solutions or actions are not sufficient to achieve interethnic integration. Segregation of ethnic groups at primary schools need to be revised as segregation will impede on integration. However, abolishing vernacular schools may result in political turmoil. Instead, strategizing plans on closing the divide between vernacular schools and national schools through collaborative efforts and engagement programs between various types of schools may promote interethnic bridging. The main agenda has to be learning different languages and culture so as to enable the students to accept diversity and assimilate with other ethnicity at early age. Having said that, teachers and instructors need to be equipped with proper formal training on diversity and interethnic relations as previous studies have revealed the absence of such training for teachers [26] and the lack of standardized curriculum in tertiary education [25].

2. Issues on 'special rights' or privileges of the Malays/bumiputras.

Non-Malay/bumiputra Gen Y respondents in this study appear to be dissatisfied with the special privileges of Malays/bumiputras as regards enrolment into public universities, scholarship quotas, recruitment in the government sector and business opportunities in government projects. Special privileges for the Malays/bumiputras are enshrined in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, mainly for: positions in the public service; scholarships and educational and training facilities; licences and permits; and post-secondary education. However, the Federal Constitution also protects the rights of all ethnic groups in terms of education, religion, citizenship and economic opportunities [29] and [30]. Eliminating or amending the special privileges of Malays/bumiputras goes against the historical backdrop behind the Federal Constitution of Malaysia, and most likely would create chaos and unrest in the country. It is essential that all Malaysians particularly the younger generation be educated correctly on the provisions of the Federal Constitution to eradicate dissatisfaction stemming from misconception of the rights of the citizen in Malaysia. As Faruqi had written, "Constitutional literacy is low. Constitutional patriotism is even rarer" [30]. Thus, understanding the Federal Constitution will prevent them from being misled by any adverse influence, resulting in racial disintegration.

3. Transparency in economic equality and opportunities.

Notwithstanding the special privileges for Malays/bumiputras, the government tenders on work projects must be free from corruption. The procedures for accepting tenders need to be reviewed to eliminate corruption and

favours. Actions must be taken against companies/organizations supplying goods or services which do not meet the standards or requirements in the government tenders. Further, incentives can be given to organizations for transferring of knowledge in business or economic opportunities to smaller and medium industries.

4. Education opportunities.

Enrolment to public universities need to reflect the proportion of population in Malaysia but without transgressing the Federal Constitution and without compromising of the quality of students enrolled. Based on the responses of the Gen Y respondents, it appears that they perceived the non-Malays/non-bumiputras are being side-lined in the selection process, with priority given to the Malays/bumiputras. Transparency in the selection of students enrolled into public universities may eliminate perception on inequality or biasness in the selection process.

5. Employment policies for government and private organizations to provide equal opportunities.

Both government and private organizations would benefit from diversified and multi-cultural workforce. Although the Federal Constitution made reservations on special privileges for the Malays/bumiputras in the federal public service, it does not prohibit the recruitment of other ethnic groups in various areas of public service. Policies can be designed requiring proportionate percentage of multi-cultural workforce in all organizations. with incentives in the form of tax rebate given to organizations from the private sectors which recruit employees from sufficiently diversified ethnicity. Based on the responses in this study, majority of the Malays felt that they were discriminated in recruitment process which required third language proficiency, particularly mandarin. To prevent biasness, requirements of proficiency in certain languages must be justified and that candidates who may not be native speakers of the language but have learned the language or are willing to undergo training to learn the language are given the opportunity to be recruited.

In sum, while the respondents were generally satisfied with the improvements in interethnic integration over the last five years, perception on unfairness or unfair treatment still looms among Gen Y workforce. Perception on unfairness would breed dissatisfaction and thereby, impede any effort on interethnic bridging. Two main sources of misconception on unfairness are ignorance and being instigated by others, particularly politicians and uninhibited social media. Enhancing interethnic bridging among Gen Y and future generations require concerted effort from all quarters. Malaysians of whichever generations must not allow themselves to be manipulated by politicians or anyone with disruptive agendas to the nation.

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