

**A STUDY ON ETHNOCENTRISM AMONG  
UNDERGRADUATES IN PENANG**

**MUTHUKUMARAN A/L KANASAN**

**UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA**

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**A STUDY ON ETHNOCENTRISM AMONG  
UNDERGRADUATES IN PENANG**

by

**MUTHUKUMARAN A/L KANASAN**

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# **KAJIAN TENTANG ETNOSENTRISME DALAM KALANGAN MAHASISWA-MAHASISWI DI PULAU PINANG**

## **ABSTRAK**

Kajian kaedah campuran bermatlamat meneroka tahap etnosentrisme dalam kalangan pelajar universiti di Pulau Pinang. Borang soal selidik diedarkan kepada 380 siswa-siswi di universiti awam dan swasta. Analisa data kuantitatif menggunakan statistik deskriptif (min, sisihan piawai) dan inferensi (Ujian t-bebas, ANOVA Sehalu, Analisis Cluster, Korelasi Pearson). Analisis ujian t-bebas dan ANOVA sehalu menunjukkan perbezaan yang signifikan ( $p < .05$ ) pada tahap etnosentrisme dalam kalangan kumpulan etnik, jantina, agama, jenis sekolah rendah dan sekolah menengah, penggunaan bahasa ibunda serta institusi pengajian tinggi awam dan swasta. Analisis Cluster menunjukkan kebanyakan responden dikategorikan dalam segmen etnosentrisme intraetnik dan interetnik tahap sederhana. Selain itu, korelasi Pearson ( $r = -0.334$ ) menunjukkan hubungan negatif antara kontak interetnik dan etnosentrisme. Diskusi kumpulan fokus dilakukan terhadap empat kumpulan etnik iaitu Melayu, Cina, India dan Sabah/Sarawak untuk meneroka faktor-faktor yang menyumbang kepada sikap ethnosentrisme. Analisis kualitatif ini mendapati tema seperti identiti budaya, agama, stereotaip, interaksi interetnik, pilihan, diskriminasi, sistem pendidikan, kesamarataan merupakan faktor yang berpengaruh terhadap etnosentrisme. Bagi merapatkan jurang antara etnik, kajian ini mencadangkan satu jenis sistem pendidikan nasional bagi rakyat, dialog antara agama yang progresif, program pertukaran pelajar di institusi pengajian tinggi, modul interetnik di tempat kerja dan polisi kesamarataan dalam usaha membendung sikap etnosentrisme.

# **A STUDY OF ETHNOCENTRISM AMONG UNDERGRADUATES IN PENANG**

## **ABSTRACT**

This mixed method research aims to delve into exploring the determinants of ethnocentrism among undergraduates in Penang. The survey questionnaires were distributed to 380 undergraduate respondents from public and private universities. The data was analysed using Independent Sample t-test, one way ANOVA, Cluster Analysis and Pearson correlation. Independent Sample t-test and one way ANOVA analysis disclosed a significant difference of ( $p < .05$ ) among the ethnic group, gender, religion, types of primary and secondary school, use of mother tongue, public and private university with ethnocentrism. Cluster analysis reveal that in regards to three segments, most of the undergraduates have moderate level of intergroup and intragroup of ethnocentrism. Pearson correlation coefficient, ( $r = -0.334$ ) shows that there was a negative relationship between interethnic contact and ethnocentrism. Besides, focus group interviews were also conducted among four ethnic groups comprise of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Sabah/Sarawak to explore contributing factors to ethnocentrism. The qualitative findings reveals several themes such as cultural identity, religion, stereotype, inter-ethnic interaction, preference, discrimination, education system, and equality have significant influence on ethnocentrism. In order to bridge the gap among ethnic groups, this study proposes to maintain only national type school, progressive interfaith dialogue, student exchange programmes in higher education institutions, interethnic relation modules in every establishment and equality policy in order to reduce ethnocentrism.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of Study

With a population of 32.4 million people (male population: 52%; female population: 48%), Malaysia consists of West Malaysia or specifically known as Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia that comprises Sabah and Sarawak. Malays dominate the population of Malaysia at 69.1%, followed by Chinese (23%), Indians (6.9%), and other ethnic minorities (1%) (Department of Statistics, 2018).

The population of Malaysia consists of various ethnic groups and ethnicities, which have influenced almost all social aspects in the country. The British colonisation that imposed the “divide and rule” policy back then has divided the country into different ethnic groups, which influences the interrelationships between these ethnic groups (Noor, 2009). Furthermore, some preferential national policies has categorised Malaysia and an ‘ethnocentric state’ (Haque, 2003).

Ethnocentrism is related to one’s belief about the truth of certain aspects, which in this case, the belief of one’s culture being the “centre”, more deserving, and superior (Etninson, 2018). Basically, ethnocentrism can be perceived as moral bias where a member of a cultural group is more particularly concerned about their own cultural group. Ethnocentrism can also be understood as “in-group favouritism” or a sense of

attachment and allegiance to a specific group that one personally identifies (Anderson, 2010). The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology defined ethnocentrism as “the tendency to view one’s own ethnic group and its social standards as the basis for evaluative judgement concerning the practices of others, with the implication that one views one’s own standards as superior” (Reber & Reber, 2001). Based on the above definitions, ethnocentrism can be generally viewed as one’s propensity to assume higher importance towards their own cultural group and/or evaluate other cultural groups according to the standards of their own cultural group.

This sociological concept is universally identified as biased attitudes and behaviours. It reflects one’s inclination to view other cultural groups from their own viewpoints and dismiss ideas and people of different cultural groups (Hammond & Axelrod, 2006). Such inclination of beliefs may create a particular school of thought that any policies and rules that go against one’s own cultural interests and standards are perceived as invalid and culturally disruptive (Kamaruddin, Mokhlis, & Othman, 2002).

Issues of ethnicity in Malaysia are prevalent—it is a challenge to live together harmoniously without any conflict in a multiracial and multicultural country like Malaysia (Mustapha, 2009). During the British colonisation, all these various ethnic groups had very minimal social contact and only interacted at the workplace or marketplace, which only intensified social or cultural bias. Such circumstances inhibited social development between ethnic groups, resulting in social disunity and intense rivalry to acquire political, economic, and social benefits today (Aziz, Salleh, & Ribu, 2010).

Racial segregation was practiced during the British colonisation for the British to take advantage of Malaysia’s natural resources and to strengthen their political

standing in this country. The different functions and position of the British led to the division of Malay, Chinese, and Indian groups according to their occupation, living space, and education (ibid, 2010).

The nature of such segregation that results in the mentality of “us versus them” is manipulative. Ethnocentrism influences how people react and make decisions according to their own biased beliefs. Maintaining unity between different ethnic groups is highly challenging for a community with a high level of ethnocentrism (Hooghe, 2003). Ethnocentrism obstructs communication and interactions between people from different cultural backgrounds (Neuliep, 2012).

Ethnocentrism is a barrier to a multi-ethnic society. Minimal racial interaction has been linked to ethnocentrism in the aforementioned studies. It is a challenge for ethnocentric people to communicate with people from other ethnic groups without bias. Such negative view towards people from other ethnic groups promotes distrust and negative relationships. Trust is an essential factor that promotes interrelationships between different ethnic groups.

Malaysians are known to be racially divided. Four common issues of ethnicity in Malaysia include religion, politics, equality, and special rights of Malays (Sankar, 2010). Other studies also highlighted similar findings on these four listed issues (Khattab et al., 2007).

The process of promoting and maintaining unity among people of different ethnic backgrounds in a multiracial and multicultural country like Malaysia is complex. The efforts to promote unity through education have even stepped up to the tertiary level and are no longer confined to the school environment alone, which clearly reflects the transformation of the multiculturalism process in Malaysia’s education

system (Ibrahim, Muslim, & Buang, 2011; Khatatneh & Teh, 2018; Ugwu & Udeh, 2018).

To date, there are four main stages of ethnic controversy in Malaysia (Muzaffar, 1989). The first stage took place during the 1950s, where issues of citizenship and contact social are dominant issues of ethnicity. During the 1960s, the second stage involved the debate of the use of Malay language prior to the implementation of the New Economy Policy (NEP). Following that, the third stage took place during the 1970s to 1980s, which involved issues of quota system and urbanisation. Since the 1990s, religious issues have substantially affected the interrelationships between different ethnic groups in Malaysia (Mahusin, 2006).

Further observation was made by Jawan (2003), as explained below:

*“The most important and everything for each ethnic groups in Malaysia compared to national interest. Ethnic groups in Malaysia mingled with each other but unfortunately they were lacking of cohesiveness. Even though they are staying closed to each other in a same neighbourhood but they were separated by the political structure. They embrace persistently to their own culture, religion, and language. They came across each other in hypermarket while shopping and then go back to their own house. In addition, an obvious job discrimination at work based on their racial background is still in exist.”*

The above discussion propelled the current study to explore contributing factors of ethnocentrism, specifically in terms of the distinctive attributes of ethnocentric attitudes. With that, the following section first describes the concept of ethnocentrism.

## **1.2 What is Ethnocentrism?**

Ethnocentrism is the main source of social conflict in this modern era. There are a number of persistent and intractable ethnic conflicts that continue to affect the modern world, including those at the Indian subcontinent, Rwanda, Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, Palestine, and recently, Sudan and Iraq. The contributing factors of negative ethnocentrism have been the focus of many studies over the years, notably in social psychology. Focusing on ethnicity, the causes of intrapsychic conflict or internal and subjective factors have continued to be a research interest in social psychology (Figueredo, Andrzejczak, Jones, Smith-Castro, & Montero, 2011).

Ethnocentric people view and interpret other cultures based on the unique sets of beliefs and values of their own culture that are perceived as the most accurate standards (Neuliep, Chadoir, & McCroskey, 2001). Studies have highlighted the adversity of maintaining social unity in an ethnocentric society (Hooghe, 2003).

Ethnocentrism can also be understood as one's trust in the supremacy of their own culture above all other cultures; such mindset of a "superior" culture may be artificial (Encyclopedia Britannica., 2013). Undeniably, everyone has their own bias and resolute opinions. Most people often prioritise their own ethnic group, treat other ethnic groups as secondary or irrelevant, or in the worst-case scenario, discriminate other ethnic groups and cause ethnic conflicts. However, most people are not aware of their level of ethnocentrism (Barger, 2008; Cunningham, Nezlek, & Banaji, 2004, as cited in Weinstein, 2013). The concept of ethnocentrism reflects one's belief of their own group being more superior and qualified than other groups that are perceived to be more inferior and less qualified.

Nonetheless, certain theorists have claimed that such differences manifest from intergroup and intragroup processes. Kreindler (2005) explained that the dynamics of these different social groups contribute to the formation of these individual differences. Human traits are manifestations of social selection and reflect how humans adapt to their living environment that consists of different social groups (Nesse, 2007). However, how these social adaptations affect modern ethnocentrism in relation to ethnic conflicts has been critically underexplored (Schaller, Park, & Muelle, 2003).

Accordingly, a lower level of ethnocentrism can be beneficial, specifically in creating a sense of cohesion among the members of a group. For examples, group development, nationalism, or patriotism. On the contrary, a higher level of ethnocentrism can critically affect communication and interrelationships between different groups. Applebaum, as cited in Neuliep et al. (2001), highlighted two dimensions of ethnocentrism, which are one's cross-cultural evaluation of cultures based on (1) the beliefs and values of one's own culture or (2) the beliefs and values of the privileged or underprivileged culture.

Brown (2006) identified the cross-cultural evaluation of cultures based on the beliefs and values of one's own culture as a more challenging subject. When people only perceive their own culture as the universal standards and disregard other cultures, more critical forms of ethnocentrism may manifest, resulting in severe social discrimination, social bias, and in the worst-case scenario, genocide or mass murder of an ethnic group (Neuliep et al., 2005).

In short, ethnocentrism is prevalent in a multiethnic society. Ethnocentrism can be understood as one's understanding of an individual or a group's stance where their own values are emphasised and serve as the underlying basis for the population. Each

group embraces its own pride and superiority and the members of the group grow up with their own kind and express dislike towards other groups (Alkire, Garton, Leonard, & Wood, 2013).

With that, ethnocentrism in this study was viewed as the same degree the attitude that incorporates emotional resilience of an ethnic group's self-interest and intense loyalty, with the conviction that one's own ethnic group is superior to the other ethnic groups. The key feature of ethnocentrism lies in one's preference towards their own ethnic group.

### **1.3 Ethnocentrism in Western Countries**

A country like the United States of America that is widely known as a heterogeneous country also encounters cultural challenges. Most Americans are not aware of the social similarities and diversities of the society within and beyond their country. In view to this ignorance, Americans believe that they possess cultural supremacy, which clearly reflects ethnocentrism (Pettijohn & Naples, 2009).

Despite the efforts to promote multiculturalism and openness, Tomkiewicz et al. (2011) highlighted the potential manifestation of ethnocentrism among college students, which may affect their career progression in the global market. A high level of ethnocentrism potentially affects their preparation to be part of the future workforce in this global economy. It is important for business graduates and practitioners to comprehend the influence of ethnocentrism on their career advancement and success (Weinstein, 2013).

Unlike racism, ethnocentrism is more of a learning process that involves cultural practices and does not create unfavourable opinions towards other ethnic

groups. Ethnocentrism is about one's struggle in accepting other cultures. All ethnic groups possess their own views of the world, which potentially lead to disregarding the potency of other ethnic groups (Hooghe, 2008).

Undeniably, everyone displays ethnocentric beliefs. The unfavourable consequences of radical ethnocentrism and severe racism can be comparatively similar despite the significant differences between both concepts. The level of ethnocentrism individually differs in various life aspects, such as way of life and preferences in terms of food, fashion, beliefs, customs, traditions, and lifestyles, which display their personal impression of being culturally superior (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013).

Macro influencers, such as national policies and other institutional implementations, may minimise intergroup interactions. Besides that, there are also interpersonal factors that minimise connection or micro-interpersonal pro-activeness that disregards cultural differences. In general, there are numerous factors that challenge interethnic communication but ethnocentrism remains the most discussed and possibly the most significant factor (Cargile & Bolkan, 2013). Ethnocentrism involves viewing different cultures from one's own cultural stance. Ethnocentric attitude creates conflicts (Vera, 2010).

There are three levels of ethnocentrism, which are positive, negative, and extremely negative levels of ethnocentrism (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel, & Roy, 2012). A positive level of ethnocentrism promotes good competition. Prior studies on prejudice highlighted the influence of competition between cultures in social categories on different cultural values of other human lives (Pratto & Glasford, 2008). Samovar et al. (2012) similarly noted the manifestation of ethnocentrism in most people and the significance of ethnocentric attitude in maintaining a society as a whole.

People with ethnocentric attitude are proud of their country and express commitment to their cultural background and tradition. However, both negative and extremely negative levels of ethnocentrism can be detrimental, as modern ethnocentrism is greatly connected to most aspects of interethnic relations. In the case of more specific forms of ethnocentrism, most people consider their own ethnic groups as the centre of the world and other ethnic groups as secondary (ibid, 2012).

Besides that, the basics of ethnocentrism lie in one's views about righteousness, ethics, and sense-making, which are passed through every part of a culture's existence. Moreover, it has become a norm to evaluate other cultures by making one's own culture as the standard (ibid, 2012). Some of the key attributes of ethnocentrism are strong sense of cultural identity, belief in the superiority of one's culture over other cultures, and the act of labelling other cultures as incorrect (Alkire et al., 2013).

Ethnocentrism also involves creating certain expectations towards others from different cultural backgrounds. Many tend to justify from their own stance as they try to make sense of others from different cultures. With different beliefs and values, many habitually disregard other cultures (Hooghe, 2008). Hooghe (2008) highlighted two key types of ethnocentrism:

*“Cultural ethnocentrism is a set of belief that their own culture are greater than other cultural groups. In addition, cultural ethnocentrist trusts that the influx of other cultural groups can jeopardise their own cultural group. However, economic ethnocentrism views other cultural groups as their economic rivals and they should refrain their economic competency. In other words, economic ethnocentrism can lead to ethnocentric consumerism as they can refuse to purchase things belongs to other ethnic groups and prefer their own ethnic groups' products.”*

In a study that involved 20 European countries, the inflow and/or the presence of migrants as well as the rapid increase of inflows were found to influence generalised trust and ethnocentrism. Focusing on the European population, a higher level of ethnocentrism was found to be more likely among men and older population as well as those with lower education level or without a job. On the other hand, ethnic minorities in the study exhibited a lower level of ethnocentrism than the main population (Hooghe, Reeskens, Stolle, & Trappers, 2006).

Meanwhile, focusing on the cross-national differences in solidarity towards immigrants in European countries, Aschauer and Mayerl (2019) explored the concept of solidarity in terms of perceived ethnic threat versus a positive view of a multicultural society. The study identified dissatisfaction with society, political distrust, fear of social decline, lack of recognition, and social distrust as significant factors that reflect an influential concept of societal malaise, which appeared to mediate the effects of classical factors of ethnocentrism (i.e. socio-demographic factors, subjective norm, and structural factors).

#### **1.4 Ethnocentrism in Asian Countries**

Li (2000) highlighted the manifestation of ethnocentrism in a rural area of Kupang, Indonesia. The study revealed that the discontentment of the local people towards Muslim foreigners in relation to the economic development led to a violent protest that involved property damage and injured four people.

Adding to that, Didimus (2004) revealed the manifestation of ethnocentrism in the public service in the same area. Likewise, Sylvia (2010) also reported the occurrence of interethnic frictions and ethnic rivalry that affect the reception of public service. The study further added that frequent joking and stereotyping appeared to intensify the suspicion interethnic communication. Evidently, the socio-economic development of the majority of the local people serves as a contributing factor of ethnocentrism.

Meanwhile, several incidents have fuelled ethnocentrism in the majority of the population in China, which linked a history of competition to the solidification of ethnic identities and interethnic rivalries (Taynen, 2007). The competition for economic opportunities and cultural domination were found to contribute to the hostility and confrontation between the local authorities and ethnic minorities in China (Bovingdon, 2002).

The ethnic minorities and religious groups in China have experienced different forms of discrimination, repression, and even ethnic cleansing attempts. The correlation of ethnicity and state authoritarianism in handling Tibetan Buddhists versus Chinese Buddhists can be observed in the government policies that regulate Uighur (Turkic) Muslims versus Hui (Han) Muslims (Taynen, 2007). To date, the state has not been able to infiltrate and neutralise the communication framework in the Tibetan and Uighur communities. These violent incidents and conflicts are closely linked to ethnocentrism.

After gaining independence in 1948, Sri Lanka was believed to experience a post-colonial era and most likely to gain economic and democratic success. However, after 60 years, the country is somehow linked to liberalism, political decay, and ethnocentrism. The state of the country has deteriorated towards dictatorship without

any indicators of secularism, liberalism, pluralism, ethnic coexistence, and good governance (Devotta, 2009).

In recent years, political struggle remains a prevalent issue for most developing countries. Although the bases of political struggle may be linked to diverse disciplinary areas, the concern with ethnocentrism on the issue appears to have covered up the magnitude of essential economic elements in a multiethnic society like Sri Lanka. The development process of Sri Lanka appears to be lacking, resulting in a longstanding economic static, due to its political struggle that involves militant revolution in the southern Sinhala and freedom fighter struggle in the northern Tamil (Abeyratne, 2008).

Hasangani (2019) explored ethnocentrism among the social media users in Sri Lanka. The study identified ethnic pride, intolerance or perceived threat (material or symbolic form), and religiosity as significant factors of ethnocentrism. In addition, the study further concluded that the self-image created by Sinhalese is not purely “religious Sinhalese” and religiosity is not the main predictor of the out-group intolerance. Meanwhile, intolerance or perceived threat (material or symbolic form) was found to strongly influence Sinhalese ethnic self-image, especially their out-group intolerance .

As for the case of Singapore, a study expressed disapproval towards the country’s ethnic classification of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and others (CMIO) in terms of general “racialisation” of identities. Focusing on a specific anxiety of culture, Tan (2003) criticised the reliability of the government policies that exclusively reinforce “Chineseness” in the country. The study highlighted the annual Speak Mandarin Campaign as an attempt to nurture and create a bilingual and bi-cultural Chinese society as the cream of the crop according to the Confucius ethics. The study

highlighted this case as ethnocentrism, with the connotation of “sinicisation” or excessive “Chineseness”.

In another study that focused on Malay ethnic group in Singapore, Rahim (1998) similarly highlighted how the government policies appear to strongly favour the Chinese ethnic group, particularly in terms of political and cultural dominance. The study did not apply the term “sinicisation” but expressed similar views on how the proposed policies in Singapore reflect “Chineseness”. These studies concluded that the government displays ethnic bias towards the Chinese ethnic group in Singapore through cultural policies that promote Mandarin language and Confucian values.

The Singapore government promotes Chinese culture and language to support the Chinese ethnic group and puts less consideration for other ethnic groups. This compromises the implementation of multiracial policies. Furthermore, Chinese culture is often linked to Confucian values or shared “Asian values”, which marginalises the influence of non-Chinese cultures in a multiethnic society. This potentially puts the unity of Singaporeans at risk if other ethnic groups demand to exercise their cultural rights. The dominance and excessive use of Mandarin language in Singapore are a clear example of discrimination towards other ethnic groups, which may adversely affects interethnic relations. Additionally, this favoritism policies has looked up at East Asia and ignore the South-east Asian territory as a base for its cultural inspiration (Barr, 2000).

## **1.5 Ethnocentrism in Malaysia**

Without proper treatment, discrimination continues to take place in Malaysia, especially when all ethnic groups are deeply rooted with prejudice and ethnocentrism

(Arope, 2009). Embong (2001) similarly noted the existence of ethnocentric attitude and poor ethnic relations among Malaysians due to prejudice and resentment based on the survey conducted. Arope (2009) described unity in Malaysia as artificial and attributed this circumstance to the need to survive in a multiethnic society.

Muzaffar (1989) listed several factors that contribute to the poor interethnic relations in Malaysia, such as changing policies in the education system, discrimination in the private sector, race-based politics, and insensitive racial comments. Apart from that, Muzaffar (2010) identified the lack of consideration between the majority and minority ethnic groups in the country and the lack of understanding between Malays and non-Malays in terms of their contributions and loyalty for the country as other factors of ethnocentrism in Malaysia.

The former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Mahathir Mohamad (1970), wrote a book on Malay stereotypes, where Malays are viewed as lazy, lethargic, disorderly and undisciplined, not adaptable to change, and easy going (Sofjan, 2009). There was another incident that involved a former information minister who stereotyped Malaysian Chinese as “*pendatang*” (Ian, 2014).

In view of the above, ethnocentrism is a global phenomenon and Malaysia is of no exception. The various incidents that reflect ethnocentrism have proved the importance of addressing issues of ethnocentrism given the negative implications of ethnocentrism on interethnic or multicultural relations and social unity. Thus, there is a need to explore ethnocentrism from multifaceted perspectives.

## **1.6 Ethnocentrism and Interethnic Relations**

There are various forms of interethnic relations. The effects of ethnicity and ethnic identity on interethnic relations have been extensively explored in psychological research (Gudykunst, 2005). A completely separate but equally important line of research examined the dynamics of interethnic relations in the context of close relationships (Gaines & Liu, 2000). The focus on interethnic relationships in which at least one partner is stigmatised due to his or her ethnicity. Gaines (2001) explained that partners in a relationship play an important role in providing social support for their stigmatised partners who have to struggle with social and psychological forms of discrimination.

People prefer to communicate with others of a similar ethnic group, as compared to people from other ethnic groups (Bolong, Tamam, & Abas, 2008). Ethnic conflicts have contributed to lesser interethnic interactions among Malaysians (Abdullah, Liaw, & Husin, 2012), which further strengthen the level of ethnocentrism between different ethnic groups. Ethnocentrism affects communication between people of different cultural backgrounds, which subsequently makes the sense of cohesion or solidarity difficult between different ethnic groups.

Lawman (2004) expressed ethnocentrism as one's attitude towards their group, culture, or society as being superior. This suggests the inability to embrace other cultures, which creates hostility towards other cultures. It is imperative to substitute ethnocentric attitude with positive thoughts by understanding and embracing cultures of different values and practices (Ahmad, 2007).

Unfortunately, certain Malaysians remain hostile towards people from other ethnic groups or prefer to interact with people from the same ethnic group, resulting

in the apparent differences between the majority and minority ethnic groups (Zakaria, 2012). Aziz, Salleh, & Kassim (2007) attributed the weak interethnic relations in Malaysia to ethnocentric attitude. As highlighted by Abdullah et al. (2012), Malaysians prioritise ethnicity over the sense of patriotism, which further intensifies the level of ethnocentrism in a multiethnic society.

The country's history has influenced how different ethnic groups in Malaysia are perceived, up to a certain extent. Malaysia is a clear example of a heterogeneous and ethnocentric society but ethnocentrism has affected the existing interethnic relations in this country (Muzaffar, 2010). As it is everyone's interest to live harmoniously, ethnicity issues inevitably remain a prevalent and critical matter for Malaysians, which explains the emphasis on creating harmonious interethnic relations in this country (Tamam, 2013). However, the higher education system appears to have failed in creating a strong sense of cohesion among the members of this multiethnic community—this has created growing prejudice, ethnocentrism, and self-isolation in the education setting (Segawa, 2007).

Although different ethnic groups in Malaysia may interact harmoniously, most of the close friendships remain within the same ethnic group. The effects of general attitudes and perceptions of race and religion on interethnic relations have been rather inconclusive. There are a number of evidence where more interactions and friendships between the members of different ethnic groups can promote tolerance and favourable sentiment towards other ethnic groups. Merdeka Centre (2015) explored interpersonal contact and found that respondents who reported only “fairly frequently” on the question of whether they meet people from different ethnic groups were more likely to have close friends from the similar ethnic group.

Apart from having friends from the same ethnic group, Malaysians' ethnocentric attitudes towards race and religion adversely affect interethnic relations and widen the segregation between different ethnic groups; and ethnic groups gravitate towards opposing positions on the issue of ethnic affirmative action (Aun, 2017).

Clearly, ethnocentrism, particularly on the interethnic relations between different ethnic groups, in Malaysia is a critical subject to explore. The importance of ethnicity is highlighted by Fong and Isajiw (2000) highlighted the significance of ethnicity and the influence of interethnic relations in a multi-ethnic society. With that, this propelled the current study to assess the influence of ethnocentric attitude on face-to-face interethnic interactions in a campus setting.

Moreover, the lack of social relation has intensified rivalry and affected alliances between different ethnic groups, particularly for their economical, societal, and political survival (Sanusi, 1989). The differences in religion, culture, and insensitiveness towards other ethnic groups have strengthened the prejudice between these ethnic groups (Aziz et al., 2010). For instance, a clear economic disparity among the ethnic groups continues to progress until today. This has emphasised ethnic and cultural division (Atoma et al., 2009).

Apart from economic restructuring and redistribution strategy, education is another key instrument to create a harmonious society in a multi-ethnic country. Many social scientists and educationists have discussed the importance of the education system in promoting interethnic socialisation and multiculturalism (Soen, 2002).

Based on the above review, the historical background, including the implementation of "divide and rule" policy, different education systems, racial polarisation, and social and economy inequality have caused various issues of ethnocentrism. This has further fuelled Malaysians to isolate themselves from other

ethnic groups and protect their own ethnic rights for the sake of survival in this multi-ethnic society. Considering that, it is evident that ethnocentrism can directly or indirectly affect interethnic relations, if it is not properly addressed. The review of key literature further revealed the lack of studies on the influence of interethnic relations between different ethnic groups on one's ethnocentric attitudes and behaviours. With that, the unclear nature of this relationship between ethnocentrism and interethnic relations among undergraduates in a campus setting was addressed in the current study.

### **1.7 Youth and Ethnocentrism**

The undergraduates in this study were viewed as youth. The definition of the term "youth" is broad, which basically means a lifetime from childhood to adulthood reflects youth. Youth can also be defined as a period of trying out different roles and identities towards becoming a functional member of a society without social burden and responsibility. Youths begin to socially integrate themselves in a complicated social network with diverse socio-cultural elements and various demands and prospects that contribute to their personal foundation and development (Henze, 2015).

The United Nations defined "youth" as an individual of between 15 to 24 years of age. As youths represent the future of a country, it is vital to make sure their well-being development. Referring to Malaysia's National Youth Development Policy 1997, youths are individuals of between 15 to 40 years of age. Following in 2018, the definition of youth in the Malaysian context has been revised to individuals of between 15 to 30 years of age (Ramli et al., 2017).

The youth population is unique. Unlike the older generations, most youths are idealistic, keen to provide unselfish assistance, highly attuned to the societal demands,

and open to ideas. However, youths can be rather uncooperative, insecure, easily affected by their environment, and susceptible to the needs to achieve their desires. In short, youth is a transitional period between two different inclinations. It is a challenging period for youths as they transition into adulthood. Malaysian youths are of no exception (Hamzah, 2005).

Apart from making the country proud, Malaysian youths have made valuable contributions towards building a brighter future for the country. According to the Department of Statistics (2018), 14.6 million Malaysians who are of age between 15 to 39 years (45.4% of the total population) represent the youth population in this country. The youth population plays various influential roles that determine the political, economic, and social development of the country—for instance, Malaysian youths of above 21 years of age are eligible voters. Considering that, it is crucial to explore the level of ethnocentrism among youths and the influence of ethnocentric attitudes and behaviours on interethnic relations.

In essence, the sustainability and advancement of a country lies in the hands of the youth population. It is important that the youth population drives the multiracial and multicultural country with the withstanding vision of ensuring unity and embracing cultural diversity. In order to gain better insights of ethnic sensitivity, Hamzah (2005) conducted a study and found a low tolerance level towards different ethnic groups among most youths at the tertiary level.

Furthermore, Hassan (2004) identified several factors that influence social unity in a multi-ethnic society, namely early education, family background, religion, and peers. A school environment that incorporates different ethnic groups produces more socially tolerant students, as compared to a school structure that supports only one ethnic group. As students are exposed to their own ethnic group in such schools,

such as Chinese or Indian schools, they tend to demonstrate lower tolerance towards other ethnic groups since they have grown accustomed to ethnic segregation since their early education years. In another study, Ezhar et al. (2006) reported that Malaysian youths generally exhibit an average level of tolerance, which reaffirmed the influence of early education on interethnic relations in an education setting.

Apart from the inconsistent efforts to regulate the morality of youths, the influential role of university students and young activists in national rallies, such as Bersih 2.0 for a fair election, despite the risks of being arrested or expelled, has proved the transformative demands and political vision of bold youths today (Noor, 2011). Despite their possibly similar political orientation and preferences, the youth population cannot be categorised into a single category (e.g. bearers of modernity) due to their significant different socio-economic backgrounds and expectations (Gerke, 2000).

The Election Commission (EC) of Malaysia further added that about 450,000 Malaysians turn 21 annually and 70% of 4.2 million unregistered voters are between 21 and 40 years of age. There were 2.4 million first-time voters, which represented about 30% of the total voting population in 2012 (Nawab, 2007). These figures are significant indicators of the important role that youths play in transforming the Malaysian politics, which can explain their views of the political party leadership that can shape their voting patterns and behaviours (Pandian, 2014).

Overall, Malaysian youths play a significant role in assisting the country towards achieving the status of a fully developed country. Malaysia's Vision 2020 aims to enhance all aspects of the country, which include national unity, social cohesion, economic development, social justice, political stability, good governance, quality of life, social and spiritual values, and national pride and confidence (Asmah

et al., 2016). This further emphasised the significant role of youths in steering the future of the country.

## **1.8 Problem Statement**

Past studies revealed the preference of Malaysians to interact with people from the same ethnic and their insensitivity towards racial integration, which reflect the manifestation of ethnocentrism (Abdullah, 2009). Ethnocentric attitudes adversely affect interethnic relations in Malaysia. Zakaria (2012) revealed the presence of ethnic gap between the majority and minority ethnic groups although some Malaysians do mingle with others of different ethnic groups. Clearly, such gaps reflect the manifestation of ethnocentrism in a multi-ethnic society.

Ethnicity issues remain prevalent as long as ethnic segregation exists (Shamsul, 2005). The establishment of an ethnic boundary emphasises social aggression and conflicts that can even go beyond ethnic terms, including the effects of groupism—the consciousness of a community to which one feels a certain sense of belonging can potentially create discrimination, stereotype, and ethnocentrism.

Merdeka Centre for Opinion Research (2011) examined Malaysians' views on interethnic relations, which revealed that the public confidence declined from 78% in 2006 to 66% in 2011. A growing number of Malaysians expressed their agreement on weaken interracial relationships (from 25% in 2010 to 33% in 2011) and growing gaps between different ethnic groups (from 25% in 2006 to 33% in 2011) in this country. The negative perception towards interethnic relations in Malaysia also increased from 15% in 2006 to 24% in 2011. Interreligious integration also appeared to decline from 64% in 2006 to 36% in 2011.

The above findings were further supported by Pragash, Sultana, & Khor (2018). The negative relationship between ethnocentrism and willingness to interact with other cultures was similarly reported in several prior studies (Neuliep, 2012; Campbell, 2016; Fatemi, Khajavy, & Choi, 2016; Logan, Steel, & Hunt, 2016; Rokis, Zain, & Yusuf, 2017), where the moderate correlation between ethnocentrism and willingness to interact with other cultures was found to be statistically significant.

Ethnocentric people tend to view their own religion, customs, traditions, beliefs, values, and cultural lifestyles to be superior. There are various cases of interreligious conflicts in Malaysia, such as Islamisation issue, freedom of religion, equality of religion, the use of “Allah” in the Bible, the demolition of worship places, issues of religious celebration and sensitive rituals, and banning of yoga among Muslims. These cases have fuelled interreligious conflicts in Malaysia that provoke resentment, discrimination, stereotype, and ethnocentrism, which explains the need to explore various policies or strategies to address ethnocentrism (Nor, 2011).

Past studies reported moderate practices for interethnic relations but higher religious tolerance. Indians were found to display a higher level for interethnic relations, followed by Chinese. The results further linked Malays or Muslims with higher religious tolerance than other races despite their low practices for interethnic relations. These results rejected the notion that Malays discriminate non-Malays and the need to learn religious tolerance towards other races (Chandra, as cited in Bakar, 2014).

Evidently, ethnic conflicts remain prevalent in Malaysia. Conflicts are bound to take place whenever the core cultural values (e.g. religion, language, and education) of any ethnic group are provoked. For Malays, their religion and language are regarded as the most important and superior aspects. As for the Chinese, their language and

education system are highly valued and protected as their unique cultural identity. Meanwhile, Indians also highly value their religion as they believe that their religion is the first religion in this world (Husin, 2012).

Every ethnic group has certain beliefs and opinions towards other ethnic groups. This is a typical case of ethnocentrism, where each ethnic group believes in the superiority of their own cultural values. With the prevalence of ethnocentric attitudes, such circumstances eventually lead to various issues of interethnic relations. It is a challenging process to address the conflicts between different ethnic groups in this country due to the different cultural values of Malays, Chinese, and Indians, as these ethnic groups put forward their unique cultural values and identity. The persistent attempt to preserve these values and the manifestation of ethnocentrism have contributed to ethnic conflicts, even until today (ibid, 2012).

On a similar note, the above statement was also in line with the study by Montesino (2012) that identified the following cross-cultural conflicts in Malaysia after 40 years of affirmative actions: (1) highly segregated education system with minimal opportunities for interethnic relations; (2) the ghost of latent interethnic tensions beneath the surface; (3) the emphasis on intraethnic disparities; (4) cultural dominance by the Malays and economic dominance by the Chinese; (5) marginalisation or discrimination of Indians.

When ethnocentrism is not addressed properly, the society and country are negatively affected in the long run. A high level of ethnocentrism is more likely to create intense social boundaries and affects interethnic relations between different ethnic groups. People from different ethnic groups are less likely to mingle with one another. This would eventually interrupt cultural changes, ethnic unity, and social integration. In addition, ethnocentric attitudes further incite conflicts and hostility

between these different ethnic groups. Ethnocentrism can lead to cultural misinterpretation and miscommunication in a multi-ethnic society.

Hence, ethnocentrism should be critically assessed and properly addressed by the government. It is vital to tackle ethnocentric attitudes among youths who are typically less interested in interethnic relations. The current study on the manifestation of ethnocentric attitudes among undergraduates complemented the study by Ketab, Tamam, Bolong, & Sharif (2016) that revealed a significant and negative relationship between ethnocentrism and face-to-face interethnic interactions.

Ketab et al. (2016) highlighted the lack of interest of getting involved with different ethnic groups among Malaysian students. Despite the various group activities in campus, Malaysian students in the study demonstrated ethnocentric attitudes and tendency to avoid interacting with people from different ethnic groups. Considering the significant role of Malaysian youths as the country's future leaders, it is imperative that they have positive attitudes and a low level of ethnocentrism when it comes to dealing with different ethnic groups (ibid, 2016).

There have been studies on the challenges and strategies to improve interethnic relations in Malaysia. Although most studies identified ethnocentrism as the key barrier of interethnic relations, the direct effect of ethnocentrism on interethnic relations in Malaysia has remained underexplored, which suggests the need to further explore this subject (Noor, 2007; Bolong et al., 2008; Tamam, 2009; Mustapha, 2009; Helen, 2012; Pang et al., 2013).

Exploring ethnocentrism in the framework of communication extends the existing body of knowledge across different domains of research (i.e. social psychology, sociology, political science, and so forth) and provides valuable insights on how to effectively address cultural barriers and strengthen communication between