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Sensitive issues, complex categories, and sharing festivals: Malay Muslim students' perspectives on interfaith engagement in Malaysia

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**Abstract**

Within the religiously and ethnically diverse secular state of Malaysia, the ethnic and religious identities of the Malay Muslim majority group are constitutionalized. This, together with the official classification of religious issues as “sensitive”, provides a distinctive context for the political psychological analysis of Islam and interfaith relations. The qualitative study presented in this paper examines how Malay Muslims who are students in the United Kingdom perceive and experience engagement with other religious groups in Malaysia. Four focus group interviews were undertaken with 18 participants. Interview transcripts were subjected to thematic analysis. Three themes were developed: “Perceived socio-political influences on interfaith engagement in Malaysia”, “Individual and group barriers to engagement with other religious traditions”, and “Potential pathways toward positive interfaith engagement”. These are elaborated and discussed in terms of the social categorization processes used to conceptualize and navigate interfaith relations. It is recommended that future research in the political psychology of religion should attend closely to the complexity of religious groups' social identities and the implications this might have for re-categorization efforts as a means of encouraging and facilitating interfaith contact.

*Keywords:* interfaith relations; intergroup contact; Malaysia; Malay Muslims; social identity

## INTRODUCTION

Malaysia faces the challenge of fostering positive intergroup relations within a diverse society. In terms of ethnicity, Malays make up 50.4% of the country's population of approximately 31.7 million people (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2016), with the rest of the population consisting of citizens of Chinese, Indian, and aboriginal ethnicities. Studies on ethnic relations in Malaysia indicate that, despite efforts by the government to foster "national unity" (Wan Husin, 2011), tensions remain. Although Malays are accorded special privileges that are written into the country's constitution (access to government resources, for instance), there is no clear dominant social group (Hooker, 2004). For example, although Malays hold considerable political power, much of the economic power in the country is held by the ethnic Chinese group, which can be perceived as a threat by other groups (Noor, 2007).

This multicultural landscape is made more complex by the religious diversity that exists in the country. On gaining independence from the British colonial power in 1957, Malaysia adopted the Westminster parliamentary system rather than sharia as the basis for its federal constitution, although Muslims make up 61.3% of the population (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2015). This makes Malaysia a secular state but with Islam as its official religion. Freedom of religion is enshrined within the federal constitution, but this does not extend to ethnic Malays. In the constitution, the definition of "Malay" in Article 160(2) includes the criterion that to be a "Malay", one also has to be Muslim (Federal Constitution of Malaysia, 1957), making Malay Muslims the only group in the country with their ethnic identity substantially constituted by religion. As such, Malay Muslims form a clear majority but with 38.7% of Malaysia's population made up of non-Muslims (19.8% Buddhist, 9.2%

Christian, 6.3% Hindu, and 3.4% other religions) (Department of Statistics, Malaysia, 2015), the minority groups are sizeable enough to have an impact on the country's economy, politics, and policies.

Consequently, religious and particularly Muslim affiliation and identity play a significant role in public understandings of the country's ethno-political situation (for example, Buttny, Hashim, & Kaur, 2013). Mutalib (2007), for instance, conceptualizes Malaysia as a "bi-modal" rather than "plural" society, with group boundaries drawn between "Muslims" and "non-Muslims". This delineation makes intuitive sense when taking into account how ethnic and religious identity is intertwined for Malay Muslims, with the privileges accorded to Malays often attributed to or conflated with Islam in the popular imagination (for an example of conflation, see Boo, 2014). Therefore, while isolating "interfaith relations" from the socio-political contexts within which they occur is extremely difficult in any setting (Beverluis, 2000), this is particularly the case in Malaysia. Although "religious" conflict implies that conflict between religious groups is fuelled by the desire to assert a "metaphysical superiority", this may be misleading (Seul, 1999). Instead, religion as an entrenched identity marker distinguishes groups that are in conflict over resources or power within a particular context.

The "divide and conquer" policies of the British colonial rulers resulted in Malays being economically marginalized, leading to policies drawn up along ethnic lines that increased ethnic tensions, culminating in the racial riots of May 13 1969 – the deadliest incident of sectarian violence in the country since independence (Noor, 2007). The aftermath of this saw ethnic – and by extension religious – issues officially classed as "sensitive" and difficult to broach for fear of inciting further tensions (Lee, 2000) and risking arrest under the 1948 Sedition Act which criminalizes speech that would engender "feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races". Nonetheless, specifically religious issues have come to the

fore in Malaysia in recent years (see Rawther, 2016; Sarwar, 2005), highlighting a need to explore the Malaysian context beyond the obvious level of inter-ethnic conflict.

Despite these considerations, there has been relatively little psychological research on how Malaysians understand and engage with each other at a religious level, even though political and social psychologies with their theories of intergroup relations offer valuable resources for understanding such interactions and building interventions aimed at fostering increased constructive engagement across religious groups. The present study speaks to this gap, drawing upon Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and Self-Categorization Theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) (collectively termed “the social identity approach”) to develop an understanding of the psychological factors and processes involved in how Malay Muslims engage now and might engage in the future at an interfaith level.

### **Social identity and interfaith relations**

According to Social Identity Theory, social identities are constituted from the social categories with which the individual identifies. Self-Categorization Theory elaborates this process: membership within these categories may be voluntary or prescribed, with the boundaries between the social categories that one identifies with (“ingroups”) and the categories that one identifies against (“outgroups”) being maintained through categorization processes that accentuate perceived similarities within ingroup categories and differences associated with outgroup categories (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). This tendency to emphasize intragroup similarities and intergroup differences increases when individuals categorize themselves as part of a valued group (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Consequently, if religious identity is valued, constructions of the religious “Other” can become more salient and accessible, increasing the likelihood of social comparisons. This

can increase the potential for conflict, as these social comparisons can promote a sense of identity threat (Ouwerkerk & Ellemers, 2002) – for example, if the religious Other is seen as proselytizing or wanting to proselytize (Azumah, 2002). In Malaysia, one source of interfaith tension in recent years has been the use of the word “Allah” to denote “God” by Malay language-speaking Christians. Malaysia’s national language has been used by some Christian communities in the country for over a century and Malay-language Bibles have used “Allah” as a translation for “God” since 1852 (Neo, 2014). Despite this, their use of the word has been viewed by some Muslim groups as an attempt to “confuse” and “convert” Malay Muslims (see Izwan, 2013). Note that it is the *perception* of threat and not necessarily the presence of actual threat that is sufficient to induce tension and conflict.

### **Intergroup contact and interfaith dialogue**

The complex interaction between religious identity and socio-political contexts makes it difficult to pinpoint the root causes of interfaith conflict in efforts to alleviate or prevent it. One particular context involving contact/engagement between religious groups is “interfaith dialogue”, a loosely-defined term which refers to discussion and exchange between groups from different religious traditions to facilitate mutual understanding on equal terms (Ariarajah, 2002; Garfinkel, 2008). For this to be achieved, there is a need for openness toward the religious Other without compromising one’s own beliefs (Beverluis, 2000). Any suspicions about the motives of other participants may reduce its effectiveness (Ariarajah, 2002). In Malaysia, attempts at interfaith dialogue have primarily taken place in university settings for educational purposes rather than for conflict resolution (Wan Yusof & Ab Majid, 2012), yet uncertainty and controversy remain about how interfaith dialogue might be established within the Malaysian context (for example, due to concerns about proselytization) (Lim, 2013).

However, there are situations in which religious groups' views of and relations with one another have a more positive tone. For example, Hutchison and Rosenthal (2011) demonstrated that favourable attitudes between Muslim and non-Muslim students were predicted by experiences of high quality intergroup contact. The conditions that promote such contact – as espoused by Pettigrew (1998) – include the evocation of a superordinate identity through reappraisal (see also Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Intergroup contact studies in Malaysia have suggested that, regardless of status, Malaysians tend to maintain high subgroup identification even when a superordinate identity is evoked (see, for example, Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2012). This reflects the dual identity model of recategorization, which is concerned with how perceptions of intergroup boundaries can be systematically altered while group members maintain their specific group identities *and* superordinate identities (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2007). Consequently, the efficacy of attempts to reduce perceived identity threat in an interfaith setting by evoking a superordinate identity may depend on participants' ability to perceive subordinate (Malay and Muslim) and superordinate (Malaysian) identity categories as distinct – what has been called “social identity complexity” (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Hence, attending to how Malay Muslims make sense of their identity categories can provide insights into the possibilities for interfaith contact and engagement in Malaysia.

### **The present study**

Studying Malay Muslims provides an opportunity to examine interfaith relations in the context of Islam in a unique setting. Past research on interfaith relations within Islam has focused either on Muslims as a minority group (for example, Hopkins & Kahani-Hopkins, 2006), within an Islamic state (for example, McVittie, McKinlay, & Sambaraju, 2011), or in extreme situations such as terrorism (for example, Kabir, 2007). In this study, not only are

Malay Muslims the majority group within a secular state that is religiously and ethnically diverse, they are also unique in that their ethnic and religious identities are written into and accorded privileged status within the country's federal constitution, raising questions about how this might influence views on and practices in interfaith relations.

As such, this study examines how Malay Muslims who are students in the United Kingdom perceive and experience engagement with other religious groups in Malaysia. Sub-questions concern how members of this group perceive the relationship between the "Malay" and "Muslim" identity categories in Malaysian society – in other words, how they see the constitutional overlap between these categories as culturally received – and the implications they perceive this as holding for interfaith engagement. This particular group was focused upon as members are educated, have experienced another culture, and are likely to occupy professional positions in Malaysia in the future. This profile renders them potentially influential agents in Malaysia in relation to various social issues including interfaith relations. It was also assumed that their current liminal position outside their country of origin would help them to stand back metaphorically and offer insightful, reflective overviews of interfaith relations in Malaysia. Such a vantage point was deemed advantageous as the research questions are well served by reflection from perspectives inside and outside the contexts under study.

## METHOD

### **Design**

Given the complex ways in which identity and socio-political considerations can interact in the Malaysian context, a qualitative research approach was employed to enable subtleties and nuances to be explored.

A critical realist epistemological stance was adopted (Lopez & Potter, 2001). The reality of the phenomena under investigation is acknowledged but the only access available to these phenomena is through the participants' and the researchers' interpretative lenses. This 'reality' concerns participants' representations and interpretations but the possibility of these mapping onto actual experiences, behaviours, cognitions and emotions in the past and present is acknowledged too. In qualitative interview data, participants will often reflect upon their own and others' cognition and cognitive processes in relation to the research topic. Yet it is also possible to draw inferences about *in situ* cognition from qualitative data (for example, see Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Smith, 1996).

These commitments required the adoption of an analytic approach that could readily accommodate them, in this case the epistemologically flexible version of thematic analysis elaborated by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013).

### **Sample**

Eighteen Malay Muslim students (14 women and four men) were recruited from two universities in the south east and midlands areas of England. Recruitment occurred through university Malaysian societies. These students had left Malaysia specifically to study and did not intend to remain in the UK. Their ages ranged from 20 to 34 years (mean 23.89; SD = 4.36), with 11 studying at undergraduate level and seven pursuing postgraduate studies.

### **Data generation**

A favourable ethical opinion for the study was obtained from a university ethics committee. Data were then generated through four focus group interviews with 4-5 participants in each group. All interviews were conducted by the first author (who is Malaysian but not Muslim) in the universities from which participants were recruited and each lasted approximately 90 minutes. Focus groups are well suited to the exploration of social phenomena as they allow researchers to see participants discuss and negotiate understandings and representations in real time, providing insights into the processes through which meanings are socially developed. A short, semi-structured interview schedule was used in an open manner in each focus group. Questions addressed participants' perceptions of interfaith engagement but the interviewer's prime concern was to prompt and follow participants' discussions. One explicit prompt involved the presentation of one encouraging and one sceptical perspective on Muslim involvement in interfaith dialogue, derived from work by El-Kassem (2008) and Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins (2006) respectively. Participants were invited to position themselves in relation to those perspectives and to discuss their rationales for adopting particular positions. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

### **Analytic procedure**

Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis to generate a set of meaningful patterns or themes that capture core, recurrent features of the data set and address the research questions. The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2013) six stages of familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes and sub-themes, defining and naming themes and sub-themes, and writing up the analysis. Although the participants responded primarily in English, English was not the first language for some. The researchers did not try to correct grammatical errors within the transcripts. Where such errors

made participants' meanings obscure, their comments were interpreted according to the contexts within which they were made.

The themes and subthemes that were generated featured social, cognitive and behavioural aspects, with participants reflecting on the nature, construction and implications of relevant social and particularly identity categories. In the discussion section of the paper, participants' reflections on their own and others' cognition-in-context were used to build some analytic inferences and hypotheses about actual cognition and cognitive possibilities within and beyond the interview context. This can be seen as the outworking of an epistemologically pluralist form of thematic analysis (within the broad parameters of critical realism) that does justice to the complexity of the social and psychological phenomena under consideration (Dewe & Coyle, 2014).

The quality of the analysis was promoted through close alignment with recognised criteria for good qualitative research, such as grounding interpretations in examples from the data (which allows readers to confirm or query interpretations), conducting credibility checks to avoid idiosyncratic interpretations, and optimizing coherence across the study (for example, see Yardley, 2000). In the data excerpts that illustrate the analysis in the next section, dots indicate pauses in speech, empty square brackets indicate where material has been omitted, and material within square brackets is for clarification; all names accorded to participants are pseudonyms.

## RESULTS

Three themes were developed through the analytic process. The first two – “Perceived socio-political influences on interfaith engagement in Malaysia” and “Individual and group barriers

to engagement with other religious traditions” – concern contextual, group, and individual factors that were perceived to influence interfaith engagement between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia. The third theme – “Potential pathways toward positive interfaith engagement” – focused on participants’ perceptions of how interfaith engagement in Malaysia might be facilitated. These themes and their constituent subthemes are presented in this section.

### **Perceived socio-political influences on interfaith engagement in Malaysia**

The representation of religion as socio-political in Malaysia appeared within and across the focus group discussions. This was sometimes done in passing, as in participants’ frequent references to the “sensitive” nature of religion in Malaysia, and sometimes in a more in-depth way, such as when participants queried the appropriateness of framing religion in political terms and redefined intergroup engagement in Malaysia as being more racial/ethnic than religious in nature. This theme elaborates in phenomenological terms the summary of the status of religion in Malaysia that was offered in the introduction to this paper.

#### ***The normativeness of “religion as a sensitive issue” within Malaysian culture: perceived impact on interfaith engagement***

There was a shared representation of religion as a “sensitive” issue in Malaysian culture among participants, as demonstrated in the excerpt below:

Lina: But I think another reason for this is because back then, you know, there was this one issue in Malaysia, a racial issue, um in 1969. I think since then the media and the government has put it, put us in such a way where there are certain issues where we think are sensitive and we shouldn’t talk about it, even in media. Like, you have these certain issues where they would say that this would raise sensitivities between a

certain group so do not raise about, uh, do not raise these issues. Um, I think there are certain groups and how the media portray these issues as sensitive that are making us not want to talk about it. Because even the media do not want to talk about it. So it's like that. [ ]

Adam: Hmm, I think people rarely talk about this because they can – they can live with each other without knowing [each other's religion], then they're fine with it... Because if I don't know it, then it doesn't hurt me, so I don't really have to know about it...And, yeah, like how Lina said just now, again it's just how the mindset of Malaysians that think that...I would say they're, they might be afraid of asking – asking that question.

Lina: Yah, yah, yah.

Adam: They have, because we might, we never know how people think, so they generally assume that if I ask about religion, it's gonna be sensitive, it's gonna hurt our relationship, I shouldn't talk about it, even though some people would just say, "Oh, just ask me, I'm not gonna do anything, I'm not gonna be mad or anything, just ask." But it's just people's mindset of being afraid to ask. (Focus Group 4)

In this excerpt, Lina identifies the framing of religion by law as "sensitive" and the implementation of that framing by the media as creating a cultural common-sense about the status of religion as a topic not for open discussion. Adam represents this as "the mindset of Malaysians", suggesting that it has been internalized as a taken-for-granted condition within social life and become normative. He presents this normative condition as not being interactionally problematic in everyday life, even if some people would prefer not to align with it. It is worth noting this representation of non-discussion as a normative condition because it occurred in other groups and formed the context for considerations of the

possibilities for and the social and political risks of interfaith engagement initiatives in Malaysia. For example:

Nora: I think Malaysia is not ready yet to have this interfaith dialogue because what happens in Malaysia is one – the Constitution says we have to maintain our religious harmony. And then this interfaith dialogue might affect this and might be some group of people that, that might reject this, this kind of dialogue, because they feel like they will have some racial or religious attack on each other. Yah, so I think it's a really sensitive issue. (Focus Group 1)

Here Nora presents what might be at stake in any interfaith endeavour: the constitutional requirement to preserve religious harmony. Her perception that some Malaysians may interpret (proposals for) interfaith dialogue as risking an interactional “attack” underscores the level of sensitivity attached to religion in this setting. In other parts of the world, the interfaith agenda is driven at least partly by a concern for promoting social cohesion (for example, see Harris & Young, 2009). In the focus groups, Nora and other participants discussed the possibility that the opposite could result in Malaysia.

Despite the consensus in the data set about the sensitive status of religion in Malaysia, some participants were critical of this and framed it as a political or politicized construction. In the following excerpt, the media are invoked as contributing to this:

Mat: I think in – in this point the media have play a very, very role importance. Some media say that it's bad to have interfaith, some media say it's good to have interfaith [ ] You know, the media might, you know, spread the wrong thing. The objective of interfaith is try to look into the similarities but the media try to overturn this thinking.

Intan: Yeah [ ] somehow the media would twist it to be a political stand or something. So it's not right, I mean, somehow misleading, because people would be too afraid because it's becoming a political issue. (Focus Group 2)

Intan's use of the word 'twist' suggests she believes that the Malaysian media might deliberately interpret religious discussions in political terms, which would result in a fear-based reluctance to engage in interfaith initiatives. Lina elaborated on this and called for a halt to the construction of religious issues as "sensitive":

Lina: What you should do is not just, not making people afraid to think that, um, talking about these issues would make you risk the relations. Just stop labelling these issues as sensitive. I think that should be a good start...because, um, there's always this thing called um, where you get people arrested because, uh, they are raising issues that are sensitive. Usually they are on race and religion, um, and then I think what would be a good start is to abolish this, this terms where, um, you have sensitive issues, sensitive issues. Stop labelling them as sensitive issues – get people to talk about it.

(Focus Group 4)

Here, Lina highlights a threat in the form of the legal implications of framing religion in political terms. Her point about arrests being made over "sensitive" issues refers to the 1948 Sedition Act. Through this reference, Lina provides some insight into a practical reason why the politicization of religion in Malaysia is detrimental to interfaith engagement. Her call to "abolish" the use of the term "sensitive" with regard to religion appears to indicate a belief in the need to reframe religion as independent of politics if Malaysians are to engage with each other at an interfaith level.

***Conceptualization of intergroup engagement in Malaysia as more ethnic/racial than religious***

Despite the pervading perception of religion as "sensitive", all participants also agreed that Malaysians are more likely to engage with the social "Other" at an ethnic or racial level than at a religious level. For example:

Mas: I think in Malaysia, it's not like religious community, it's like, races community. [ ] They don't feel like "I'm working with Muslim", they will feel "I'm working with a Malay, I'm working with a Chinese, I'm working with that Siamese." They don't feel like "I'm working with a Muslim, ah, she's fasting now." They don't even care. So I think it's not religious community, it's races community. (Focus Group 2)

Here, Mas expresses the view that Malaysians tend to engage consciously across racial/ethnic lines more than across religious lines in everyday interactions. This was qualified by other participants, who conceptualized religious conflict as an extension of ethnic/racial conflict because of a perceived overlap between ethnic/racial and religious identities. For example:

Siti: And I think um, like, in Malaysia the main issue would be more like cultural differences rather than religious differences but they tend to group people, like Muslims – Malay, and then, um, yah, I don't know, maybe like, that's what they have arguments between that, in terms of culture... in terms of races, sorry – races rather than religion

Ali: That's not good [group laughs]

Siti: Most of them will assume that way

Ali: They, they see it like that. Muslim – Malay, Malay – Muslim. So, if you want to be a Muslim, you have to be a Malay. If you're a Malay, you're Muslim. (Focus Group 1)

Intan: In Malaysia we have a lot of races so one of the perception is [ ] if I were to convert to Islam means I need to convert to Malay, which is a wrong, wrong thing. And somehow, they have a bad perception to Malays and somehow that bad perception to Malays leads up to a bad perception to Islam as well, which is totally wrong because Islam is Islam but Malay is Malay. But in Malaysia they somehow say if you are a Islam, you are a Malay. (Focus Group 2)

Siti argues that, although intergroup differences in Malaysia are mainly perceived at a cultural or racial level, Malaysians have a tendency to identify Malays as Muslims and vice versa – a tendency that was acknowledged across the groups – which Ali conceptualizes as “not good”. Intan offers a reason for that assessment on the grounds that if an equivalence is perceived between “Malay” and “Islam” and if the “Malay” category is subject to negative social evaluation, the “Islam” category will be similarly evaluated. Given the focus of the discussion, the implication is that non-Muslims may be hesitant to engage with Islam because of negative perceptions of Malays. These reflections are noteworthy because of the overlap or equivalence between “Malay” and “Muslim” identity categories that is explicitly prescribed in the Federal Constitution of Malaysia. It suggests that despite the institutionalized nature of the Malay Muslim identity, the participants did not perceive it as a necessarily unified social identity category, conceptualizing it instead as two distinct social identities – Malay and Muslim.

Here and elsewhere in the data set, the participants exhibited a desire to disentangle Islam from the “Malay” race, which would allow for the formation of more complex social identity categories within the ingroup identity of “Malay Muslim”. This holds interesting implications for their own identities as well as for group level engagement. Although it is not explicitly discussed within this subtheme as to how such a psychological separation of identity would impact on interactions at both inter- and intra-faith levels, the potential influence of this conceptualization is alluded to within other subthemes.

### **Individual and group barriers to engagement with other religious traditions**

In addition to socio-political considerations, participants identified what they perceived as individual and group-level barriers to engagement with other religious traditions. Those that

were elaborated in the focus groups were a lack of knowledge of religion, a reluctance to move beyond what is familiar, and outlooks on learning about other religions.

*Lack of knowledge of religion perceived to hinder engagement with other faiths*

A fear that interfaith dialogue could reveal limitations in someone's knowledge of their own religion was identified as a disincentive to engagement. This intergroup anxiety was elaborated most fully in the excerpt below:

Kat: I won't ask people personally about their religious but I will go to that kind of occasion – the interfaith dialogue [ ] Because I think, uh, if I ask them personally [about their religion], they will ask me back [group laughs]. And I don't know how to answer [laughs].

Iman: [ ] Yah, I think so, don't really know the religion in detail, so we're afraid that we're saying something wrong but we know there are more to it, we don't find in deep yet, that's the problem.

Sara: Yah, I think that's right because when we ask, when we going to ask to the non-Muslim, [ ] they just like, I don't know. Then we afraid to ask them because they will ask us back and we also don't know, so... [laughs]

Kat: Sometimes they also don't have the answer for our question and we also don't have [group laughs]. (Focus Group 3)

Although Kat expresses a willingness to be present at an interfaith dialogue, she states her reluctance to engage “personally” with people of other religious traditions on the topic of their religion for fear of being questioned about her own religion and lacking the knowledge to answer. Iman and Sara align with this fear and Kat suggests that it could apply both to Muslims and to the undifferentiated category of “non-Muslims”. Together participants craft a

picture of a perceived fear that Malaysians lack the knowledge resources they imagine are needed for interfaith dialogue.

*Outlooks on learning about other religions as influencing openness to interfaith engagement*

Participants also represented people's attitudes toward and outlooks on learning about other religions as affecting the possibility of meaningful interfaith discussion. For example:

Ida: Because, I don't care. [group laughs] I want to ask but I don't really care. I just want to know but...yah, just for knowledge... [ ] but I didn't want to burden my head with that. [laughs] It's not, you know, got a lot of thing to do. (Focus Group 3)

Here Ida admits that, despite wanting knowledge of other religions, she would not engage in interfaith discussion because she did not care and "didn't want to burden my head with that."

This apathy about and non-investment in interfaith engagement was one attitudinal barrier that participants identified but another barrier extended beyond apathy:

Siti: Yeah, the barriers, um, I agree with Ali, the barriers would be, the first is mind setting and um [ ] the mind setting of most of people, most of my friends I can see, um, most of my Malay friends are [ ] um, they're in their comfortable zone. They don't want to mingle, they don't want to understand because they are um, like, most of the Malaysians who are Muslims are Malay and then, so they are very comfortable with their own, uh, Malay, yeah, Malay peers...because they're, they don't want to, uh, like, they're in their comfort zone, so they don't want to change.

Nora: I think it's the nature of humans – we like to mingle with our own religion.

Ali: [ ] Just that you are comfortable towards the things that you know...rather than towards the things that you don't know because darkness can be scary. So, if you

don't know the things, it will tend to be scary. You tend to be scared about the things you don't understand. (Focus Group 1)

Siti's representation of Malay Muslims as being too firmly in their "comfort zone" to desire interfaith engagement appears to echo Ida's position. Although Siti portrays Malay Muslims as preferring to restrict their engagement to members of their ingroup (other Malay Muslims), Nora extends this representation to a universal human nature in a lay version of a basic principle of the social identity approach. Ali, in turn, suggests that such an attitude arises from a preference for familiarity and a fear of the unknown.

An individual's perception of the possible impact of interfaith engagement was posited to influence their attitude toward and potential investment in it:

Lina: I would say education play an important role as well. Maybe the people here, they see, they see opinion from other, people from other religion as a knowledge, as something for them, as additional information for them to know. But meanwhile, maybe in certain parts of Malaysia, mainly in the rural areas, where people might, um, still be defensive about religion, they don't see getting to know other religion as something, as a good knowledge, I mean, as a knowledge itself. They see it as maybe, you know like... maybe something dangerous, something that would affect their religion. I mean, you know like, they have to be defensive of what they believe in and maybe if they get to know other religion, they might not believe as, um, strongly as they have been believing before? Maybe things like that. Maybe, yeah, education is important.

(Focus Group 4)

Here, Lina represents the social group of "Malaysian Muslims" as diverse and suggests that educational background may shape an openness to learning about other religions. She constructs the student group in which she is located as potentially having that openness (Ida spoke in a different focus group) and treating such learning as involving a regular domain of

knowledge. She contrasts this with a more defensive attitude that she attributes to people in rural areas who may experience learning about other religions as threatening their own religious commitment. Here she reproduces a standard mapping of low educational level and social conservatism onto rural-ness and openness onto urban-ness, with urban-rural as oppositions between “us” and “them” (Duncan, 1993). Ana elaborates Lina’s portrayal of the threat that may be attributed to interfaith engagement by constructing rural people with a low educational level as susceptible to influence by others:

Ana: I think I understand, like, in a way if you’re less developed, so is your education, your education level is low and you get influenced easily by someone who is able to talk and able to, like, influence you in a way. So you sort of like, you, you don’t really have your own stand, your own belief, you more like, you follow the leader.

(Focus Group 4)

Hence, although apathy and a desire to adhere to the familiar were presented as stances that could undermine an openness to interfaith engagement, the explanatory accounts that participants offered went beyond this and elaborated an outgroup category of people who, by virtue of poor education and a sense of threat, would be less likely to demonstrate such openness.

### **Potential pathways toward positive interfaith engagement**

Although the first two themes have addressed perceived constraints on interfaith engagement among Muslims in Malaysia, participants also identified what they saw as two potential routes to positive engagement, qualified by reference to the perceived constraints. These were interfaith dialogue and the sharing of different religious traditions’ celebrations.

*Interfaith dialogue as a means of facilitating inter- and intra-faith engagement*

Although different views were expressed about who should participate in interfaith dialogue and how it might proceed, participants believed that if it took the form of a “discussion, not a debate”, this would facilitate positive outcomes. There was some disagreement as to how ready Malaysians were for such an endeavour on account of considerations presented in the preceding themes. However, participants’ main reason for supporting interfaith engagement that is centred on true dialogue and mutuality was that they saw it as a context for exploring important issues in Malaysian national life in a non-confrontational way. Although there was a perception that Malaysians might fear they lacked the knowledge needed for interfaith dialogue, some participants suggested that such dialogue could help Muslims who have an incomplete understanding of Islam to learn about their own religion as well as about the religion of others. For example:

Mona: Not only for other religions to understand us but also for the Muslims to understand us as well...It’s because, uh, not all Malays are Muslim, true Muslim, you know what I mean? Then, with this dialogue, they will know more about Muslim – why we shouldn’t do that, why we should do this – and we make more open about our religion. That is how I feel. (Focus Group 1)

At first sight, Mona seems to invoke the distinction between “Malay” and “Muslim” that was highlighted earlier but here it is actually a distinction between “supposed Malay Muslims” and “true Malay Muslims”. Her assertion that not all Malays are “true Muslim” suggests a belief in a standard through which “Muslim-ness” can be evaluated and which provides a clear border to the ingroup category. In light of this, her suggestion that interfaith dialogue may enable Malay Muslims to learn more about Islam extends the function of the dialogue from an intergroup level to an intra-group level, facilitating learning that can enable self-identified Muslims to move wholly within a more tightly-defined Muslim ingroup category.

*Religious celebrations as avenues for positive interfaith engagement*

In discussing positive experiences of interfaith engagement, participants in all groups brought up their experiences during religious celebrations in Malaysia. There was a consensus about there being a cultural norm in Malaysia to be open to sharing in the festivals of other religious traditions, with Muslim, Hindu and Christian festivals being specifically named (Eid al-Fitr, Diwali and Christmas respectively) and with these being treated as an occasion for broad communal interaction. Some participants suggested that this could be actively built upon:

Piah: Well, I think because Malaysia has so many holidays that is related to religion, I think, uh, and now Malaysia is having, like, you know, Christmas and then Hari Raya Aidilfitri [a Malay term meaning “Day of celebrating Eid al-Fitr”] [ ] and that sort of thing. That itself is a good platform, you know, for us to have that open discussion. Normally people just go to other people’s, you know [ ] I just go there to eat [group laughs] [ ] We never discuss “Why are you celebrating?”, you know.

Intan: [ ] We have a lot of celebrations but only few really know what the celebration is all about. So, just for starters, to make it light, because Malaysians don’t like stuff that’s just too heavy for us to understand [Mas laughs] so if for starters we can do, [ ] for example, [television] commercial for a particular celebration [ ] and that advertisement actually insert a bit of why the celebration is actually being held so we learn a little by little. (Focus Group 2)

Here, Piah identifies the variety of religious celebrations in Malaysia as an opportunity for discussion about the events and beliefs that are being marked, although such discussion is presented as not the cultural norm. Intan turns to how knowledge of what underpins these celebrations might be increased, offering suggestions about how this information could be communicated by media and how it should be pitched. Intan had earlier criticised what she

saw as the media's role in politicizing religion and so this represents a call for a more constructive engagement. These suggestions were taken up by participants as ways of addressing any fears that people may have about lacking knowledge resources for interfaith engagement and as equipping them to broach questions about religion with neighbours in an informed way.

## DISCUSSION

Before examining the findings in relation to theoretical concepts relevant to intergroup relations, it is necessary to consider the status of the findings. As students pursuing higher education in the United Kingdom, the participants are not representative of Malay Muslims. However, obtaining representative samples and generalizable findings is not the aim of this type of qualitative research. Instead the focus was on gaining in-depth insight into experience-based understandings of possibilities for and limitations on interfaith engagement held by a group of young Malay Muslims who may occupy influential positions in Malaysia in the future. This study has identified strategies and resources for making sense of and responding to the current Malaysian interfaith relations context that may be shared by other young Malay Muslims with a similar profile, although the transferability of the findings needs to be determined by future research. Also the identity concerns that were discerned in the data may have been at least partly shaped by the focus group context. By bringing together members of an elite, privileged group of Malaysian young people, the interviews may have augmented participants' sense of collective belonging and group cohesiveness. These caveats need to be borne in mind when considering the findings.

There was a prevailing perception among the participants that the possibility of interfaith engagement in Malaysia was closely linked to the country's socio-political situation and specifically the "sensitive" nature of religious issues within Malaysian law and societal discourse. Participants were consistently critical of this perceived politicization of religion, despite Beversluis' (2000) contention that religion is inevitably intertwined with its socio-political context. The sensitivity of religious issues in Malaysia was also seen as having been internalized by Malaysians whom participants represented as being wary of engaging with each other at an interfaith level for fear that doing so would negatively affect social relationships. This representation of motivation may be seen as invoking system justification (see Blasi & Jost, 2006), where adhering to the status quo is regarded as necessary to maintain order, despite any apprehension about the politicization of religion. In this case, the likelihood of incurring interactional trouble was deemed high enough for Malaysians to acquiesce to a system that may hinder interfaith engagement rather than risk challenging it.

In light of this – and answering a specific research question in this study – participants put forward the argument that intergroup engagement in Malaysia tends to occur at an ethnic/racial rather than interfaith level, with concern being expressed about the way in which the Malay and Muslim identity categories were perceived to be synonymous. Participants stressed that "Malay" and "Muslim" should be conceptualized as distinct social identities, indicating that they did not accept the constitutional specification that to be Malay was to be Muslim. Their preference for representing Malay Muslim identity as more complex than this appeared to be driven at least partly by a concern that Islam should not be evaluated in terms of the behaviour of Malays. This echoes the concept of social identity complexity that was noted earlier – the capacity to perceive one's social identity categories as distinct even when they may appear to overlap (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). The participants' display of seemingly high complexity in their representation of the Malay and Muslim categories not only allowed

them to query the legitimacy of the perceived low complexity of the Malay Muslim identity but also to evaluate what that might mean for their ingroup.

What is striking here is participants' perception of how the appearance of low social identity complexity among Muslims might be interpreted by non-Muslims. Participants' differentiation of "Malay" and "Muslim" echoes Klein and Azzi's (2001) findings that ingroup members who are aware of a particular meta-stereotype – that is, an ingroup's beliefs about how the outgroup sees them (see Saroglou, Yzerbyt, & Kaschten, 2011) – may attempt to modify it to the advantage of the ingroup. This constitutes an alternative to the typical use of perspective-taking (see Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), as the participants appear to be taking their perception of the outgroup's evaluation of their ingroup and working with this to manage potential threats against a valued, salient social identity category ("Muslim"), and not necessarily for the purposes of fostering intergroup bonds.

The participants' representations of their Malay Muslim identity as complex also placed them in the position of being able to critically evaluate their ingroup's contribution to interfaith engagement in Malaysia. Although they alluded to non-Muslims' ignorance of "true" Islam playing a role in potential interfaith conflict, a similar charge was laid on Muslims who failed to "check" their sources of Islamic teachings. This conceptualization appears to include the representation that Muslims who know the "true" Islam would be more likely to avoid interfaith conflict. This representation of the Muslim ingroup as heterogeneous can be seen as functioning to protect a superordinate identity category from undifferentiated negative evaluations, as suggested by Hutchison et al. (2006).

Drawing attention to heterogeneity within their Muslim ingroup enabled the participants to defend their superordinate Muslim identity from a position of credibility, as they also attempted to account for and critique their fellow Muslims' potential involvement in interfaith conflict. This offers additional insight into how perceived ingroup heterogeneity

may provide members with the resources to express loyalty to the ingroup (Hutchison et al., 2006; Hutchison, Jetten, & Gutierrez, 2011), while still maintaining credibility as observers.

Furthermore, throughout the focus group interviews, participants' categorizations of the groups involved in this context echoed Mutalib's (2007) characterization of Malaysia as "bimodal". The interfaith context was consistently represented as involving "Muslims" and "non-Muslims", despite the heterogeneity of the "non-Muslim" category in Malaysia, reflecting the outgroup homogeneity effect that is often observed in intergroup settings (for example, see Brauer, 2001). As such, the participants' tendency to represent interfaith tension and conflict as arising from a lack of understanding of Islam by both Muslims and non-Muslims provides an indication that a complex navigation of the interfaith landscape may have been taking place.

The predominant issue that was highlighted was that a lack of knowledge of Islam among non-Muslims formed the basis of misconceptions that led to actions that were potentially hurtful to Muslims. This perceived lack of knowledge was also extended to Muslims, which facilitated the construction of an outgroup of Malaysians, regardless of religion, who were unwilling or unable to engage across religious traditions due to ignorance. This situation was perceived to be exacerbated by the fact that Muslims are hindered from talking about their religion due to the religious sensitivities in the country. Interestingly, the potential for conflict was discussed overwhelmingly in terms of knowledge and exposure rather than in religious or theological terms.

Conceptualizing the lack of engagement in knowledge terms provided the framework for the participants' suggested avenues for promoting interfaith engagement among Malaysians. Interfaith dialogue was posited to be potentially effective as a means of increasing people's interest in engaging with each other at a religious level and, with caveats, a potentially safe means of acquiring knowledge. This suggestion was especially interesting

as writings on interfaith dialogue urge caution about how it is implemented, identifying issues of power, status and motivation as posing difficulties (see Ariarajah, 2002). That said, there was awareness among the participants that interfaith dialogue may not be well-received by some Malaysians, whom they perceived as being “not ready” for open discussions of religion. This suggests that although studies on social identity complexity have typically identified intergroup contact as antecedent to increased complexity (see Schmid, Hewstone, Tausch, Cairns, & Hughes, 2009), there may be a need to consider baseline social identity complexity in attempting more direct interventions such as interfaith dialogue, as the psychological resources available to participants in such a setting may have implications for its success. This also reflects concerns by commentators that interfaith dialogue may only be effective if the parties involved are all open to the process (Ariarajah, 2002; Garfinkel, 2008), which may be more true of those higher in social identity complexity who are less susceptible to identity threat (Schmid et al., 2009).

It also highlights that in a complex intergroup context such as Malaysia, where there is evidence that dual identities (such as race and nationality) remain salient and influential despite intergroup contact efforts (see Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2012), the salience of multiple identities may make engaging across one identity category unrealistic (as might be expected in some interfaith dialogue settings). Particularly for Malay Muslims, the potential difficulty of engaging as Muslims, and not also as Malays, with religious others may result in intergroup anxiety. This was reflected in participants’ concerns that others’ perceptions of the Malay race would colour their views of Islam, given the perceived conflation of the two identity categories in the country. As such, less direct intergroup interventions may be necessary in contexts like Malaysia, where such overlaps in social identity are not just common, but prescribed.

Religious festivals were identified as a possible means through which Malaysians may be indirectly encouraged to engage with each other in order to learn about their respective religions. Armstrong (1988) found that the Malaysian tradition of “open houses”, that is, visits between members of different religious groups during festivals, was particularly effective as an intergroup contact setting. This could suggest that boundary permeability exists between religious groups that is unique to the context of religious celebration (see also Bekerman, 2003), reflecting a shift in attention from one’s religious social identity, as the evocation of open houses as “Malaysian traditions” may draw attention to the superordinate identity category of “Malaysian”, at least for that time period and in that context. As Hornsey and Hogg (2000) suggest, making a superordinate identity category more salient has the potential to increase groups’ focus on the similarities they share in relation to that identity, rendering them more inclusive, even if that requires specific intergroup contexts in order for it to endure (Dovidio et al., 2007). The suggestion that Malaysians could be exposed to educational commercials on religious beliefs during religious festivals is also worth exploring, as the salience of the Malaysian identity may allow them to be more receptive to such content than at other times. Such commercials may provide insight into other religions without the viewer needing to reciprocate with insights about their own religious tradition – an intergroup anxiety raised by participants when describing why they were reluctant to engage in interfaith discussions in the first place.

This study provides an illustration of the explanatory value of an intergroup relations perspective when conceptualizing and researching interfaith relations. In this respect, political and social psychologies offer valuable interpretative resources to scholars who are researching interfaith relations within other disciplines such as theology and religious studies. In specific terms, future research in the political psychology of religion could usefully seek to elucidate the processes that underlie contexts of intergroup contact, giving particular attention

to the complexity of the social identities involved and the implications this might have for re-categorization efforts as a means of encouraging and facilitating interfaith contact. Through its elaboration of these complexities, the present study demonstrates the psychological and social risks and costs that intergroup contact may carry. As highlighted in this study, intragroup priorities and dynamics (such as preservation of the religious ingroup's status when thinking about engagement with the religious outgroup), as well as individual conceptualizations of social identity, could potentially play a crucial role in the success of interfaith/intergroup interventions. Any such attempts should first be grounded in a firm understanding of the social context in which they occur. Indeed this study has provided a reminder of the importance of attending seriously to the broader socio-political context in any psychological research on interfaith relations. Failure to attend to such contexts may result in crucial explanatory resources being overlooked.

Finally, the research has highlighted the Malaysian context as one that is rich in possibilities for the exploration of interfaith relations. In particular, the capacity of religious festivals to create temporary boundary permeability between potentially competing groups that could facilitate meaningful contact beyond mere exposure should be investigated further, along with how specific intergroup dynamics may interact with the socio-political categories and boundaries operational in the country. Future psychological research could usefully explore this context further from other perspectives. Given that majority and minority groups may have different preferences for forms of recategorization (Dovidio et al., 2007), the perspectives of diverse groups of Malay Muslims living in Malaysia merit investigation but also of religious minorities in the country.

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