Reducing Prejudice: The Role of Contact Theory in Inter-Religious Dialogue

Arfah Ab. Majid[1]

[1] Faculty of Human Ecology Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: am_arfah@upm.edu.my

_____

Abstract: *Due to prejudicial attitude that is still ingrained in some of Malaysian society, there are always inter-religious issues arise in this country. This detrimental attitude if not being handled wisely could lead to inter-religious discord. Even though inter-religious dialogue has been implemented in Malaysia since 1950s, its effects on prejudice reduction is still vague. International dialogue practitioners have begun to include a number of theories in their dialogue designs in order to address prejudice. One of the theories is contact theory proposed by Gordon Allport (1954). According to Allport, contact that occurs under four specified conditions can generate learning and understanding about others which consequently lead to reduction of prejudice. Therefore, this study aims to explore the existing designs of several inter-religious dialogue programs in Malaysia and to determine to what extent these programs conformed to the contact theory. To gather data on inter-religious dialogue designs and their compliance to contact theory, a case study (i.e. interview and document analysis) had been carried out at two organizations, Institut Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (IKIM) and Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF). Two inter-religious dialogue programs for each organization were studied. The findings from the case study suggests that out of four programs, only one of the programs (i.e., INSaF's community building) fulfilled all four contact conditions since it applied unconventional design of dialogue which combined workshop, exhibition, Hari Raya celebration and alliance building. The other dialogue programs that applied the format of a forum, public lecture or roundtable dialogue only manage to fulfil three contact conditions namely equal status, common goals, and authority sanction. These conventional formats of dialogue did not provide the opportunity for the cooperative interaction condition to occur among the participants, hence the contact theory was incomplete. In order for the dialogue to achieve the desired goals such increasing inter-religious understanding and reducing prejudice, inter-religious dialogue practitioners and organizations should consider developing a systematic inter-religious dialogue design that is grounded on specific theories such as the contact theory in the future.*

Keywords: Prejudice, Contact theory, Dialogue, Design, Malaysia

_____

1. Introduction

As a melting pot of diverse ethnicities, cultures and religions, Malaysia has always been a model in maintaining her peaceful coexistence. However, the peaceful and harmonious living is something that can only be seen on the surface while what lies beneath is the suppressed prejudicial attitude. Prejudice as defined by Gordon Allport (1979:6) is "thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant" which implies that judgments made prior to careful examination and consideration of the facts.

In a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country like Malaysia, issues that reflected "thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant" often arise. Among the main issues as identified by Robert Hunt (2009) are: the issue of religious freedom, demolition of temples and the prohibition of the used of the word "Allah" in the Bible. Other than these issues, the issues of conversion (Pankaj Jha, 2009), cow head protest in Shah Alam, Namewee's controversial song, Ethnic Relation module and Suqiu issue, and attacks on churches (Yong & Md Sidin, 2010; Carmen Nge, 2012) had also created religious and ethnic tension in this country. To this very day, such issues are still lingering in our society. For example, the recent public outcry against The Education Ministry's decision to introduce Jawi writing as part of the Year Four Bahasa Melayu textbook at the national and vernacular schools. Following that issues, "Buy Muslim-made First" campaign has also been launched. It is a social media campaign that urged Muslims to prioritize Muslims' products in their purchasing instead of non-Muslims' products. Issues of these kinds are constantly emerging as Malaysian society is still shrouded with prejudice.

2. Literature Review

The Reality of Prejudicial Attitude among Malaysian

The reality of prejudice among Malaysian society is supported by a research finding conducted by Abdul Rahman Embong (2001). One informant in this research claimed that the unity that we are experiencing today is only for the sake of survival not "unity of the heart" (Abdul Rahman Embong, 2001: 75-77). A survey conducted by Merdeka Centre in 2011 further supports this finding which reveals that offensive racial stereotyping is still prevalent among Malaysian. Racist stereotypes such as "The Malays are lazy", "The Chinese are greedy" and that "The Indians cannot be trusted" only declined marginally by 2%, 3% and 2% respectively since the last survey in 2006 (Tan S. K., 2011).

According to Stephan and Stephan (2000), there are four types of threats that are often ignite prejudice namely realistic threats, symbolic threats, intergroup anxiety and negative stereotypes. Realistic threats are perceived threats related to the welfare, political and economic power of the in-group. Symbolic threats are the perception that the different worldview, values and beliefs of other groups will challenge one's own. Inter-group anxiety is the presupposition that inter-group interaction will be embarrassed or ridiculed. Negative stereotypes such as aggressive, lazy, untrustworthy and greedy will create the feeling of threat among in-group for future interactions with the out-groups.

Other than these threats, different social realities experienced by the majority and the minority groups in a particular society also influenced prejudice. The lives of the so called advantaged and disadvantaged groups were constructed by different social realities (Demoulin, Leyens, & Dovidio, in press) produced by disparities in economic security, political power, and opportunities for social advancement (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). These different social realities create different motivations for members in the two different groups namely the advantaged and disadvantaged group. While the motivation of advantaged groups is to support the stability of the social system that benefits them, the motivation for the disadvantaged groups is otherwise that is to promote social change (Sidanius, & Pratto, 1999; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). People are often much more inclined to reflect on their marginalized identities than they are to think about how they are privileged. The four types of threats and different perceptions on social realities of the majority and the minority groups in fact shaped the prejudicial attitude rather than the differences in religious belief itself.

The existence of the threats and the different perceptions of majority and minority groups can be seen in several inter-religious and inter-ethnic issues in Malaysia. In all those types of threats, the Malay Muslim majority often experience realistic threat as it is related with threats to the political and economic power of the Malay. The Malays perceive their economic deprivation is mainly due to the domination of the non-Malays in major economic sectors such as small and medium businesses and modern sectors of employment (Lee, 2001). The ethnics' minority in Malaysia on the other hands, often experience the threats to morals, values and beliefs namely the symbolic threat. For instance, many Malaysian government policies, including the educational and cultural policies, are perceived as undermining the rights of the minorities in this country and this led to the creation of much resentment among them. This situation was further impaired with the inculcation of Islamic cultures and values in a multi-religious and multi-ethnic Malaysian society (Lee, 2000).

The inculcation of Islamic cultures and values that has been implemented by the government as early as 1980s occasionally raise discontentment among the multi-religious and multi-ethnic society. Among the major Islamic programs that were carried out by the government were:

1) Policy declaration to remodel Malaysia's economic system into an Islamic one in 1980.
2) Establishment of Islamic Banks, Islamic Pawnshops, Islamic Insurance and an Islamic Economic Foundation in 1981.
3) Establishment of a permanent site for the International Islamic Training Camp in 1982.
4) Establishment of an International Islamic University Malaysia in 1983.
5) Official declaration of Islamisation of Government Machinery in 1984.
6) Declaring that the status of Islamic judges and courts was to be on par with their counterparts in the civil judiciary in 1988 (Hussin Mutalib, 1993).

Nevertheless, it should be noted that these programs themselves did not cause the discontentment but lack of information about the programs, the content and implementation that led to misunderstanding and protest among the non-Muslims minority (Khairulnizam Mat Karim & Suzy Aziziyana Saili, 2008).

Prejudice is detrimental to any society if left unchecked as it can affect health, economy, education (American Psychological Association [APA], 2001), and may even lead to terrorism and genocide (Sternberg, 2003). The role of prejudice as the source of racial discord is also affirmed by Sri Rahayu Ismail, Zaid Ahmad, Haslinda Abdullah and Norbaya Ahmad (2009).

May 13, 1969 was a painful experience for Malaysia due to ethnic unrest that was allegedly caused by prejudice. Therefore, before another similar tragedy occurs, certain intervention is needed in order to curb this harmful attitude. There are a number of prejudice reduction approaches that have been proposed by researches such as co-operative learning, entertainment, cross-cultural/inter-cultural training, social categorization and diversity training. Other than these strategies, inter-group dialogue has also been identified as one of the interventions that appear promising in reducing prejudice (Paluck & Green, 2009) provided that this dialogue is grounded on specific theories such as the Contact Theory (Allport, 1954).

Contact Theory

Contact theory suggests that inter-group contact results in positive effects with the presence of four key conditions namely; equal group status within the group encounter, common goals, co-operative interactions and support from those with social influence and power (Allport, 1954). Gaertner, Dovidio and Bachman (1996: 27), stated that "self-revealing interactions" offered by inter-group contact has been proven to facilitate superordinate identity formation and reduce bias.

Contact theory has gone through several meta-analytic test and the treatment effect is always consistent from one study to another i.e., inter-group contact has the potential to reduce inter-group prejudice. A meta-analysis producing effects from 696 samples for instance reveals that greater inter-group contact is generally associated with a lower level of prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Another meta-analysis data shows that direct contact-based interventions (i.e., contact meetings and cooperative learning) and indirect contact-based interventions (i.e., extended contact programs such as friendships or positive relations displayed in books, picture stories, radio plays, or films) are effective in reducing prejudice (Lemmer & Wagner, 2015).

Inter-group contact has also been proven to be effective for reducing prejudice not only towards racial or ethnic minorities but also people with disabilities and mental health issues (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011). Inter-group friendships are another powerful form of contact that can improve attitudes through time spent and self-disclosure with outgroup friends (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew & Wright, 2011). A field experiment shows that ethnic majorities have more favourable views on immigrants' work ethics once they have experienced direct personal contact and cooperation with each other (Finseraas & Kotsadam, 2017).

The Application of Contact Theory in Inter-Group Dialogue

Inter-group dialogue is one of diversity or multicultural initiatives in college campuses in the United States that are implicitly or explicitly guided by inter-group contact theory. Inter-group dialogues were purposely designed to create all four contact conditions as proposed by Allport to produce positive inter-group contact. The enrolment of an equal number of students from each identity group reflects the equal status condition. Co-operation and personal interaction are guaranteed by exercises and assignments that require students to work together and to get to know each other in non-superficial ways. Since these courses are made compulsory for earning college credit, it becomes an evident of support from authorities (Nagda, Gurin & Zuniga, 2008).

Outside academic setting, inter-group dialogue can be generally described as "a form of democratic practice, engagement, problem solving, and education involving face-to-face, focused, facilitated, and confidential discussions occurring over time between two or more groups of people defined by their different social dimensions" (Schoem, Hurtado, Sevig, Chesler & Stephen H. Sumida, 2001: 6). It is an approach initiated by the grassroots in order to deal with the lack of communication among different groups of people that is becoming more apparent in schools, in communities and also in the workplace (Schoem & Hurtado, 2001). Participants of inter-group dialogue consist of 12 to 18 people from two or more social identity groups, for instance, "men and women; biracial/ multiracial/ethnic people; Arabs and Jews; people from working-class, middle-class, and upper-socio-economic class backgrounds; and Christians, Muslims, and Jews" (Zúñiga, Nagda, Mark Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007: 3).

Inter-group dialogue can benefit these groups by resolving conflicts that have occurred or may occur (Zúñiga & Sevig, 1997) since it is specifically designed to provide a safe space for participants to address sensitive social issues, such as politics, racism, religion and culture that often trigger a conflict or polarization (Dessel, Rogge & Garlington, 2006). In order to promote meaningful dialogue and to build relationships over time, inter-group dialogue requires a series of eight to twelve structured facilitated meetings (Zúñiga et al., 2007). Inter-group dialogue aims to increase personal growth contrasting from debate that encourages participants to take positions and challenge others. It is also different from group therapy processes which simply focus on an individual's inter-personal dynamics. On top of that, inter-group dialogue is also not a form of mediation which seeks to negotiate a resolution to a dispute (Dessel & Rogge, 2008).

A number of fields such as social work, political science, social psychology and communications, favour inter-group dialogue for its ability to facilitate positive changes in prejudicial attitudes or behaviours and improve troubled relationships (Parrott, Zeichner & Hoover, 2005). Students involved in inter-group dialogue were also reported to have more positive views of conflict and declared greater support for multi-cultural and affirmative action policies compared to the other students who did not participate (Gurin, Peng, Lopez, & Nagda, 1999). Among the results from the dialogues in community and international settings are breakdown of stereotyping, facilitation of personal relationships, establishment of trust and consensus building leading to critical social policy development, and commitment to social change (Alvarez & Cabbil, 2001). Participants in academic-based dialogues have also reported more passion for intergroup learning, more confidence to get involved in social action, more knowledgeable about the social group identities of self and others, and less stereotypical beliefs and prejudicial attitudes.

Based on the researches on inter-group dialogue outcomes, it can be concluded that, inter-group dialogue is generally conducted to reduce inter-group anxiety, prejudice, and other negative expressions in inter-group interaction (Miller & Donner, 2000; Nagda, Kim & Truelove, 2004).

Overview of Inter-Religious Dialogue in Malaysia

Based on previous discussion, dialogue among different faiths and religious-based groups is part of inter-group dialogue. According to Dessel, Rogge and Garlington (2006:305), faith-based groups are an integral part of local social fabric, and a point of both convergence and divergence for many people in understanding their own lives as well as the greater society. The president of Yadim (Islamic Propagation Foundation of Malaysia), Nik Omar Nik Abdul Aziz, in one of his statements endorses dialogues and mutual understanding as essential means to build good and harmonious relations among people from different cultures, religions and civilisations ("Yadim: Hold more inter-religious dialogue", 2019).

Inter-religious dialogue has been in reality taking place in Malaysia for more than a decade ago. However, its implementation is still very limited and passive due to lack of support and awareness from the society at large. This could be due to the nature of the dialogue itself which can be considered as too intellectual since it normally involves the discussion of philosophical and theological issues among religious scholars or leaders which is not suitable for the masses (Ghazali Basri, 2005). Rahimin Affandi, Mohd. Anuar, Paizah and Nor Hayati (2011) further support this argument by stating that the implementation of inter-religious dialogue in the form of intellectual discourse is still limited in this country since this type of dialogue usually takes place at the higher education institutions (e.g., Universiti

Kebangsaan Malaysia and International Islamic University Malaysia) or religious institutions (e.g., *Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia* (IKIM) (Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia)). This type of dialogue also requires the participants to be knowledgeable and well-versed in religious and textual study regarding the sacred scriptures of other religions. Based on the nature of the existing inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia, how would it be possible for the optimal contact conditions to be fulfilled? In order to answer this question, the design of several inter-religious dialogue programs will be explored.

3. Methodology

In order to examine the design of inter-religious dialogue and the presence of the contact theory, a case study which involved interview and document analysis was conducted. Among the organizations that had been selected purposively for this study were *Institut Kemajuan Islam Malaysia* (IKIM) and Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF). All these organizations were selected based on their experiences in implementing inter-religious dialogue programs. One of the programs identified was as community building and one program identified as critical-dialogic education was selected for each organization. Critical-dialogic education type of dialogue aims at exploring group differences from a social justice perspective while community building type of dialogue discusses community concerns and working towards building relationships among different groups (Zúñiga & Nagda, 2001).

This qualitative data was then analysed using within-case analysis and cross-case analysis as proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994). Within-case analysis compares the data against the theory applied (i.e., Contact theory), while cross-case analysis compares data in one case to data in the other case (which means data on the design in one dialogue model will be compared with data in the other dialogue model). The data obtained from the analysis provided relevant information on the design elements (i.e., setting, participant, format, facilitator, program duration, ground rules, effectiveness and activities) and the incorporation of the inter-group contact theory in the existing inter-religious dialogue models.

4. Discussion

The Design of Inter-Religious Dialogue Programs
The following discussion describes the dialogue designs for IKIM's and INSaF's inter-religious dialogue programs. Each inter-religious dialogue program for both organizations has been categorized as community building and critical-dialogic education based on its goal.

Institut Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (IKIM)
Community Building
IKIM normally organize programs that focus on universal values or common issues that become the concern for every religion such as the social issues, ethics, morality and *akhlaq* (disposition). For this reason, most of IKIM's model of dialogue can be described as community building type of dialogue. IKIM's dialogue programs rarely discuss theological issues since this kind of discussion allegedly will widen the gap of differences among people of different religions and cultures (M. S. Badron, personal communication, December 29, 2010).

One of the dialogue program that reflect community building spirit was a two-day seminar entitled *"Peranan Agama dalam Menangani Masalah Sosial"* (The Role of Religions in Dealing with Social Problems) held on December 8 to 9, 2010 (*Institut Kefahaman Islam*

Malaysia [IKIM], 2010a). This dialogue program took the format of seminar that is commonly practiced in the academic world. There were four sessions altogether (two sessions for each day) with four different moderators for each session. There was one theme for each session with three to five presenters presented their papers related to the theme.

In the first session, there were three presenters and each presenter was given thirty minutes to present their papers. The first presenter (i.e., Abd. Hadi Zakaria) presented on *"Masalah Sosial dan Pembentukan Komuniti"* (Social Problems and Community Development), the second presenter Muhammad Uthman El-Muhammady presented on *"Fahaman dan Penghayatan Prinsip Beriman kepada Tuhan dalam Islam"* (Understanding and Appreciation of the Principle of Belief in God in Islam) and the third presenter Othman Mustapha presented on *"Peranan Institusi dan Organisasi Keagamaan Menangani Masalah Sosial di Malaysia"* (The Role of Religious Institution and Organization in Dealing with Social Problems in Malaysia). The following three sessions (i.e., second, third and fourth) session focusing on major social problems in Malaysia and the role of religions in overcoming such problems.

Among the problems highlighted were drugs abuse and alcohol addiction, gambling, prostitution and corruption. The second session entitled *"Peranan Agama Menangani Ketagihan Dadah dan Arak"* (The Role of Religions in Dealing with Drugs and Alcohol Addiction) was discussed by four invited speakers representing different religious perspectives. Those speakers are Amir Farid Isahak (Islamic perspective), Bala Tharumalingam (Hindus perspective), John Gurusamy (Christian perspective) and Sarjit S. Gill (Sikh perspective). First day seminar adjourned shortly after the end of session two at 4.30 p.m. The third session continued on the second day started at 8.30 a.m. and discussed the *"Pandangan dan Peranan Agama Memerangi Kegiatan Perjudian dan Pelacuran"* (The Religious Perspectives and Its Role in Combating Gambling and Prostitution). This topic was addressed by three presenters representing the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist perspectives.

The fourth session which is the last session addressed the *"Pandangan dan Peranan Agama Membendung Jenayah Rasuah"* (The Religious Perspectives and Its Role in Overcoming Corruption). This topic was presented by four presenters representing Muslim, Christian, Hindu and Buddhist perspectives. Each session concluded with question and answer session and followed by a discussion session for about half an hour. The second day of the seminar ended at 1.45 p.m.

Critical-dialogic Education
"Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The Muhibah (Affability) Perspective" was an example of IKIM's critical-dialogic education dialogue with an intellectual discourse format. This intellectual discourse was held on November 2, 2010 (Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia [IKIM], 2010b). This program focused on enhancing religious understanding and harmonious living in a pluralistic society. This one-day seminar comprised of a presentation session by an invited speaker (i.e., Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman), and a discussion session participated by three discussants (Thomas Philips the President of MCCBCHST; Prematilaka KD Sarisena the Hon. Secretary-General of MCCBCHST; and Mohd Sani Badron, the Director of Centre for Economics and Social Studies, IKIM). The moderator for the program was the late Ilani Isahak. It began at 10 am after welcoming remarks by Nik Mustapha bin Haji Nik Hassan, IKIM's Director-General and ended at 12.40 pm. Most of IKIM's dialogue programs including this one normally adopted themes that are related to universal values instead of theological and philosophical themes.

A summary of the above analysis on IKIM's dialogue type and its design are as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: IKIM's Dialogue Type and Design

Type Design	Community Building	Critical-dialogic Education
Theme/topic	Ethical and moral issues (e.g., "Peranan Agama dalam Menangani Masalah Sosial")	Universal values e.g. "Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The *Muhibah* Perspective"
Setting	IKIM's grand Hall	NA
Participant	Experts, leaders and academicians as presenters/moderators Public audience	Experts and leaders
Moderator/speaker	3 to 4 different speakers 3 to 4 different moderators for 3 to 4 different sessions (different sub-topic for each session)	1 moderator, 1 speaker and 3 three discussants
Format	Seminar	Intellectual discourse
Duration	2 days seminar (December 8-9, 2010)	Half day (9.30 a.m. to 12.40 p.m. on November 2, 2010)
Ground rules	NA	NA
Evaluation	Evaluation form	NA
Activities	None	None

Note. NA= Not available

Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF)
Community Building and Social Action

As a community-oriented organization, INSaF had been involved in several inter-religious dialogue programs that fall under the community building type of dialogue. For instance, on September 16, 2010 in conjunction with Hari Raya Celebration, INSaF had organized a program called "Hari Raya Celebration and Religious Harmony Workshop" at The Pure Life Society. This brainstorming workshop was opened for everyone to encourage meaningful discussion in order to optimize religious harmony and promote sense of belonging in a more practical ways at school, home, workplace and places of worship. This workshop was facilitated and led by Carolina Lopez, Thillia Chelliah, K. Rajkumar and Mother Manggalam.

The program started at 3.30 p.m. with registration, tour of exhibition of world religions at the Temple of Universal Spirit and followed by prayer by Mother Manggalam and an introductory address by John Gurusamy at 4 p.m. The workshop began at 4.15 p.m. and followed by question and answer an hour later. Soon after the concluding remarks by the chairman of INSaF, Amir Farid Isahak, together they celebrated the Hari Raya celebrations. The program continued with some prayers and re-commitment to the declaration on religious

44

harmony. During dinner, the participants were entertained with *nasyid* choir (Islamic vocal music) (Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship [INSaF], 2010). Around 107 participants which comprised of people from different religious and ethnic backgrounds have attended this celebration (PLS, 2010).

Critical-dialogic Education

In 2006, INSaF organized inter-religious dialogue entitled "Karma, Faith and Divinity." This dialogue took place at the multi-purpose hall of the Pure Life Society. The public who were interested to participate in this dialogue were encouraged to register themselves in advance so as to arrange for light refreshment at the end of the program. This special session was arranged to foster a more meaningful engagement among participants. The program that took the format of a forum invited three speakers to present their ideas on the given topic. The presentation was later followed by a dialogue session with the audience. The three speakers invited representing different religions i.e. B.K. Letchumanan represents Hinduism, Rufus Bruno Pereira represents Christianity and Shah Kirit Kalkulal Govindji represents Islam. This one-day program was chaired by Goh Chooi Chin (The Pure Life Society [PLS], 2006). Table 2 is the summary for INSaF dialogue design in critical-dialogic education type.

Table 2: INSaF's Dialogue Type and Design

Type Design	Community Building	Critical-dialogic Education
Theme/topic	General (e.g., "Hari Raya Celebration and Religious Harmony Workshop")	Theological/general (e.g., Karma, Faith and Divinity)
Setting	Multi-purpose hall at the Pure Life Society	Multi-purpose hall at the Pure Life Society
Participant	INSaF members and public	Public (mostly non-Muslim)
Moderator/speaker	4 facilitators	2-3 speakers with 1 moderator
Format	Brain storming workshop	Seminar
Duration	Few hours in the evening	1 day
Ground rules	NA	NA
Evaluation	NA	NA
Activities	Hari Raya Celebration	Refreshment to encourage interaction

Note. NA= Not available

The Insertion of Inter-Group Contact Theory in Inter-religious Dialogue

Based on the analysis of the inter-religious dialogue design, it was found that only INSaF's community building type of dialogue program fulfilled all four contact conditions. Even though all other programs without a doubt had met the other three contact conditions such as equal status, common goals and authority sanction, however they lack of one condition which renders its ineffectiveness since all four conditions must co-exist in order for it to demonstrate the positive effect (Gaertner, Dovidio, Rust, Nier, Banker & Ward, 1999). Equal status is guaranteed by IKIM and INSaF with the selection of speakers and participants with comparable status in terms of expertise, knowledge, position and so on for inter-religious dialogue programs conducted by those organizations. IKIM for instance invited experts, academicians and religious leaders for its program entitled "Religion and Pluralistic Coexistence: The Muhibah Perspective." This dialogue invited one speaker (Kamar Oniah Kamaruzaman from International Islamic University Malaysia) and three discussants

45

(Thomas Philips, the President of MCCBCHST, Prematilaka KD Sarisena, the Hon. Secretary-General of MCCBCHST and Mohd Sani Badron, the Director of Centre for Economic and Social Studies, IKIM).

Most participants who attended inter-religious dialogues organized by IKIM and INSaF were keen on gaining knowledge about different religious perspectives on certain religious issues regardless of the community building or critical-dialogic education type of dialogue. This reflect the common goals of contact condition. Those who attended the "Hari Raya Celebration and Religious Harmony Workshop" organized by INSaF in 2010 for instance, certainly had the same purpose to celebrate Hari Raya with various ethnic and religious groups. The freedom to implement inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia is consistent with the condition of authority sanction in which most organizations did not confront any constraints posed by the authorities. The direct government support can be seen in most of IKIM's inter-religious dialogue programs since IKIM itself is one of government's body.

Both of IKIM's inter-religious dialogue programs did not include any session for interaction among participants let alone cooperation. The other INSaF's program entitled "Karma, Faith and Divinity" did include a session for light refreshment at the end of the program. However, it only meant for the participants to socialize but not to cooperate. That is why this program also did not fulfil the cooperative interaction element set for the contact theory. It is difficult for any inter-religious dialogue programs in the conventional format such as seminar, forum or public lecture to meet the condition of co-operative interaction. INSaF's community building type of dialogue "Hari Raya Celebration and Religious Harmony Workshop" was found as the only dialogue program that successfully met all four contact conditions since the program was designed differently with the conventional format of inter-religious dialogue. The program was a combination of a brainstorming workshop, exhibition, Hari Raya celebration and alliance building with the re-commitment to the declaration on religious harmony. Contact theory as applied by the IKIM and INSaF is summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: The Application of Contact Theory

Inter-group Contact Organizations	Equal status	Common goals	Cooperative interaction	Support from authorities
IKIM	Experts/leaders	Increase inter-religious understanding or social concerns	No	Yes
INSaF	INSaF members	Increase inter-religious understanding, social concerns, discuss current or work-related issues	There was existing relationship and cooperation among organizational members	Yes

5. Conclusion

As a highly diverse country, maintaining the stability and peaceful coexistence is a challenge for Malaysia. Lack of understanding on one another often stir the prejudicial attitude among different religious and ethnic groups. This is evident with the emergence of few recent inter-religious issues such as the Jawi-khat issue and Buy Muslim First campaign. A number of studies have been conducted to examine the causes, effects and approaches to its reduction.

One of the most eminent theory in prejudice researches is the contact theory proposed by Gordon Allport (1954). This theory suggests that prejudice among members of different religious or ethnic groups can be reduced with the presence of appropriate conditions during inter-group contact. The conditions are equal status, common goals, authority sanction and cooperative interaction. This theory has been applied in many intervention programs including inter-group dialogue. Inter-group dialogue with the incorporation of contact theory is proven to be effective in improving inter-group relations based on the result of the program's evaluation.

In Malaysia, most of the inter-religious or inter-ethnic dialogue programs are normally conducted in the format of forums, public lectures or seminars without the application of specific theories such as the contact theory. Present research reveals that out of four inter-religious dialogue programs being studied, only one program fulfilled all four contact conditions. The reliance on the format of forums, public lectures or seminars did not allow for co-operative interaction (one of the key conditions in contact theory) to occur among participants. Even though three of the programs involved in this study successfully met the other three contact conditions namely, equal status, common goals and support from authority, the missing component (i.e. co-operation), does affect the effectiveness of the contact theory. According to Chu and Griffey (1985), one factor will become less important when it is isolated from the other. For instance, common goals are one of the valuable factors, but it will be less effective if it is detached from cooperative interaction and other factors (Gaertner, Dovidio, Rust, Nier, Banker, Ward, et al., 1999).

As a multi-religious organization, INSaF has been actively involved in substantial number of inter-religious works and programs ahead of other organizations since half a century ago. With a wider range of inter-religious dialogue designs and community-friendly approach, INSaF has managed to draw participants not only from the elite but also from the grassroots. In order to fulfil all four contact conditions, current model of inter-religious dialogue should develop a design that is more conducive for cooperative interaction to occur like the one that was conducted by INSaF. INSaF's community building combined a workshop, exhibition, Hari Raya celebration and alliance building which requires cooperation among the diverse groups involved. The inter-group dialogue framework also offers a few examples of activities that reflect the key conditions of the inter-group contact theory especially co-operative interaction such as group-building activities, cultural chest activities, terminology activities (to generate meaning about key terms) and many more that require the participants to work together and get to know each other better (Zúñiga et al., 2007). In order to enable inter-religious dialogue to achieve the goal of reducing prejudice, organizations involve in inter-religious dialogue should consider improving the current designs and incorporate the contact theory appropriately in their dialogue models.

References

Abdul Rahman Embong. (2001). The Culture and practice of pluralism in post-colonial Malaysia. In R. W. Hefner (ed), *The politics of multiculturalism: pluralism and citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia* (pp. 59-87). University of Hawai'i Press.

Allport, G.W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice.* Cambridge, Mass: Addison-Wesley.

Allport, G.W. (1979). *The nature of prejudice: Unabridged.* Reading: Addison-Wesley.

Alvarez, A. R., & Cabbil, L. (2001). The MELD program: Promoting personal change and social justice through a year-long multicultural group experience. *Social Work with Groups,* 24 (1), 3-20.

Chu, D. & Griffey D. (1985). The contact theory of racial integration: the case of sport. *Sociology of Sport Journal,* 2, 323-3.

Davies, K., Tropp, L.R., Aron, A., Pettigrew, T.F., & Wright S.C. (2011). Cross-group friendships and intergroup attitudes: A meta-analytic review. *Personality & Social Psychology Review,* 15. 332-351.

Dessel, A., Rogge, M. (2008). Evaluation of intergroup dialogue: A review of the empirical literature. *Conflict Resolution Quarterly,* 26(2), 199-238.

Dessel, A., Rogge, M., & Garlington, S. (2006). Using intergroup dialogue to promote social justice and change. *Social Work,* 51(4), 303-315.

Finseraas, H., & Kotsadam, A. (2017). Does personal contact with ethnic minorities affect anti-immigrant sentiments? Evidence from a field experiment. *European Journal of Political Research,* 56. 703–722.

Gaertner, S. L., Dovidio, J. F., & Bachman, B. A. (1996). Revisiting the contact hypothesis: The induction of a common in-group identity. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations,* 20 (3 & 4), 271-290.

Gaertner, S. L., Dovidio, J. F., Rust, M. C., Nier, J., Banker, B., Ward, C. M. et al. (1999). Reducing inter-group bias: Elements of inter-group cooperation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 76, 388–402.

Ghazali Basri. (2005). *Dialog antara Agama di Malaysia [Inter-religious dialogue in Malaysia].* Kuala Lumpur. Pusat Dialog Peradaban. UM. Gurin, P., Peng, T., Lopez, G. E., & Nagda, B. A. (1999). Context, identity and inter-group relations. In D. Prentice & D. Miller (eds.), *Cultural divides: Understanding and overcoming group conflict* (pp. 133–170). New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Hussin Mutalib. (1993). *Islam in Malaysia: From revivalism to Islamic State*. Singapore: National University of Singapore.

Institut Kefahaman Islam Malaysia. (2010, November). Religion and pluralistic coexistence: The muhibah perspective. *Dialogue program's guide.*

Khairulnizam Mat Karim & Suzy Aziziyana Saili. (2008, June). Realiti aplikasi dialog antara agama di Malaysia: Kajian terhadap Inter-faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF) dan Pusat Dialog Peradaban, Universiti Malaya [Reality applications of Inter-faith dialogue in Malaysia: Study on Inter-Faith Spiritual Fellowship (INSaF) dan Pusat Dialog Peradaban, Universiti Malaya]. Paper presented at National Seminar on Science, Technology & Social Sciences organized by Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM) Pahang & Pahang State Government, Pahang.

Lee, H. G. (2000). Ethnic relations in Peninsular Malaysia: The cultural and economic dimensions. *Social and Cultural Issues.* Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Lemmer, G., & Wagner, U. (2015). Can we really reduce ethnic prejudice outside the lab? A meta-analysis of direct and indirect contact interventions. *European Journal of Social Psychology,* 45(2). 152–168.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook (2nd ed.).* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Miller, J., &Donner, S. (2000). More than just talk: The use of racial dialogues to combat racism. *Social Work with Groups,* 23(1), 31-53.

Nagda, B. A., Kim, C. W., & Truelove, Y. (2004). Learning about difference, learning with others, learning to transgress. *Journal of Social Issues,* 60(1), 195–214.

Nagda, B., Gurin, P., & Zuniga, X. (2008). A multi-university evaluation of the educational effects of inter-group dialogue. Retrieved February 23, 2010, from http://depts.washington.edu/sswweb/resweb/project.php?id61.

Paluck, E. L., & Green, D. P. (2009). Prejudice reduction: What works? A Review and assessment of research and practice. *Annual Review of Psychology,* 60. 339-367.

Parrott, D. J., Zeichner, A., & Hoover, R. (2006). Sexual prejudice and anger network activation: Mediating role of negative affect. *Aggressive Behavior,* 32, 7–16.

Pettigrew., T.F & Tropp., L.R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 90, 751-783.

Rahimin Affandi Abd. Rahim, Mohd Anuar Ramli, Paizah Ismail & Nor Hayati Mohd Dahlal. (2011). Dialog antara agama: Realiti dan prospek di Malaysia [Religious dialogue: Its reality and prospect in Malaysia]. *Kajian Malaysia,* 29 (2), 91–110.

Schoem, D., Hurtado, S., Sevig, T., Chesler, M. & Sumida, S. H. (2001). Intergroup dialogue: Democracy at work in theory and practice. In D., Schoem. & S, Hurtado (Eds.), *Intergroup dialogue: Deliberative democracy in school, college, community and workplace* (pp.1-21). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Sri Rahayu Ismail, Zaid Ahmad, Haslinda Abdullah & Norbaya Ahmad. (2009). The sociopsychological dimension of ethnic relations in Malaysia. *European Journal of Social sciences,* 12 (1). 76-82.

Sternberg., R.J. (2003). A duplex theory of hate: Development and application to terrorism massacres and genocide. *Review of General Psychology,* 7(3). 299-328.

Tan, S. K. (2011). Public confidence in state of ethnic relations decline. Retrieved July 22, 2012, from www.merdeka.org

The Pure Life Society. (2006, July-December). INSaF going strong: Religious dialogue. Truth alone triumph: The pure life society bulletin. p.6.

Yadim: Hold more inter-religious dialogues to promote understanding. (2019, March 5). *Malay Mail.* Retrieved from https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2019/03/05/yadim-hold-more-inter-religious-dialogues-to-promote-understanding/1729388

Zúñiga, X. & Sevig, T. D. (1997). Bridging the "us/them" divide through inter-group dialogue and leadership. *The Diversity Factor,* (Winter) 22-28.

Zúñiga, X., Nagda, B. R. A., Mark Chesler., M. & Cytron-Walker., A. (2007). Inter-group dialogue in higher education: meaningful learning about social justice. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 32 (4). 1-128.