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Promoting Inter-Ethnic Understanding and Empathy Using A Round Table Cinema Activity with Malaysian Malay and Chinese Students

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**Abstract**

The Round Table Cinema Activity (RTCA) is an intervention designed to promote improved multicultural understanding by having different social identity groups watch a carefully-selected film and take part in repeated dialogic exchanges. Here, we examined the efficacy of the RTCA paradigm at improving inter-ethnic understanding and empathy among members of different social identity groups from the same country (i.e., Malaysian Malays and Chinese). A total of 87 participants completed a measure of ethnocultural empathy before and after the RTCA paradigm, which involved watching the film *Sepet*, taking part in group discussions, and answering open-ended question about their experiences. Analyses of written responses suggested that the RTCA was successful at promoting intergroup dialogue and exchange of ideas. Analyses of quantitative data suggested significant and large improvements in ethnocultural empathy at post-intervention. Our findings suggest that the RTCA paradigm may be a useful tool for promoting inter-ethnic harmony in the Malaysian context.

**Keywords:** Round Table Cinema Activity; Contact hypothesis; Intergroup contact; Ethnocultural empathy; Malaysia

**Introduction**

Many crucial issues confronting multicultural societies involve conflicts between groups (Bar-Tal & Halperin, 2011; Coleman, 2014). This is particularly true of social identity groups that share common living space and are subject to the same socio-political structures, such as diverse ethnic groups living in the same nation (Bar-Tal, 2013). Conflicts between groups can be triggered by many factors, such as competing ideologies and competition for scarce resources (for a review, see Leidner, Tropp, & Lickel, 2013), but a common thread in multi-ethnic nations concerns negative stereotypes of the “other” (Bar-Tal, 2013). During conflict, groups define their identities through difference and delineation from out-groups; the opposing group(s) – the “other” – is characterised in simplistic and exaggerated ways, which leads each side to view the others’ existence as a threat to their own existence (Jensen, 2011). The result is a mutual negation and de-legitimisation of the others’ collective narrative and continuing conflict (Bar-Tal, Oren, & Nets-Zenghut, 2014), which are often difficult to eliminate and appear intractable (Bar-Tal, 2007).

Social psychological approaches to reducing intergroup conflict are often based on the contact hypothesis (for a review, see Dovidio, Love, Schellhaas, & Hewstone, 2017). As consolidated by Allport (1954), the contact hypothesis postulates that, under prerequisite conditions, intergroup contact reduces intergroup conflict and promotes more harmonious relations (for a review, see Pettigrew, 2016). These prerequisite conditions are (a) equal status between the groups; (b) intergroup cooperation; (c) common goals, and; (d) support of authorities, law, or customs (Allport, 1954). Later research identified additional prerequisites, including opportunities for personal acquaintance between outgroup members and norms within the contact setting that promote egalitarian intergroup interaction (Cook, 1985). Importantly, meta-analytic research has supported the efficacy of contact in promoting more positive outgroup attitudes, even when prerequisite conditions are not met (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

A number of mechanisms help to explain the power of intergroup contact in reducing intergroup prejudice and conflict (see Dovidio et al., 2017). These include enhanced knowledge of outgroup members (Miller, Brewer, & Edwards, 1985), which in turn shape affective outcomes including reductions in group-based anxiety and increases in intergroup empathy (Stephan & Stephan, 1984). Intergroup contact can also promote positive intergroup relations by reducing the salience of social identities (i.e., “decategorisation”) and changing the ways in which people categorise others (i.e., recategorisation) (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2010). Recategorisation in particular is effective when it involves cooperative interaction or emphasises shared goals, which help to shift the focus away from an othering perspective onto one of common identity (Gaertner, Dovidio, Guerra, Hehman, & Saguy, 2016). Finally, intergroup contact may also challenge perceived norms of intergroup behaviour by communicating that both the ingroup and outgroup have more inclusive norms than previously thought (Gómez, Tropp, & Fernández, 2011).

Based on the contact hypothesis, a range of methods have been developed to promote more positive intergroup relations (for a review, see Dovidio et al., 2017). One specific intervention method based on the contact hypothesis that was developed to promote improved multicultural understanding within the Asian context is the round table cinema activity (RTCA; Ito & Yamamoto, 2011; Yamamoto & Ito, 2005). In RTCAs, individuals from different social identity groups watch a carefully-selected film together before being provided with repeated dialogic spaces in which to re-evaluate gaps in knowledge about the other, discuss any discomfort triggered by the film, and resolve any internal conflicts. Through these dialogic exchanges, participants are encouraged to examine differences and similarities between self and other identities, and to consider the importance of symbiotic living by correcting earlier misconceptions about the other (Oh, 2016). Previous research has suggested that an RTCA based around a war documentary was successful at promoting better intergroup relations between Japanese and South Korean students (Oh, Choi, Yamamoto, 2014).

Although the RTCA may offer a potentially useful means of promoting intergroup relations, a number of limiting issues relating to previous research should be considered. First, from a theoretical perspective, previous studies have not situated the RTCA within the framework of intergroup contact or, for that any matter, any comprehensive psychological framework for understanding intergroup relations. While some discussions of the RTCA borrow idiosyncratic elements of the contact hypothesis, such as changing norms of behaviour (Yamamoto, 2017), the lack of clear theoretical framework limits scholarly understanding of the mechanisms that underpin any change in intergroup relations. Second, assessments of positive change in intergroup relations in RTCA studies have been limited to subjective interpretations of comments provided by participants (Oh, 2017), which may be subject to researcher bias. Finally, previous RTCA studies have been limited to participants from different national groups (Oh et al., 2014) and the efficacy of the RTCA methodology has not been examined *vis-à-vis* individuals from different social identity groups within the same nation.

**The Malaysian Context**

Here, we used the RTCA paradigm to develop an intervention aimed at promoting more positive intergroup relations among members of different ethnic groups living in the same national context. Specifically, we conducted our work in Malaysia, an ethnically heterogeneous Southeast Asian nation in which ethnicity is an important facet of socio-political and economic life. Demographically, Malaysia’s population comprises many different ethnic groups, of which Malays are the majority (about 55%) and where large minorities of Chinese (about 26%) and Indians (about 8%) also exist. Since 1971, Malaysian Malays have been accorded *Bumiputera* (literally “sons of the soil”) status, which brings privileges in terms of priority in certain occupational sectors (e.g., the civil service), housing, business licences, and university admission, and have caused dissatisfaction among non-*Bumiputeras* (Christie & Noor, 2012). Economically, however, *Bumiputeras* and Malays in particular remain over-represented among those living in poverty, while the Chinese have historically dominated the business and commercial sectors (Jomo, 2004). Socially, inter-ethnic marriages are rare and ethnic segregation has become an increasingly common feature of Malaysian life, particularly as ethno-religious differences are entrenched in the education system, through linguistic barriers, and in communal politics (Noor & Leong, 2013; Raman & Tan, 2010).

In short, although the different ethnic groups that comprise Malaysian citizenry share a common pool of generalised symbols and values derived from nationhood, ethnic social identity – including exclusive languages, cultures, and religions – remains an important constituent of individual Malaysian psyche (Wan Norhasinah, 2011). Importantly, scholars have highlighted shifts away from national integration and towards ethnic polarisation since the 1960s, but particularly in the past two decades (Ali, 2008; Holst, 2012; Verkuyten & Khan, 2012). In particular, this has involved a deterioration of ethnic relations and increased inter-ethnic animosity between Malays and Chinese, as these groups struggle over the cultural constituents of national identity, a share of political power, and the distribution of economic wealth (Buttny, Hashim, & Kaur, 2006; Fernandez & Coyle, 2018). Indeed, previous research with Malaysian Malays and Chinese has shown that in-groups are perceived more positively than out-groups (e.g., in terms of warmth and competence) (Janssen, Verkuyten, & Khan, 2015; see also Christie & Noor, 2017), which may affect inter-ethnic relations (Ward & Hewstone, 1985).

Importantly, a small handful of studies have examined the efficacy of contact at improving intergroup relations between different ethnic groups in Malaysia. For example, several studies have shown that a contact-based nation-building exercise (the Malaysian National Service Programme) improved out-group attitudes (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, Little, & Lang, 2014), although effects were no stronger than that attained by a control group (Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2012). Another study reported that when paired Malay and Chinese individuals worked together on a common task, there was a prospective reduction in prejudice towards the other ethnic group, but only when the task was conducted face-to-face (Mustafa & Poh, 2019). Other relevant work has suggested that levels of ethnic segregation on university campuses in Malaysia are very high and that greater inter-ethnic contact between Malay and Chinese students was associated with higher out-group understanding (Mustapha, 2009), more positive out-group attitudes (Tamam, 2009), and inter-ethnic sensitivity (Tamam & Strauss, 2017), although effects were relatively weak.

**The Present Study**

Given the equivocal findings from studies that have tested the contact hypothesis in Malaysia and the generally weak effects that have been reported, developing alternative intervention methods for promoting improved inter-ethnic relations are urgently required. Indeed, it has been suggested that many young Malaysians appreciate the need for national unity, but have limited opportunities for inter-ethnic contact (Buttny & Hashim, 2015; Zainal & Mohamad Salleh, 2010). In the present study, therefore, we evaluated the efficacy of the RTCA paradigm in improving inter-ethnic relations in Malaysian Malay and Chinese university students (i.e., members of different social identity groups from the same national context). In this sense, we provide an extension of previous studies RTCA studies, which have been limited to assessments of inter-cultural relations in participants from different national groups. In addition, so as to avoid an over-reliance on subjective interpretations of participant commentary, we provide a more robust analysis of qualitative data than in previous RTCA studies and also asked participants to complete a measure of ethnocultural empathy before and after the delivery of the intervention. Based on previous meta-analytic work regarding the contact hypothesis generally (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and the RTCA method specifically (Oh, 2016, 2017; Oh et al., 2014), we expected that the RTCA in the present work would result in significantly improved inter-ethnic understanding and empathy in Malaysian Malays and Chinese.

**Method**

**Design**

Because previous research has not provided a standardised RTCA methodology, we followed the basic paradigm (Oh, 2017; Yamamoto, 2017), but adapted it for our purposes. Specifically, Malaysian Malay and Chinese participants completed a measure of inter-ethnic empathy before watching a carefully-selected film. Following the film, they were asked to provide written answers in response to a series of open-ended questions based on the narratives presented in the film. Two weeks later, they were asked to return to the laboratory, where they were presented with a summary of the group’s written responses, which was used as the basis for a guided group discussion. Following the discussion, participants were asked to provide a second set of written answers in response to open-ended questions focused on the group discussion. These responses were also summarised and presented to participants in a final group setting, held four weeks after the film-viewing, so as to facilitate a final group discussion. Following this, participants were asked to complete the same measure of inter-ethnic empathy as before.

**Participants**

Participants of the study were 87 Malaysian citizens (50 women, 37 men) enrolled on undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at three universities in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. Of the total sample, 44 were Malay and 43 were Chinese. Participants ranged in age from 20 to 35 years (*M* = 24.61, *SD* = 3.42) and the majority were enrolled on undergraduate degree programmes (69.0%).

**Film Selection**

The film we selected for use in the RTCA was *Sepet* (Kassim, Shukri, & Ahmad, 2004), which literally translates as “slit eyes” (a derogatory term used to refer to Chinese individuals in Malaysia). The film presents a fictional narrative of an inter-ethnic romance between a Chinese vendor (Ah Loong) and a Malay schoolgirl (Orked) and thus provides a useful basis to discursively explore inter-ethnic relations in the Malaysian context (Ang, 2007). Beyond the inter-ethnic romance at the heart of the film, *Sepet* also displays Malaysia’s multiculturalism in various ways, including the use of multiple languages and code-switching between languages, music selection representing different ethno-cultural backgrounds, and the depiction of historical and contemporary inter-ethnic mingling. Additional reasons for selecting *Sepet* include its politically progressive plot and its subversion of common ethnic stereotypes (e.g., Malay Muslim characters who are not piously religious or who watch Chinese soap operas) and gender roles (Orked is seen transgressing traditional gender role and sexual norms; Omar, 2011), as well as explicit portrayals of racism and ethnic discrimination (Sim, 2009). Finally, because of its release date, participants in the present study were unlikely to have watched the film prior to the study.

**Open-Ended, Qualitative Questions**

Following the film viewing and the first group discussion, participants were asked to provide written responses to open-ended questions. We used this response method because it allows participants to express opinions while minimising researcher interference (Schuman & Presser, 1996). Open-ended questions also increased the likelihood of discovering responses that we may not have considered *a priori*.

**Post-film assessment**. Questions for the first session were developed through a process of consensual discussion between all authors and through a consultation of the relevant literature (Oh, 2017; Yamamoto, 2017) by the first author. A total of six questions were generated: (a) two questions asked participants to identify what they liked and disliked about *Sepet*; (b) one question asked about the impact that watching the film had on how participants felt, viewed, or thought about other ethnic groups; (c) one question asked about the impact of watching the film on participants in general (e.g., their mood); (d) one question asked whether participants would recommend the film to their friends or family and what benefits they might experience, and; (e) a final question asked if participants had anything else to add.

**First group discussion**. Following the first group discussion, participants were asked to provide written responses to six open-ended questions, developed based on an initial reading of the earlier written responses by the first author and a consensual discussion between the first four authors. These questions covered: (a) general impressions of the group discussion; (b) aspects of the group discussion that were liked or disliked; (c) the impact the discussion had on how participants felt, viewed, or thought about other ethnic groups; (d) the impact of the group discussion on participants’ feelings in general (e.g., their mood); (e) the extent to which the group discussion allowed participants to voice everything they felt or wanted to say, and; (e) whether participants had anything else to add.

**Data treatment and analyses.** Data from the open-ended questions were analysed using qualitative content coding analysis, which allows for the development of a coding scheme through comparison of participant responses to categories (Neuendorf, 2002). The first author (a Malaysian, male Professor of Psychology with expertise in qualitative content coding) began by reviewing the transcripts several times and generating a coding scheme. New codes were generated when any text did not fit with existing categories and analysis proceeded until all transcripts from each session had been analysed. Examples of each coded were used to develop labels and conceptual descriptions that summarised the meaning of each label. Next, the first author recoded the data in accordance with the final coding structure. Finally, the second to fourth authors (female Malaysian researchers with expertise in qualitative research; two Malays and one Chinese) analysed the transcripts and labelled each response according to the identified codes. Inter-rater agreement between the first author and the second to fourth authors was measured using Cohen’s κ, with values ≤ .67 indicating lack of agreement, .68-.80 indicate fair agreement, and .81-1.00 indicate substantial agreement (Krippendorf, 1980).

**Quantitative Assessment**

**Ethnocultural empathy.** Before and after the final sessions, participants were asked to complete the 31-item Scale of Ethnocultural Empathy (SEE; Wang et al., 2003), a self-report measure of one’s empathy toward people of racial and ethnic backgrounds different from one’s own along four dimensions: Empathic Feeling and Expression (15 items; sample item: “I share the anger of those who face injustice because of their racial and ethnic backgrounds”); Empathic Perspective Taking (7 items; sample item: “It is easy for me to understand what it would feel like to be a person of another racial or ethnic background other than my own”); Acceptance of Cultural Differences (5 items; sample item: “I don’t understand why people of different racial or ethnic backgrounds enjoy wearing traditional clothing”; reverse-coded), and; Empathic Awareness (4 items; sample item: “I am aware of how society differentially treats racial or ethnic groups other than my own”). All items were completed in English and were rated on a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*). Mean subscale scores were computed following reverse-coding of 12 items. Wang and colleagues (2003) reported that SEE scores had good factorial validity, adequate internal consistency, good test-retest reliability up to two weeks, and good convergent validity. Internal consistency, as assessed by omega, was adequate across all subscales and testing sessions in the present study (ω ≥ .71).

**Data treatment and analyses.** Data were pooled across sex for analyses. To compare SEE subscale scores from before the first session with scores from after the final session, we computed a series of 2 x 2 mixed analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with participant ethnicity as a between-groups factor and testing session as a within-groups factor. Effect sizes were interpreted following Cohen’s (1988) recommendation that ηp2 of about .01 should be considered small, .03 as medium, and ≥ .06 as large.

**Procedure**

Ethics approval for the project was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at Perdana University (approval number: PU IRBHR0183). Potential participants were recruited via direct approaches by the second to fourth authors at areas of congregate activities at three Malaysian universities. To be eligible, participants had to be of adult age, a Malaysian citizen, of Malay or Chinese ancestry, and fluent in English. A total of 127 invitations to participate were made, resulting in a participation acceptance rate of 68.5%. Those who agreed to participate were invited to a laboratory setting in March 2019, where they provided written informed consent and completed the SEE individually in a private setting. They were then invited to watch *Sepet* (uninterrupted except for a 15 min break halfway through the film) in six groups that were balanced for sex and ethnicity (see Table 1). Following the film, participants were asked to individually complete a three-page paper-and-pencil questionnaire containing the six post-film questions described above. A summary of these written responses was prepared by the first author.

Two weeks later, participants returned to the laboratory, where they were read the summary. They then took part in a guided (by the second to fourth authors) group discussion based on an interview protocol developed consensually by the first to fourth authors and in the groups described in Table 1. The discussions took between 97 and 116 min to complete, were conducted in English (though in practice some code-switching between English and Malay occurred), and were digitally recorded (these data are not reported here). Following the discussion, participants were presented with a three-page, paper-and-pencil questionnaire containing the second set of open-ended questions described above. A summary of the responses was prepared by the first author. Two weeks later, participants returned to the lab for a final time, where they read the summary and participated in a guided group discussion based on an interview protocol developed by the first to fourth authors and using the same procedures as before. Following this group discussion, participants were asked to complete the SEE in a private setting. Finally, participants were provided with written debrief information. All participation was voluntary and participants who completed all three sessions received RM200 (about US$50).

**Results**

**Qualitative Data from First Testing Session**

**Aspects of *Sepet* that were liked.** Participants identified a range of aspects of the film that they liked or enjoyed. In total, 7 codes emerged in this analysis and the percentage of participants who reported each aspect is reported in Table 2, along with exemplar quotes for each code. Most participants liked the portrayal of the inter-racial relationship between Ah Loong and Orked (κ = .94), with participants frequently highlighting the power of love in transcending social identity boundaries. A majority of participants also liked depictions of multiculturalism in the film (κ = .91), such as the use of multiple languages, as well as the portrayal of family acceptance (κ = .83), particularly the way the parents of Ah Loong and Orked accepted their inter-racial relationship. A smaller number of participants enjoyed the portrayal of loyalty in friendship (κ = .87) and the open-mindedness of characters in the film (κ = .87). A small minority of participants liked the fact some characters in *Sepet* took a stand against racism (κ = .88) and the nostalgia-inducing elements of the film (κ = .84).

**Aspects of *Sepet* that were disliked.** In our analyses, we identified 7 codes relating to aspects of the film that were disliked (see Table 3). A majority of participants disliked the portrayal of perceived character flaws or criminal activity (κ = .86), such as scenes of attempted rape and domestic violence. Just under half of participants did not like the scenes that depicted moral, religious, or gender transgressions (κ = .82). A substantial minority of participants also did not like the film’s ambiguous ending (κ = .96) and the depiction of racism or discrimination in the film (κ = .92). Smaller numbers of participants did not like what was perceived as the stereotypical depiction of races (κ = .85). Finally, a small number of participants did not like the use of multiple languages in the film (κ = .94), which they felt made the film difficult to understand, or the relative absence in the film of races beyond Malay and Chinese (κ = .89).

**Impact of watching *Sepet*.** We identified 5 codes relating to participants’ stated impact of watching *Sepet* (see Table 4). First, a majority of participants reported positive feelings or emotions as a result of watching the film (κ = .81), including feeling touched and blessed, and happiness at seeing the inter-racial romance of Ah Loong and Orked. A majority of participants also said the film had challenged them to think about their previous beliefs or had changed their attitudes in some way (κ = .87), which included greater understanding, respect, or feelings of warmth toward other ethnic groups. A substantial minority of participants reported feelings of sadness or disappointment having watched the film (κ = .89), either because of the film’s plot or because the film highlighted experiences of racism and discrimination in Malaysia. Smaller numbers of participants said they felt proud after watching the film (κ = .93), either for Yasmin Ahmad’s courage in making the film or for living in a multi-racial society, or said they felt boredom when watching the film (κ = .91).

**Recommendation of the film to others**. Three codes were identified in terms of participants’ willingness to recommend the film to their friends and family (see Table 5). The majority of participants said they would recommend the film to others (κ = .95). Reasons for this primarily centred around the positive impacts that others would receive from watching the film, including changed perceptions and attitudes toward others races and better understanding of other races. A small number of participants said they would not recommend the film to others (κ = .95) because they did not feel their friends or family would benefit from being exposed to the film’s message of inter-racial tolerance, because they did not believe certain scenes would be appropriate, or because of language barriers. Only one participant said they were unsure about whether would recommend the film (κ = 1.00).

**Qualitative Data from Second Testing Session**

**Aspects of the group discussionthat were liked.** Five codes were identified and the percentage of participants who reported each aspect is reported in Table 6, along with exemplar quotes for each code. Most participants said the group discussion had been a positive experience, citing the willingness of group members to share and discuss their experiences as a key reason (κ = .84). A large number of participants also highlighted the mutual respect shown by participants during the group discussion as an important reason for their positive experiences (κ = .84). Just under a half of participants also said the opportunity to learn new perspectives or be exposed to different ideas was a reason they liked the group discussion (κ = .82). A smaller number of participants liked the safe space provided by the group discussion to discuss sensitive issues (κ = .88), with many participants highlighting the fact that such spaces were infrequently or never encountered in the daily lives. Finally, a small number of participants said they liked the group discussion because they felt their points-of-view were supported by others (κ = .90).

**Aspects of the group discussionthat were disliked.** The majority of participants said that there were no aspects of the discussion that they did not enjoy or did not identify any negative elements. Of those who did, we identified three major codes that were raised by a small minority of participants (see Table 7). These related to the domination of the group discussions by individuals (κ = .92), the fact that the discussions were perceived as being overly “safe” with participants unwilling to discuss issues that were too sensitive (κ = .94), and feeling triggered by sensitive topics (κ = .95).

**Impact of the group discussion.** We identified 4 codes relating to participants’ stated impact of the group discussion (see Table 8). A majority of participants said the discussion had impacted their feelings positively (κ = .88), either because of the experience of taking part in a discussion about race or because they felt the discussion had reminded them of their good fortune to live in a harmonious, multi-racial society. A majority of participants also said that the group discussion had broadened their minds, challenged their preconceptions, or changed their attitudes or opinions about an issue (κ = .82). Conversely, a minority of participants said the discussion had raised negative emotions or feelings (κ = .88), including sadness that racism and discrimination still occurred in Malaysia. A minority of participants said the discussion had caused them to feel pride (κ = .93), either because other participants were respectful during the discussion or because they lived in a multi-racial society.

**Ability to voice everything during discussion.** We also asked participants if they were able to voice everything they wanted to say during the group discussion and identified three codes (see Table 9). The majority of participants said that the group discussion format had allowed them to express everything that they had wanted to say (κ = .95). Conversely, a minority indicated that they felt uncomfortable talking about certain topics that were perceived as being too sensitive (κ = .94). Finally, a minority of participants gave mixed answers, agreeing that the format had facilitated open dialogue but that they felt inhibited because of their lack of proficiency in spoken English (κ = .96).

**Quantitative Analysis**

We computed a series of 2 x 2 mixed ANOVAs, with the SEE subscale scores as dependent variables, participant ethnicity as a between-groups factor, and testing session as a within-groups factor. Descriptive statistics are reported in Table 10. The first ANOVA with Empathic Feeling and Expression showed that there was no main effect of Ethnicity, *F*(1, 85) = 0.91, *p* = .344, ηp2 = .01, and no significant Ethnicity x Time interaction, *F*(1, 85) = 2.97, *p* = .088, ηp2 = .03. There was, however, a significant main effect of Time, *F*(1, 85) = 20.20, *p* < .001, ηp2 = .19, with scores being significantly higher at post-intervention. For Empathic Perspective-Taking, there was also no significant main effect of Ethnicity, *F*(1, 85) = 0.46, *p* = .498, ηp2 < .01, and no significant interaction, *F*(1, 85) = 0.23, *p* = .631, ηp2 < .01, though there was a significant main effect of Time, *F*(1, 85) = 11.47, *p* = .001, ηp2 = .11, with scores being significantly higher at post-intervention.

Likewise, when considering Acceptance of Cultural Difference scores, there was no main effect of Ethnicity, *F*(1, 85) = 0.15, *p* = .704, ηp2 < .01, and no significant interaction, *F*(1, 85) = 0.15, *p* = .704, ηp2 < .01. There was, however, a significant main effect of Time, *F*(1, 85) = 10.97, *p* = .001, ηp2 = .11, with scores being significantly higher at post-intervention. Finally, when scores on Empathic Awareness were entered into the ANOVA, we found no significant main effect of Ethnicity, *F*(1, 85) = 2.51, *p* = .117, ηp2 = .03, and no significant interaction, *F*(1, 85) = 0.22, *p* = .642, < .01. There was, however, a significant main effect of Time, *F*(1, 85) = 68.48, *p* < .001, ηp2 = .45, with scores being significantly higher after the final session.

**Discussion**

In the present study, we used the RTCA paradigm to develop an intervention aimed at promoting improved inter-ethnic understanding and empathy in the Malaysian context. Our deployment of the RTCA was broadly based on the finding that intergroup contact helps to reduce intergroup conflict and promote more positive relations between social identity groups (Pettigrew, 2016). In line with both previous studies using the RTCA method specifically (Oh, 2016, 2017; Oh et al., 2014) and studies of intergroup contact generally (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006), our results showed that the RTCA paradigm was effective at improving inter-ethnic understanding and empathy in Malaysian Malay and Chinese participants. Below, we discuss the study’s main findings in terms of the qualitative and quantitative data.

Within the RTCA paradigm, selection of an appropriate film is crucial, as it centres all subsequent group-based activities (Ito & Yamamoto, 2011). In the present work, we selected Yasmin Ahmad’s *Sepet* as our film of choice for reasons discussed above (i.e., its central narrative of an inter-ethnic romance, depiction of Malaysian multiculturalism, portrayals of racism and ethnic discrimination, and its subversion of common stereotypes). Analyses of the written responses following the film viewing suggested that this selection was an appropriate one, insofar as it generated a wide range of discursive points for subsequent discussion. Indeed, most participants liked the use of an inter-racial romance in the film, which allowed us to broach the topic of inter-racial harmony in group discussions, rather than raising this issue directly and immediately. Of course, there were elements of the film that were problematic, although these were mainly focused on issues of plot and character development.

Importantly, viewing *Sepet* in and of itself appeared to generate positive inter-group change, at least based on participants’ written responses. Beyond the positive feelings the film generated, a majority of participants indicated that the film had challenged them to think critically about previously-held beliefs about other ethnic groups, particularly in terms of their stereotypical conceptions. Importantly, these participants also indicated that watching the film had caused them to change their attitudes or opinions about the other ethnic group in some way. This included greater understanding, respect, and feelings of warmth toward other ethnic groups, as well as a stated willingness among some participants to change their behaviours in some way (e.g., to learn a new language, to take greater care in inter-ethnic interactions, or to find out more about other ethnic groups). Similar findings were reported by Oh (2017), who found that viewing a war documentary caused Japanese and Korean students to self-reflect and change their viewpoints toward one of harmonious co-existence.

Likewise, participants in this study appeared to find the group discussion in the second testing session a positive experience, particularly in terms of opportunities to share their own experiences and listen to the narratives of others. In part, this may be explained by the novelty of the task: many participants highlighted the fact that they have few opportunities to engage in dialogues about the socio-political impact of ethnicity, particularly with members of other ethnic groups. This is consistent with earlier studies suggesting that opportunities for inter-ethnic contact are limited for many young Malaysians, but also that they welcome such opportunities where available (Buttny & Hashim, 2015; Fernandez & Coyle, 2018; Zainal & Mohamad Salleh, 2010). Beyond mere opportunity, ensuring that these dialogues take place within safe spaces also appears to be important: participants in the present study emphasised the importance of mutual respect as a key contributor to their positive experience during the group discussions. In turn, the group discussions appeared to have positively impacted participants, with many participants indicating that they had changed their earlier attitudes, had their preconceptions about other ethnic groups challenged, or discovered a newfound willingness to learn about other cultures.

However, this is not to say the RTCA was experienced as uniformly positive by all participants. For a minority of participants, the group discussions elicited negative experiences, primarily because of concerns that the topics being discussed were sensitive or has the potential to cause upset. Indeed, a small number of participants indicated that they felt unable to speak freely during the group discussions because of fear that they might distress other participants. Thus, while there is clearly an appetite to discuss issues of national harmony (see also Buttny & Hashim, 2015; Fernandez & Coyle, 2018; Zainal & Mohamad Salleh, 2010), our results suggest that there may be subtle barriers to doing so practically. Such barriers may be mitigated through careful moderation of discussions that allows for disagreements of opinion to emerge while minimising the risk of negative outcomes. Overall, however, it should be noted that participants reported few negative experiences and most felt able to speak freely during the RTCA.

Stronger evidence of the benefits of this RTCA intervention comes from our quantitative data. Our results showed significantly higher ethnocultural empathy scores in post-intervention compared with pre-intervention. The largest improvement was found on the Empathic Awareness subscale, which includes items focused on awareness or knowledge that one has about the experiences of people of other ethnic groups, which is broadly consistent with the results of our qualitative analyses. Nevertheless, it should be noted that large improvements in SEE scores were found across all four subscales. This is particularly important when juxtaposed against the results of previous studies that have relied on inter-group contact interventions in Malaysia (e.g., Al Ramiah & Hewstone, 2012; Al Ramiah et al., 2014; Mustafa & Poh, 2019), which have generally reported small effects. Thus, it would seem that the RTCA paradigm has the potential to offer real and substantive improvements in ethnocultural empathy in the Malaysian context.

Capitalising on the findings of the present study will require careful consideration of the extent to which study-specific issues, such as the delivery and format of the intervention, can be generalised more broadly. For example, ensuring that group discussions are facilitated by trained practitioners, who are cognisant of potential sensitivities in discussing issues of race and religion, appeared to have been important in ensuring open and respectful dialogue among participants. Likewise, consideration will need to be given to language barriers, particularly where participants from different social identity groups do not share a common language. Here, we elected to conduct the group discussions in English, which is a widely used *lingua franca* in Malaysia, although it was notable that doing so meant that some participants did not feel comfortable voicing their opinions during the discussions as a result. Finally, careful selection of the film to be used in the RTCA is vital: our results suggest that *Sepet* is a good choice for use in Malaysian samples, although drawbacks include potentially sensitive scenes and plotlines that may be overly progressive for some individuals.

Furthermore, it is important to consider some limitations of the present work when considering its applicability more widely. First, our results are based on a sample of university students and it is uncertain to what extent similar findings would be obtained with community samples. Likewise, we only included Malay and Chinese participants, as these represent the two largest ethnic groups in Malaysia. In future work, it will be important to include participants from other ethnic groups, although this may also have implications for the film selection. Second, we cannot discount the possibility that our results were affected by a social desirability bias: given the nature of the RTCA paradigm, it is possible that participants were able to guess the study hypotheses and altered their responses accordingly, either to avoid standing out (e.g., by voicing unpopular opinions) or to appease the researchers. Given that participants were self-selecting, we also cannot rule out sampling biases, such as the possibility that our set of participants would have been more receptive to the RTCA intervention. This aspect of our study could be re-investigated by avoiding a reliance on a single-group pretest-posttest method; that, is, the inclusion of an appropriate control or comparison group may allow for a better understanding of the potential and limits of the RTCA methodology in future work. Nevertheless, it should be noted that the RTCA is primarily focuses on qualitative understandings of social identities (Oh, 2016) and the lack of a control group is not necessarily a design limitation.

Limiting issues notwithstanding, we suggest that our findings are important for several reasons. From a theoretical point-of-view, ours is the first study to demonstrate that the RTCA paradigm may be effective at promoting within-country intergroup understanding and empathy, which extends the available body of work on the RTCA method. In this vein, we have also advanced knowledge by clearly linking our work with the body of knowledge derived from the contact hypothesis. Doing so is important because previous RTCA studies have not clearly articulated their theoretical underpinnings (but see Yamamoto, 2017), though it seems plausible that the tenets of intergroup contact are relevant and applicable. From a practical point-of-view, our results highlight the potential utility of the RTCA paradigm in promoting inter-ethnic understanding and empathy, at least in Malaysian university students, among whom levels of ethnic segregation are known to be high (Mustapha, 2009). More generally, given scholarly concern about inter-ethnic hostility in Malaysia (e.g., Ali, 2008; Holst, 2012; Verkuyten & Khan, 2012), the availability of the RTCA method we describe here may prove useful for practitioners and policy-makers seeking relatively inexpensive and theoretically-grounded mechanisms of promoting more harmonious inter-ethnic relations.

**Compliance with Ethical Standards**

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**Conflicts of Interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

**Ethical Approval**

All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of Perdana University’s Institutional Review Board and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

**Informed Consent**

Written informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Table 1. *Breakdown of Groups by Sex and Ethnicity*.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Group 1 | Group 2 | Group 3 | Group 4 | Group 5 | Group 6 |
| Malay women | 6 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 4 |
| Malay men | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Chinese women | 3 | 4 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 3 |
| Chinese men | 3 | 2 | 4 | 4 | 6 | 3 |
| Total | 15 | 14 | 15 | 14 | 15 | 14 |

Table 2. *Percentage of Participants who Reported Each Aspect of The Film that Was Liked (Note: Quotes are Provided Verbatim)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Number and Percentage | Exemplar Quotations |
| Portrayal of inter-racial romance or relationships | 85 (97.7%) | * I like the love between the Chinese and the Malay. For me, love is not limited by the race, age, gender, religion. * This movie portrayed a positive environment of different cultures living under one flag, one state, one city. It shows how progressive the citizens develop tolerance toward other races, which is what I liked. |
| Multiculturalism and linguistic variation | 55 (63.2%) | * I like when they are using a lot of languages in the film that it makes the movie become more interesting, such as Hokkien, Cantonese, Chinese, English, Malay and so forth. * I love they used three different languages which is Malay, Chinese and English, especially when the Chinese family (the mom) fully used Malay language even the son replied in Chinese. This film proved that there is no barrier between Malay and Chinese. We can be good friends or even lover. |
| Family acceptance  and love | 47 (54.0%) | * The parent-child interactions in both Ah Loong’s and Orked’s cases are also nice, especially given how supportive the characters are. * Another thing that I like in this movie is how the parents of both male lead and female lead react after they know their children’s relationship. It is hard to have so supportive parents who put their children’s happiness as priority. |
| Friendship and loyalty | 26 (29.9%) | * The friendship between Jason and his friend was very touching and something to be admired. * The other aspect of the movie that I enjoyed most was the relationship of friendships that Jason and his friends had. They were such a loyal friend. |
| Open-mindedness of characters | 20 (22.9%) | * I like the way they film out the open minded preferences of some people that like cultures from other ethnicities. For example, Orked likes Chinese unconventional Kung Fu movies, Jason likes P. Ramlee collection. * They [Jason and Orked] are both open towards each other’s culture. Orked had no problem walking into a Chinese restaurant that serves pork. Orked loves Chinese food and Ah Leong loved old Malay films and songs. |
| Anti-racism | 10 (11.5%) | * Good thing is where they show characters standing up to the racist comments. * They [Orked and Jason] respect other in terms of their cultures. Besides, Orked stood up for Jason when her friend insulted him racially. |
| Nostalgia | 6 (6.9%) | * I like the atmosphere of the movie; the setting, the music, and the language used. It makes me recall of my younghood memories in Penang and also in Damansara. It is very peaceful those days. * It really brought me back to Ipoh. Besides, it also makes me reminiscing some of my memory living in multicultural village. |

Table 3. *Percentage of Participants who Reported Each Aspect of The Film that Was Disliked (Note: Quotes are Provided Verbatim)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Number and Percentage | Exemplar Quotations |
| Perceived character flaws or criminal activity | 53 (60.9%) | * I don’t like the scene of the Johari try to rape Orked. But that is the reality of life in Malaysia today. We are cruel and that aspect show the standard life of a man with no manners. * The aspects I did not like was regarding family drama where the main character’s father beat his mother. |
| Moral, religious, or gender transgression | 41 (47.1%) | * The social life of Orked and friends – how dare they simply touching, go clubbing although they are still students. * The Malay actors and actress are too open. For example, they just fine to wear *kain batik* and the scene where men and women hug each other” |
| Film’s ending | 33 (37.9%) | * I did not like the ending which I’m not sure whether Jason is still alive or not after accident. * I did not like the ending with a not clear ending message. |
| Portrayals of racism or discrimination | 29 (33.3%) | * I dislike the part where Orked was offered a scholarship but Jason wasn’t with better results than hers. It was not told in the story the reason why but a Malaysian would understood it as a special right for certain race. * Dislike how the characters in the movie are being stereotypic by calling the Chinese ‘*mata sepet*’ [slit eyes]. |
| Stereotypical portrayals of race | 15 (17.4%) | * I did not enjoy how it [the movie] tries to stereotypes the Chinese as a gang member despite trying to tackle the problem of racial stereotypes. * The aspects of the film I dislike from the film is the portrayal of Chinese ethnic in the film is quite bad including gangsterism, domestic violence, pregnancy before marriage and abortion. This is true and really happening in real time but the portrait of the Chinese character in this film is quite bad and may be misleading. |
| Invisibility of other races | 6 (6.9%) | * The absence of other ethnicity in the story, kind of deliberately excluding non-Malay and non-Chinese races. * The movie should be more multiracial by including and acknowledging Indian in Malaysia. |
| Use of multiple languages | 3 (3.4%) | * I didn’t understand certain words from other languages. * I don’t like how the film use so many language. Make it difficult to follow what is happening. |

Table 4. *Percentage of Participants who Reported Each Aspect of The Impact of Watching the Film (Note: Quotes are Provided Verbatim)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Number and Percentage | Exemplar Quotations |
| Positive feelings or emotions | 61 (70.1%) | * I was truly touched by the love story of Orked and Jason. Regardless of people’s opinion regarding inter-racial relationship, they still fall in love, share similarities and differences, enjoy and be themselves. * I feel blessed to be a Malaysian, to live in a country rich in cultures such as Baba Nyonya, Malays, and Chinese (Hokkien, Cantonese). |
| Challenged or changed attitudes | 51 (58.6%) | * It has altered how I think about inter-racial relationships, in that love takes many forms and does not discriminate, or as Orked says, ‘I like who want to like’. * My typical view towards Chinese is very negative, such as they very hate other race because they have ethnocentrism of their race. But after watching this film, I believe that not all of the Chinese is the same. |
| Sadness or disappointment | 36 (41.4%) | * After this movie, my feel very sad. This is because living in the world is difficult. But falling love with someone (different race or religious, same gender) that is not accepted by the other made our life more suffer” * I feel sad and alarmed when I was reminded that racial stereotypes still exist in our country. |
| Pride | 16 (18.4%) | * I feel proud that the director tried to create a movie that involved a love story between the different races. * I feel proud to live in a multiracial country because we have different experience compared to other country. |
| Boredom or frustration | 10 (11.4%) | * If anything, I feel rather frustrated with how fairy-tale like the story was. * I also think that the storyline of the film is a little boring. I am quite disappointed by the storyline because this is a very good subject. |

Table 5. *Percentage of Participants who Said They Would or Would Not Recommend the Film to Others (Note: Quotes are Provided Verbatim)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Number and Percentage | Exemplar Quotations |
| Would recommend | 73 (83.9%) | * Yes. For me I think my family do not really accept when there is a Chinese guy with a Malay lady. Perhaps through this movie, their mind would be changed and would not be so conservative. * Yes, I live in a family where they are racist towards other races. I am the only one who is not and I know it should be that way. It would show them how connections can be established with people who are in different races/ethnicities. |
| Would not recommend | 13 (14.9%) | * I come from a very mixed/multi-racial family and hence the message wouldn’t be relevant to us. * I don’t think I will recommend it because I don’t like many scene in this film like gangsterism, romantic, and so on. Also it not suitable for a child. |
| Unsure | 1 (1.1%) | * Maybe yes and maybe not… I think the movie is too sexy for Malay actor. I think people who watch this movie will enjoy as much as I do because it’s really rare to see different races fall in love together. |

Table 6. *Percentage of Participants who Reported Each Aspect of Group Discussion that Was Liked (Note: Quotes are Provided Verbatim)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Number and Percentage | Exemplar Quotations |
| Sharing of experiences | 72 (82.7%) | * For many questions, I only think of one answer which is from my point of view. But it’s interesting to listen to the other’s answers as I never thought of that. Thus, the discussion session is great. * Was really impressed with how open everyone was. Everyone was happy to tell their personal stories. It was a really good experience as I rarely have discussion like this. |
| Respect for one another | 55 (63.2%) | * All of them [participants] are open minded, accepting comments and try to solve the problems that arise smoothly and not cause a big fighting whether there is a common about racist or discrimination and sensitivity through races or religion. * I would like to press on the respectful among us when we trying to give our ideas and opinion. Everyone give their opinion in a good way without discriminate other opinion. |
| Exposure to new ideas or new learning | 43 (49.4%) | * I can hear different idea and information from others about the multi-racial relationship of the film and in Malaysia. * I can learn a lot about the negatives of racism based on the experiences that have been given in the group discussion. |
| Safe space | 34 (39.0%) | * I liked the discussion which relate with religions and language where is it difficult for us to discuss with others outside of this room. * I liked the professionalism that everything is confidential and the speaker’s identity will not be exposed (I hope). I liked the atmosphere where everyone can voice out freely. These are not something we can do often. |
| Felt supported | 12 (13.7%) | * I liked the aspect when other racial support or giving positive statements related to my ethnic as well as every Malaysian. * For me it is nice to hear others say things I agreed with or that support by ethnics. |

Table 7. *Percentage of Participants who Reported Each Aspect of Group Discussion that Was Disliked (Note: Quotes are Provided Verbatim)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Number and Percentage | Exemplar Quotations |
| Domination of discussion by individuals | 7 (8.0%) | * I dislike when one respondent is overpowering the discussion. Everyone should have the opportunity to speak. * I dislike where some people elaborate too long on their answers until it has gone out of topic. |
| Discussion overly safe | 6 (6.9%) | * What I disliked about the group is how everyone hesitates to response to the moderator’s questions/topics out of fear of offending other participants. * Most participants gave ‘safe’ answers that might be difficult to become more deep, thus making each topic and answers only a surface deep. |
| Felt triggered or discussion too sensitive | 2 (2.3%) | * There might be an issue that being discussed that might triggered other races. As example, Malay is lazy, Chinese and Indian question their nationality and more. * I dislikes the way of people in group want equity. |

Table 8. *Percentage of Participants who Reported on the Impact of the Group Discussion. Note: Quotes are Provided Verbatim)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Number and Percentage | Exemplar Quotations |
| Positive feelings or emotions | 62 (71.2%) | * The impact on me is positive because I always dreamed about this issues of racist or ethnic groups can be solve and becoming end. So if there is any discussion that can open up my mind and help to support solving this issue, I am gladly want to participate. * I feel happy as this provide a platform for me to express my thoughts. I also feel happy because I rarely met a situation where we can discuss openly for this issue without flipping table” |
| Challenged preconceptions or changed perspective | 55 (63.2%) | * The group discussion driven my thinking to interact more with each other to learn and understand what they are doing in their culture and we can exchange our real life practical experience to improve or strengthen inter-racial relationship and friendship. * This discussion makes me felt more understanding and tolerant with other races because they explain some of the dissatisfaction they have on my race. The explanation gives me rethink about the mentality that I have and I should incorporate some of their ideas into my life values. |
| Negative feelings | 22 (25.3%) | * I feel troubled. Yet, it is beautiful to have a multi-race and culture country but there would be an ugly side as well. There are only a few of us here, and these issues would get us tension, what about when the whole of Malaysia is involved? I’m worried for our country. * From this group discussion, I can feel and think that still have person in Malaysia that have racism issue. I feel a bit disappointed because before I thought there is no such issue. |
| Pride | 9 (10.3%) | * I feel relieved and proud that the other speakers from different races/religions can accept and understand my religion/race’s restrictions” * I feel proud to be Malaysian because of adaptability, know more languages, and more knowledge towards different cultural background. |

Table 9. *Percentage of Participants who Reported Being Able to Voice Everything They Wanted to Say During the Group Discussion (Note: Quotes are Provided Verbatim)*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Code | Number and Percentage | Exemplar Quotations |
| Able | 70 (80.4%) | * I feel the group discussion is good as it allows us to express our opinions by keeping our identity anonymous. Hence, it is comfortable for me to voice out everything I felt to say. * Yes! This group discussion really allowed me to speak openly. I really like this kind of discussion very well where I can speak openly without others’ judgement. |
| Unable | 9 (10.3%) | * There are things that I did not voice because that is what I think or experienced, and not according to fact/statistic. Therefore I did not say it. For example, more Malays are accepted into [university] compared to Chinese. * No. There are participants from other races so it not polite to say something that may offend them. |
| Mixed | 8 (9.2%) | * Sometimes there is a view that what I want to speak up cannot be said as I am not confident in my English. * I am very comfortable. However, there are language limitation to explain my thought where my vocabulary in English are not so good. |

Table 10. *Descriptive Statistics (Means and Standard Deviations in Parentheses) for the Quantitative Data Collected in the Present Study*.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Subscale | Pre-RTCA | | Post-RTCA | |
|  | Malay | Chinese | Malay | Chinese |
| Empathic Feeling and Expression | 4.06 (0.52) | 4.29 (0.51) | 4.53 (0.67) | 4.49 (0.51) |
| Empathic Perspective-Taking | 4.04 (0.57) | 4.15 (0.52) | 4.29 (0.61) | 4.33 (0.58) |
| Acceptance of Cultural Differences | 4.21 (0.68) | 4.38 (0.65) | 4.44 (0.61) | 4.55 (0.58) |
| Empathic Awareness | 4.18 (0.71) | 3.94 (0.75) | 4.81 (0.71) | 4.72 (0.66) |

*Note*. RTCA = Round Table Cinema Activity.