

# Parents' Role in the Ethnic Socialization of Youth in Malaysia

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**Abstract:** The study examines the influence of the ethnic background on the parents' role in the ethnic socialization of youths in Malaysia. A survey of 894 youths, who were aged 18–40 years, and who were from Malay, Chinese, Indigenous, and Indian ethnic backgrounds, was conducted. The questionnaire results show moderate levels of ethnic affiliation and parental socialization. The influence of other people in the ethnic socialization, namely, relatives other than the parents, as well as friends and other adults (teachers, neighbors, and people of the same religion), was limited. The parents of the youths were engaged in more positive ethnic socialization than negative ethnic socialization. The participants' parents talked to them about cultural pluralism and cultural pride from once to several times a year, but the Indian participants reported frequencies of more than once per month. Conversations that prepared the participants for bias and that promoted mistrust occurred one to two times a year, but they occurred up to several times a year for the Indian participants. The parents of the Indigenous, Malay, and Chinese participants engaged in less frequent ethnic socialization. As a majority group, the Malay parents may have felt secure in their privileged status; however, the groups with immigrant backgrounds responded to their marginalized status in divergent ways with respect to the activeness of the parental ethnic socialization.

**Keywords:** parent; political socialization; youth; Malaysia



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## 1. Introduction

Ethnic groups negotiate culturally diverse contexts in the development of their ethnicity, which includes making meaning in terms of discrimination and bias. The members of an ethnic group are defined as a group of people who share a common culture, religion, language, or nationality [1]. In countries such as Malaysia, children grow up knowing that ethnic identity is “the most important point of reference right down to everyday conversations in which the assertion of one's own and the other's *bangsa* [ethnic group]-background is part and parcel of getting to know each other” [2]. Holst (2012) cites supermarket loyalty forms that require information on ethnic affiliations as an example of how important this identity is to Malaysians [2]. The definition of the self as a member of an ethnic group governs behavior in interethnic relations, and shapes the attitudes and beliefs about social issues, the government, and other aspects of life. Out of the 30 million people that make up the Malaysian population, Malay and Indigenous people account for 69.8%, but the minority groups with immigrant origins have smaller populations (Chinese, 22.4%; Indian, 6.8%; Other, 1%) [3]. The Malay dominate the ruling government and the civil service, and they have affirmative action privileges in education, financial assistance, business shares, and land ownership. The Malaysians of Chinese and Indian descent have to acknowledge *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance) and cultural supremacy. The Malay language is the official language, and Islam is the official religion, of Malaysia. The Malaysian government encourages ethnic integration and tolerance, and it espouses cultural assimilation, but the goal has not yet been achieved. Various ethnic groups in Malaysia have been careful about ethnic relations in order to avoid a repeat of the May 1969 Chinese–Malay clash and, thus far, there have been no incidents involving bloodshed.

The flux in local and international situations is unsettling the fragile equilibrium of ethnic relations. Ethnically charged issues are now more openly reported in news reports. In Malaysia, for example, the minority ethnic groups who had once accepted their less privileged positions have come forward to demand access to privileges, which hitherto had been the domain of the majority Malay, particularly after the 14th general election on 9 May 2018 brought a historic end to the 60-year rule by the Barisan Nasional coalition. Examples include the right of Chinese students to enter Universiti Teknologi MARA (which is set up to cater to the educational needs of the Malay and Indigenous students), and the recognition of a Chinese-based Unified Examination Certificate (UEC) for entry into public universities (which is conventionally performed through the Malaysian Certificate of Examination (SPM) and the Higher School Certificate (STPM)). Both demands were rejected, not explicitly, but through the absence of action. The partisan politics have been largely based on ethnic concerns [4]. The last decade saw attempts to break down the demarcations through the fielding of political candidates who came from ethnic groups that were different from that of the majority of the political party membership, but who still voted along ethnic rather than party lines.

The ethnic socialization of the Malaysian youth warrants research because more young adults (18–29 years old) believe that racial or ethnic minorities face discrimination compared to older age groups, and that this is irrespective of all racial/ethnic backgrounds [5]. It is particularly important to understand how youths from different ethnic groups in Malaysia are socialized to respond to ethnic pluralism and discrimination because such feelings influence voting patterns. Young voters were touted as the kingmakers in the 14th general election in 2018, which toppled the Barisan Nasional coalition government and brought an end to a 60-year rule [6]. Young voters comprised 41% of the total voters, and the voting age was 21 at that time (however, it was amended to 18 years old on 10 September 2019). Speculations also abound as to whether voters from different ethnic groups exhibit different voting patterns. On the basis of an analysis of interviews, Rahman (2018) reports that some young voters went against parental objections and supported the opposition, and that urban Malays supported the reform agenda in the 14th general election [7]. On the basis of an analysis of the voting patterns in the two earlier general elections (2008 and 2013), Thock and Yan (2018) show that Chinese voters across the country voted for change and that they supported the opposition party [8]. Voting behavior is linked to ethnic identity and ethnic tolerance [9]. Voting patterns are indicative of the different ethnic socializations that are experienced by different ethnic groups. An understanding of how youths from different ethnic groups have been socialized by their parents would shed light on why Malay and non-Malay students choose different models of ethnic integration [10,11], and would uncover the reasons why minority groups are unwilling to assimilate into the majority culture.

This descriptive study examines the influence of the ethnic background on the parents' role in the ethnic socialization of the youth in Malaysia. The specific aspects examined are: (1) The parental ethnic socialization in terms of pluralism, cultural pride, the preparation for bias, and the promotion of mistrust; (2) The influence of other agents of ethnic socialization; and (3) The ethnic affiliation.

The term, "ethnic group", will be used to refer to the Malay, Chinese, Indigenous, and Indian. "Indigenous" is a category that comprises the Iban, Bidayuh, and Melanau, as well as other groups from Sarawak, the Kadazandusun, Bajau, and other groups from Sabah.

## 2. Literature Review

Parents have been the primary agent of ethnic socialization processes [12]. "Through cultural socialization, members learn about the beliefs, values, norms and traditions of their ethnic groups" [13]. Hughes et al. (2006) note that the studies on ethnic socialization are mainly focused on the cultural retention, identity achievement, and in-group affiliations of the children of immigrant parents, who are under pressure to assimilate to the dominant society [12]. Friends largely reinforce the ethnic identity that is instilled by the parents

because close friends are usually from the same ethnic group, on the basis of research conducted on youths in universities [14,15] and schools [16]. Despite the undisputed role of the parents in ethnic socialization, there are still gaps in the knowledge that pertain to the ethnic socialization process. Hughes et al. (2006) point out that there is limited empirical knowledge about the normative developmental and family processes that may be unique to various ethnic groups, even though they may live in the same country or may be included in the same sociopolitical entity [12]. This includes knowledge about how parents socialize their children to handle societal discrimination and bias, and about how they teach their children to develop pride in their ethnic identity, which is particularly relevant in the case of ethnic minority groups. The other contents of the parents' socialization included "cultural heritage and group social status", and "discussions about the prevalence of stereotypes and discrimination based on phenotypic characteristics, language competencies, and other group characteristics" [12]. In the ethnic studies in Malaysia, the attention has been focused on the outcome rather than on the ethnic socialization process (for example, the markers of ethnic identity for different ethnic groups) [17–20].

In addition, the negative aspects of ethnic socialization, such as discrimination and bias, are hardly researched in Malaysia compared to the positive aspects, such as cultural pride and heritage, because of the precarious ethnic relations. For example, Mustapha et al. (2009) report that the students in universities that are located near the capital city of Kuala Lumpur have some knowledge, appreciation, and understanding of other ethnic groups [15]. Tamring et al. (2020) report moderate levels of ethnic integration among university students in Sabah [21]. In addition, the national day coverage in the Malaysian newspapers revolves around the positive values associated with patriotism [22]. Messages on patriotism and harmony among ethnic groups are frequently disseminated in the news and in school textbooks. The focus on cultural pluralism is understandable because, as Alatas (1999) states, the developing interest in, the compassion for, and the understanding of the cultures of other ethnic groups can minimize ethnic conflicts and cleavages [23]. Tamam, Tien, Idris, and Hamzah (2006) report that the ethnic tolerance of Malaysian youths that were aged 15–25 years was moderate to high [24]. The youths practiced moderate levels of tolerant behavior in dealing with diversity, differences, and conflicts (behavior), a willingness to understand cultural differences and interethnic relations issues (cognition), and a willingness to accept the views on life in a multiethnic society and the ways of promoting interethnic integration (attitude). In the study, 16% percent of the variance in the behavioral component of ethnic tolerance can be explained by the exposure to public affairs news, and by the cognitive and the attitudinal components of ethnic tolerance.

However, an understanding of negative ethnic socialization and ethnic conflicts is possibly more crucial because positive ethnic socialization is already well researched. Discrimination, and the negative emotions that arise from it, can affect not only societal ethnic relations, but also individual well-being. Thus far, the topic of discrimination has been broached by Jawan et al. (2020) [14]. Their findings show that 38% of the students from three West Malaysian universities had had racist statements directed at them, and another 22% had experienced discriminatory action. While the majority might not have been at the receiving end of the discrimination, Jawan et al. (2020) found that 63% had heard racist remarks that were targeted at the people around them [14]. Generally, Malaysians feel uncomfortable when confronting the negative aspects of ethnic relations, and the media often allude to the Chinese–Malay riot of 13 May 1969 in order to remind the public to preserve outwardly harmonious ethnic relations. The minority groups are bound by the agreement of political leaders that are engaged in postindependence negotiations on the citizenship conditions of the Chinese and Indian immigrants, one of which is to accept *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance). This means that the Chinese and the Indians "have to accept 'special Malay privileges' in education and government service, the Malay royalty as their ruler, Islam as the official religion and Malay language as the official language" [25]. An aspect of discrimination in Malaysia that has been extensively researched is the discrimination in higher education enrolments [26–29]. Minority ethnic

groups are expected to suppress their feelings about the unfairness and to refrain from questioning Malay dominance in order to avoid stoking ethnic conflict.

### 3. Method of the Study

This descriptive study focuses on Malaysian youths from various ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds. The participants were 894 youths that were aged 18–40 years and that were living in Malaysia (65.77% females, 34.23% males; average age: 25.29, Table 1). At the time of the study, a “youth” in Malaysia was defined as anyone between the age of 15 and 40 years, according to the 1997 National Youth Development Policy [30]. However, since December 2019, “youth” in Malaysia has been redefined to include those that were aged 15–30 years on 3 July 2019, on the basis of an amendment to the Youth Societies and Youth Development Act (Amendment) 2019 (Act 668) [31].

**Table 1.** Demographic information of participants ( $n = 894$ ).

Demographic Information	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	588	65.77
	Male	306	34.23
Age (average)			25.29
Own Ethnicity	Malay	351	39.26
	Indigenous	264	29.53
	Chinese	249	27.85
	Indian	21	2.35
	Other <sup>1</sup>	9	1.01
Father’s Ethnicity	Malay	343	38.37
	Indigenous	267	29.87
	Chinese	246	27.52
	Indian	26	2.91
	Other	12	1.34
Mother’s Ethnicity	Malay	337	37.70
	Indigenous	276	30.87
	Chinese	237	26.51
	Indian	25	2.80
	Other	19	2.12
Mixed marriage	Yes	429	47.99
	No	452	50.56
	(Not answered)	13	1.45
Highest Education	Primary 6	8	0.90
	Form 3	11	1.23
	Form 5	352	39.37
	Form 6/Matriculation	365	40.83
	Degree or higher	104	11.63
	(Not answered)	4	0.45
Father’s highest education	None	48	5.37
	Primary 6	196	21.92
	Form 3	117	13.09
	Form 5	277	30.98
	Form 6/Matriculation	120	13.42
	Degree or higher	98	10.96
	(Not answered)	36	4.03

Table 1. Cont.

Demographic Information	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Mother's highest education	None	59	6.60
	Primary 6 or lower	234	26.17
	Form 3	122	13.65
	Form 5	272	30.42
	Form 6/Matriculation	114	12.75
	Degree or higher	52	5.82
	(Not answered)	39	4.36
Socioeconomic status <sup>2</sup>	Low	714	79.86
	Middle	177	19.80
	High	3	0.34

<sup>1</sup> "Other" refers to other ethnic groups, which are grouped together because the individual numbers are too small for comparison purposes. <sup>2</sup> "Socioeconomic status" is based on occupation because these are linked in Malaysia. For example, those with low socioeconomic statuses are blue-collar workers, food vendors, and clerks, while those with middle socioeconomic statuses work in jobs that require degrees, such as teaching, information technology, engineering, and management. When they reach senior positions, they might attain the high socioeconomic statuses enjoyed by CEOs and the top managers and owners of big companies.

The larger percentage of females in the study is similar to the general Malaysian student population, which is 58.74% female, and 41.26% male [32]. A total of 39.26% of the youth were Malay, and 29.53% were Indigenous, while the Chinese made up 27.83%, and the Indian made up 2.35%. Most of the youths had completed Form 5 and Form 6 of the matriculation education (39.37% and 40.83%, respectively), which shows an improvement over their parents' highest educational levels, which were mostly primary school and Form 5. A total of 900 questionnaires were collected, but 6 were omitted because of missing responses, and because the ages of the participants were outside of the range.

The 45-item questionnaire comprised measures about parental ethnic socialization (16 items, [33]), other agents of ethnic socialization (3 items), ethnic affiliation (3 items, [34]), and demographic information (13 items). The questionnaire has internal consistency, as is shown by the Cronbach alpha value for the parental socialization measure from Hughes and Johnson (2001) [33], which is 0.9336, as well as the self-constructed measure of the other agents of ethnic socialization, which is 0.7349. The ethnic affiliation measure, from Hughes (2003) [34], has a moderate Cronbach alpha value of 0.6695.

The questionnaire was paper based and was prepared in English and Malay. The back translation and verification were conducted by a lecturer in Malay linguistics to ensure equivalence of meaning. The English version of the questionnaire was translated to Malay by a coresearcher in the research group. A Malay linguistics lecturer translated the Malay version back to English and checked the accuracy of the back-translated version with the original English version to ensure that the Malay version of the questionnaire was accurate, and that it was written in good language. The items in the questionnaire are shown in Tables 2–4, and the notes for the tables show the response scales and the scoring.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants within the youth age range that were living in the Kuching and Kota Samarahan divisions of Sarawak, which is an East Malaysian state that is located on Borneo Kalimantan Island. However, the participants originated from all over Malaysia, and they were either studying or working in Sarawak.

The researcher and the trained research assistants administered the questionnaires. The purpose of the study, the voluntary participation, and the confidentiality and anonymity of the research reports were explained. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants prior to the study. The procedures were in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000 (5). The questionnaire items were on nonsensitive matters, and the participants were not harmed from their participation in the study. The data collection took about six months.

**Table 2.** Mean scores showing frequencies of parental ethnic socialization activities ( $n = 894$ ).

Item	Malay ( $n = 351$ )		Chinese ( $n = 249$ )		Indigenous ( $n = 264$ )		Indian ( $n = 21$ )		Other ( $n = 9$ )	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
CULTURAL PLURALISM (average)	2.65		2.39		2.83		4.05		3.60	
1. My parents have talked to me about important people or events in the histories of different ethnic groups, other than my own.	2.85	1.82	2.53	1.65	2.86	1.74	3.48	2.27	3.33	1.87
2. My parents have encouraged me to read books about other ethnic groups.	2.00	1.69	1.77	1.58	2.15	1.77	3.24	2.53	2.67	1.94
3. My parents have talked to me about the discrimination against an ethnic group that is not my own.	2.03	1.76	2.16	1.60	2.40	1.71	3.76	2.69	2.67	1.80
4. My parents have engaged in or stated things to show that all are equal, regardless of race.	3.22	1.67	2.80	1.65	3.34	1.70	5.10	2.21	4.56	2.06
5. My parents have said that different ethnic groups should try to understand each other so that they can get along.	3.15	1.74	2.71	1.60	3.38	1.80	4.67	2.03	4.78	2.17
CULTURAL PRIDE (average)	2.46		2.14		2.56		3.82		2.44	
6. My parents have talked to me about important people or events in my ethnic group's history.	2.93	1.84	2.50	1.63	2.91	1.81	4.62	1.86	3.00	2.55
7. My parents have explained to me something on TV that showed discrimination against my own ethnic group.	2.51	1.76	2.12	1.53	2.48	1.88	3.29	2.37	2.22	1.83
8. My parents have talked to me about discrimination against my own ethnic group.	2.41	2.07	2.18	1.97	2.45	2.00	3.52	2.05	2.44	2.51
9. My parents have encouraged me to read books about my own ethnic group.	1.98	1.77	1.74	1.77	2.38	1.82	3.86	2.06	2.11	2.33
PREPARATION FOR BIAS (average)	1.91		2.23		2.48		3.38		2.20	
10. My parents have talked to me about others trying to limit me because of race.	1.77	1.79	2.23	1.85	2.18	2.04	3.57	2.06	2.22	2.40
11. My parents have told me I must be better in order to obtain the same rewards because of race.	1.91	1.87	2.22	1.74	2.50	1.91	2.95	2.49	2.00	2.24
12. My parents have told me that my ethnicity is an important part of self.	2.49	1.47	2.33	1.61	3.17	1.59	4.00	1.55	3.00	1.86
13. My parents have talked to someone else about discrimination in my presence.	1.40	1.53	1.75	1.79	1.93	1.92	2.29	2.47	1.22	2.13
14. My parents have talked to me about unfair treatment due to race.	1.98	1.63	2.63	1.40	2.63	1.37	4.10	1.29	2.56	1.76
PROMOTION OF MISTRUST (average)	1.41		1.45		1.50		1.58		1.56	
15. My parents have engaged in or stated things to keep me from trusting people of other races.	1.59	1.52	1.55	1.39	1.60	1.46	1.48	1.56	1.89	1.39
16. My parents have engaged in or stated things to encourage me to keep a distance from people of other races.	1.23	2.03	1.35	1.84	1.41	1.98	1.67	2.65	1.22	2.39
Mean score	2.11		2.05		2.34		3.21		2.45	

Note: Parental ethnic socialization was measured on an eight-point scale: 0 for "Never"; 1 for "Never this year"; 2 for "1 to 2 times this year"; 3 for "Several times this year"; 4 for "About once a month"; 5 for "Several times a month"; 6 for "Once a week"; and 7 for "Several times a week".



**Table 3.** Mean scores showing frequencies of other agents of ethnic socialization ( $n = 894$ ).

Item	Malay ( $n = 351$ )		Chinese ( $n = 249$ )		Indigenous ( $n = 264$ )		Indian ( $n = 21$ )		Other ( $n = 9$ )	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. Other than your parents, how often has your family (e.g., brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and grandparents) talked with you about ethnic groups and racial issues?	2.63	0.81	2.46	0.78	2.78	0.78	2.90	1.0	3.00	1.22
2. How often have your friends talked with you about ethnic groups and racial issues?	2.98	0.91	2.77	0.85	2.93	0.86	2.81	0.75	3.67	1.0
3. How often have other adults (e.g., teachers, neighbors, people of the same religion) talked with you about ethnic groups and racial issues?	3.07	0.96	2.62	0.87	2.78	0.86	2.90	1.0	3.00	1.22
Average	2.89		2.62		2.83		2.87		3.22	

Note: 1 for “Never”; 2 for “Rarely”; 3 for “Sometimes”; 4 for “Often”; and 5 for “Always”.

**Table 4.** Mean scores showing strengths of ethnic affiliations ( $n = 894$ ).

Item	Malay ( $n = 351$ )		Chinese ( $n = 249$ )		Indigenous ( $n = 264$ )		Indian ( $n = 21$ )		Other ( $n = 9$ )	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. How closely do you identify with other people from the same ethnic group as you? (Sense of belonging) <sup>1</sup>	3.12	0.68	3.02	0.63	3.09	0.58	2.90	0.62	3.11	0.60
2. How much do you prefer to be with other people from the same ethnic group as you? <sup>2</sup>	3.00	0.68	2.86	0.63	3.09	0.64	2.76	0.62	3.00	0.71
3. About how many of your closest friends belong to the same ethnic group as you? <sup>3</sup>	3.15	0.65	3.05	0.65	2.88	0.71	2.71	0.64	2.56	0.88
Mean	3.08		2.98		3.02		2.79		2.89	

Notes: On a scale of 1 to 4, the scores of 1–1.99 were considered “low”; the scores of 2–2.99 were considered “moderate”; and the scores of 3–4 were considered “high”. <sup>1</sup> 1 for “Not close”; 2 for “Less close”; 3 for “Quite close”; and 4 for “Very close”. <sup>2</sup> 1 for “Not at all”; 2 for “Not so much”; 3 for “Quite a lot”; 4 for “A lot”. <sup>3</sup> 1 for “None”; 2 for “Not many”; 3 for “Very many”; and 4 for “Almost all”.

The questionnaire data were keyed into Excel sheets using codes (e.g., 1 for “Strongly Disagree”, and 5 for “Strongly Agree”). Subsequently, the data were grouped by ethnic group in order to investigate the influence of ethnicity on the parental role in ethnic socialization, and the frequencies and the mean scores were calculated.

#### 4. Results

This section presents the results on the parental ethnic socialization, the other agents of ethnic socialization, and the ethnic affiliations by ethnic group. The focus is on the Malay, Chinese, Indigenous, and Indian participants. The results from the nine participants in the “Other” category will not be described because of the small number, and also because the category comprises several ethnic groups. Tables 2–4 show the means and standard deviations, which indicate the variability in the responses. A Kruskal–Wallis test was conducted to determine whether there is an effect of the ethnic background on the frequencies of the parental ethnic socialization activities, the frequencies of the activities of the other socialization agents, and the strengths of the ethnic affiliations. The results indicate a nonsignificant difference:  $\chi^2(6) = 5.99$ ,  $p = 0.50$ . There are no statistically significant differences in the levels of the ethnic socialization activities of the parents and the other agents, and in the strengths of the ethnic affiliations among the Malay, Chinese,

Indigenous, and Indian respondents. However, the qualitative differences between the ethnic groups, which are based on the means, are still important and are thus described.

Parental ethnic socialization comprises positive aspects (cultural pluralism and cultural pride) and negative aspects (the preparation for bias and the promotion of mistrust). Table 2 shows that, on average, the Indian participants reported the highest frequencies of parental ethnic socialization activities ( $M = 3.21$ ), and the Chinese participants reported the lowest frequencies ( $M = 2.05$ ). The Indigenous ( $M = 2.34$ ) and Malay participants ( $M = 2.11$ ) had frequencies that were in between the two groups.

In terms of cultural pluralism, the two activities that the parents engaged in the most were participating in or stating things that showed that people are equal regardless of race (Item 4), as well as stating that different ethnic groups should try to understand one another so that they can get along (Item 5). The frequencies ranged from several times a year for the Chinese parents, to several times a month for the Indian parents, and the frequencies for the Malay and Indigenous parents were in between. The parents seldom encouraged the participants to read books about other ethnic groups (Item 2) or talked about the discrimination that was targeted at other ethnic groups (Item 3): the frequencies ranged from once to twice a year (Chinese parents), to several times a year (Indian parents).

The results show that the parents were inclined to preach messages of harmony and equality among ethnic groups and that they avoided, consciously or otherwise, bringing up discrimination, even if it was not about their own group. The messages of cultural pluralism were direct (e.g., talking about important people or events in the histories of different ethnic groups) rather than indirect (e.g., asking their children to read books about other ethnic groups). These messages were targeted at encouraging the children to put aside their differences and to look at the commonalities that they share as Malaysian citizens.

Ethnic pride, “to promote a sense of loyalty among ethnic group members as well as enhancing the sense of belonging”, is another important aspect of ethnic socialization [6]. The results show that the main means by which the parents instilled cultural pride was by talking about important people or events in the history of an ethnic group (Item 6). The participants were also encouraged to read books about their own ethnic group (Item 9). However, the Indian parents engaged in this about once a month, while the other parents did so one to two times a year. The parental ethnic socialization took place mostly in the form of what they said directly to their children, and they did not quite believe in exposing their children to culturally relevant books.

In addition to instilling cultural pride in a positive way, the participants were also alerted to discrimination by their parents, albeit less frequently. The Indian participants reported that their parents talked to them about discrimination against their ethnic group (Item 8), and that they sometimes used events shown on television to bring home the point (Item 7) at frequencies of several times a year. However, the frequencies were lower for the Malay, Chinese, and Indigenous participants (one to two times a year). On the basis of the results, there were more active attempts by Indian parents to instill cultural pride and identity awareness, compared to the other ethnic groups.

A reality of living in culturally diverse contexts is making meaning out of racial discrimination and bias. The Table 2 results show that the Indian participants received more preparation for bias from their parents. The Indian parents explicitly and frequently told their children about unfair treatment due to race (Item 14), and that other people were trying to limit them because of race (Item 10), and as frequently as once a month. The Malay, Chinese, and Indigenous parents did this once to twice a year. To prepare them for bias, the participants were also told that ethnicity is an important part of self (Item 12). Their parents also occasionally talked about the need to be better than other ethnic groups in order to obtain the same rewards (Item 11), and they have sometimes overheard their parents talking about discrimination towards other people (Item 13). The mean scores show that the Malay parents were the least inclined to talk about discrimination and bias compared to the parents from the other ethnic groups.



Finally, in terms of the promotion of mistrust, the participants from all the ethnic groups reported low-to-null frequencies. Their parents almost never engaged in or stated things to keep them from trusting people of other races (Item 15), or to encourage them to keep a distance from people of other races (Item 16). Examples of the matters that create mistrust are the negative stereotypes of ethnic groups, such as the Malay being too laid back, the Chinese being calculative and stingy [6], and the Indians being drunkards [35] or inclined towards criminal activities [36], as well as two-faced. The parents appeared to have refrained from sowing the seeds of discord because, in Malaysian society, the participants have to interact with people from other ethnic groups in their social and work circles, and also in their transactions. A distrust of other ethnic groups would cause them to be socially segregated from one another.

#### 4.1. Other Agents of Ethnic Socialization

Table 3, with means between 2 and 3, show that the participants sometimes talked about racial issues with their families (other than parents), friends, and with other adults (e.g., teachers, neighbors, and people of same religion). Only the Malay participants reported discussions that had more frequent conversations about ethnic issues (a mean of 3.07). The results suggest that the influence of people (other than parents) in ethnic socialization was limited, which indicates the primary role of the parents in ethnic socialization.

#### 4.2. Ethnic Affiliation

Table 4 shows that the strength of ethnic affiliation is the strongest among the Malay participants (a mean score of 3.09), who are followed by the Indigenous participants (a mean score of 3.02). The Malay, Chinese, and Indigenous participants identified more closely with members of the same ethnic group than the Indian participants. The Malay and Indigenous participants expressed somewhat strong preferences to be with people from the same ethnic group, but the Chinese were similar to the Indian participants in expressing moderate levels of preference. The Malay and Chinese participants had many close friends belonging to the same ethnic group. Overall, the participants identified with the members of their own ethnic groups.

### 5. Discussion

The study shows moderate levels of the parental ethnic socialization of, and the ethnic affiliation among, the youths in Malaysia. The parents of the youths were engaged in more positive ethnic socialization than negative ethnic socialization. The influence of the other agents of ethnic socialization was limited. These results are discussed next in order to understand how parents teach their children to manage ethnic differences and inequalities in culturally diverse contexts.

First, the results show that the parental ethnic socialization placed an emphasis on cultural pluralism and cultural pride, rather than on the preparation for bias and the promotion of mistrust. The participants' parents appeared to be fair, as they highlighted the achievements of the prominent members of both their own and other ethnic groups. They also talked about discrimination against their own and other ethnic groups. Positive ethnic socialization practices such as these could have contributed to the moderate-to-high levels of ethnic tolerance among the Malaysian youths [24]. In spite of this, it is probable that the messages on the discrimination against one's own ethnic group hit home harder, and that they draw the youths closer to members of their own ethnic groups. Furthermore, a closer analysis of the mean scores on the parental ethnic socialization shows that the parents talked relatively more frequently about the discrimination against their own ethnic group compared to that against other ethnic groups, with the exception of the Indian youths (whose parents talked more frequently about the bias against other groups).

Generally, the results indicate that the parents were concerned about alerting the youths to the unfair treatment of their own ethnic groups. It is important to "orient youths [of minority cultures] toward developing skills and characteristics needed to thrive in

settings that are part of the mainstream, or dominant, culture" [12]. The Malay participants reported lower frequencies of their parents engaging in the preparation for bias. This is understandable because the Malay is the majority group in Malaysia. Malays are also in the ruling coalition and they are the beneficiaries of the affirmative actions in government service jobs, university enrolment, and financial assistance (e.g., bank loans). There is no doubt that ethnicity is an important part of identity in Malaysia [2], but the Malays generally do not have to fear being disadvantaged because of their ethnic group. Instead, what they have to handle are attributions of blame for discriminating against minority ethnic groups through affirmative policies and other manifestations of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay dominance). The youth in the study were aged 18–40 years, and they were considered to be grown-up enough to be informed about the less pleasant facets of ethnic relations. Hughes et al. (2006, p. 758) state that "discussion of more complex social processes, such discrimination or wariness of other groups, may not emerge until children reach middle childhood or adolescence" [12].

Secondly, the results indicate that the parents of the Indian youth were the most active in ethnic socialization, while the parents of the Chinese youth were the least active. Interestingly, both the Indian and Chinese groups in Malaysia have immigrant beginnings that date back to the early 20th century and earlier. The parents of the Indian youth were more active in telling them about unfair treatment and about others trying to limit them because of their ethnic group. The Indian youth were also more frequently told that their ethnicity is an important part of self (compared to the Malay, Chinese, and Indigenous youths), and this reinforced cultural pride and ethnic identity, which are important parts of social identity. The stronger parental endorsement of cultural pride by the Indian parents is possibly because they feel threatened. Ramasamy (2004, p. 145) states that "Indians have become politically marginalized, economically deprived of opportunities, and culturally alienated" [36]. The Indians cannot fall back on their numerical strength since their population is only 6.8% of the total population, compared to the 69.8% *Bumiputera* (encompassing Malay and Indigenous), and 22.4% Chinese [37]. These circumstances could have aroused the ethnic consciousness of the Indian parents and could have strengthened their resolve to encourage cultural pride and ethnic solidarity in their children.

Thirdly, the study shows that the youths had moderate levels of ethnic affiliation across the ethnic groups. This is where the Chinese participants' lower scores for ethnic affiliation, compared to the Malay, Indigenous, and Indian participants, stand out as unfathomable. The Chinese is a minority group in Malaysia, and they should want to be affiliated with the members of the Chinese community. The results contradict the existing findings and show stronger ethno-grouping among the Chinese students than among the Malay or Indigenous students [2,16,21]. For instance, Tamring et al. (2020), who studied only Chinese students in a Sabah university, found that while the students may have affiliated with other ethnic groups in the group assignments, they chose Chinese students over students from other ethnic groups when sharing problems, when dining together, and when engaging in leisure and sports activities [16]. In these studies, the ethno-grouping was measured on the basis of the percentage of participants who reported having friends from the same and different ethnic groups. This was similarly explored in the present study through a questionnaire item that asked the participants whether many of their closest friends belonged to the same ethnic group.

The attempts to understand the weak ethnic socialization of the Chinese youth in the present study led to findings on a related construct: ethnic identity. Kakhnovets and Wolf (2011, p. 501), who investigate ethnic affiliation and identity, found a correlation for the Jewish people, but "the constructs appear to be separate variables and should be treated as such in future research" [38]. In the Malaysian setting, two studies that used Phinney's Multiethnic Identity Measure (1992) show that the ethnic identity of Chinese university students is not as strong as those of other ethnic groups [39]. Ting and Kho (2021) report that Chinese university students have a marginally positive commitment to their Chinese identity, but that the Malay, Indigenous, and Indian students are more

committed to their ethnic identities, albeit still at moderate levels [40]. In another study, the Chinese, Malay, and Indigenous students had moderately strong ethnic identities, while the Indian university students had a strong ethnic identity [41]. Thus, on the basis of the comparisons with the past findings that are related to ethnic affiliation and ethnic identity, it can be surmised that, while Chinese university students exhibit ethno-grouping in their behavior, their ethnic identity is marginally positive.

The present study has contributed to this discussion by linking the conservative level of ethnic identity that is reported by the Chinese youths in many studies to the minimal ethnic socialization performed by their parents. For some parents, coming from the standpoint of a minority group, the discrimination is too painful or uncomfortable to discuss because they are powerless to change matters. Furthermore, because of social desirability bias, the Chinese youth may have refrained from reporting the frequent indoctrination by their parents on unfair treatment and their disadvantaged position in terms of government jobs, housing, and political power. Attempts to downplay ethnocentric behaviors and views are understandable because a strong ethnic identification is seen as undesirable from the government standpoint [42], and is also undesirable to the *Bumiputera*, who espouse the cultural assimilation model of integration [10]. An example is Nordin et al.'s (2018) findings on Indian and Chinese students who preferred to retain their ethnic identities and cultural norms: the researchers deemed the "multiple identities" model of integration as too fragile to be workable [10]. However, it needs to be noted that the findings of the present study were based on youths that were aged up to 40 years old because of the definition of "youth" in Malaysia that followed the National Youth Development Policy [30] at the time of the study. Another limitation of the study is the imbalanced number of youths from the ethnic groups, particularly Indians ( $n = 21$ ), compared to the Chinese, Indigenous, and Malay youths. We acknowledge that the Indian sample might not be representative, and that selection bias might be at work.

## 6. Conclusions

The present study has uncovered the ethnic socialization patterns that are unique to the ethnic groups living in Malaysia, and it reveals the negative ethnic socialization that is engaged in by the parents of the youths, particularly in terms of preparing them for discrimination. This is a break away from the usual focus on the more comfortable topic of how children are socialized to learn about their culture and ethnic identity. The politically correct behavior for minority groups means that they should lean towards cultural pluralism, rather than cultural pride, and definitely away from ethnically divisive actions, such as preparing children for bias, or promoting the mistrust of other groups. When ethnic groups regard other ethnic groups with suspicion, and when they operate on stereotypes, this poses obstacles to assimilation and acculturation in nation building in a multiethnic society [11].

In the present study, the primary agent of ethnic socialization that was investigated was the parents. The study went as far as establishing that friends and other adults had a limited influence on the ethnic socialization of the youths. However, the role of peers needs to be further investigated in view of Chin's (2013) preliminary finding, in focus group discussions, that friends talk more openly about ethnic groups and issues than family [13]. Furthermore, because of the ethno-grouping among peers [2,14–16,21], it is pertinent to investigate the aspects of ethnic socialization that are reinforced by peers, and the ways in which these are enacted. A methodological issue in the research on ethnic socialization in ethnically diverse settings is the hesitancy of the participants to reveal their deep-seated beliefs, attitudes, and values that are deemed unacceptable to other ethnic groups. The use of interviews may produce more meaningful insights into ethnic relations than questionnaires. Most of the studies cited in this paper (unless otherwise indicated) employed questionnaires. More honest and candid responses tend to emerge in qualitative interviews than in questionnaire studies, and it is also important to gain the trust of the participants by having researchers who are from the same ethnic group. These studies will

add to the knowledge on the ethnic socialization of youths from different ethnic groups living within the same sociopolitical entity.

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