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Ethnopolitical discourse among ordinary Malaysians: Diverging accounts of "the good old days" in discussing multiculturalism.

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Abstract: A small group of ethnically diverse Malaysians was assembled to discuss the state of multiculturalism in Malaysia. Discursive analysis was used to get at the participants' accounting practices and constructions of multiculturalism. Participants' accounts revealed an increasing social distance between the Malays and the non-Malays, but differing assessments and explanations for such group boundaries. Participants' accounts drew on both their own experiences and on broader ethnopolitical discourses to tell their side. Participants used various voicing practices to represent or evaluate the current situation and how it became this way. Religion, especially Islam, was used as an ethnopolitical discourse and was articulated in different ways. For instance, the Malays invoked being Muslim as the primary source of identity and imagined community, while the non-Malays cited the politicization of Islam as a cause for the increasing boundary between groups. Despite these differences participants seemed willing to engage on these "sensitive issues" through criticism and defensive accounts sequences.

Keywords: Malaysia; multiculturalism; ethnopolitical conflict; Islamization; accounts; discursive analysis.

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1 Introduction

> Okay I'm- I'm very glad that you come up with this uhm very relevant
> what some people might say sensitive questions because I think uhm
> that un<u>less</u> we hear these questions and try to answer and face those questions
> you get nowhere going around in circles: because we have to face (.) uh
> these questions if we hope to progress

Malaysia is one of the most multicultural countries in the world, but there are competing assessments of how Malaysia has fared as a multicultural society. Malaysia is said to be "among the most successful countries in postcolonial management of ethnic pluralism" (Goh 2008: 234); for most of the 50-plus years since independence the country has been at peace and has grown economically such that today Malaysia is no longer considered a third-world country (Aziz and Shamsul 2004; Ibrahim 2004). On the other hand, Malaysia is said to be deeply divided along ethnic lines with race/ethnicity influencing how Malaysians conduct themselves at all levels (Haque 2003; Hooker 2004; Fee 2006; Husin 2008; Quayum 2012: xiii). A recent survey indicated that "ethnocentric views, mistrust and misunderstanding (were) quite prevalent" (Merdeka Centre [2006] as cited in Taman [2009]) with people identifying more with their ethnic or religious affiliation than as Malaysian. While Prime Minister Najib has recently called for "1 Malaysia," critics have pondered what this really means or have dismissed it as mere sloganeering or rhetoric (Muzaffar 2011).

The epigram – a statement by a focus group participant – captures one of the central issues of our inquiry: How ordinary Malaysians discuss potentially sensitive or divisive issues about multiculturalism with a diverse group of fellow citizens. In particular, we are interested in how various ethnic, racial, or religious notions get used in accounting for the current multicultural situation in Malaysia.

2 Malaysia as a multicultural society

Due to its favorable location along sea trading routes Malaysia has long been a crossroad for commerce, trade, and cultural exchange over the centuries (Hefner 2001; Hooker 2003; Milner 2008). The three largest cultural groups in Malaysia today are the Malays, the Chinese, and the Indians. The Malays comprise about 67% of the population (Department of Statistics 2010); they are Muslim and largely run the national government. The Chinese are roughly 25%; most immigrated during British colonial times from about 1850 to work in the tin mines (Hooker 2003: 148). The Chinese are Taoist or Buddhist and some Christians.

Indians also arrived in large numbers after the 1880s to work on the railways and the rubber plantations. They comprise about 7% of the population, are largely Hindu with some Sikhs or Christians, and are the most economically disadvantaged of the three main groups. Each of these three main groups is diverse and comprised of different ethnic or linguistic groups (Baskaran 2004). In addition, there are many people of hybridized identities, e.g., Eurasian, or recent immigrants, especially from Indonesia. The northern states of Borneo became part of Malaysia in 1963 and added a number of other ethnic groups to the Malaysian mosaic, e.g., Kadazan, Iban, and Melanau.

In Malaysia there is no one dominant group: the Malays control the political realm, while Chinese Malaysians are dominant in business and trade (Hooker 2004; Mandal 2004). Multicultural tensions arise, not from a legacy of racism, as in the West, but more from a "question of national belonging" (Goh 2008). Despite the fact that the vast majority of Chinese and Indians have lived in Malaysia for generations, "Who is an immigrant?" remains a hot-button issue (Mandal 2004). The state's intervention in multicultural politics has had a major influence on the current situation. The racial formation, *bumiputera* (literally 'sons of the soil'), was created by the government by combing the Malays along with other indigenous peoples from the Peninsula and Borneo (Fee 2006). The *bumiputera* need to be seen in contrast to the non-indigenous groups, the Chinese and Indians. To achieve economic equality for the Malay majority group, a New Economic Policy (NEP) was devised in 1971 to give the *bumiputera* "special rights and privileges" which allows for positive discrimination in jobs, scholarships, and other advantages (Sowell 2004; Mutalib 2007). This asymmetry in economic and educational opportunities has led to a growing dissatisfaction among non-*bumiputera*: "The expansive role of the state in managing, reinforcing and reengineering ethnic identities in Malaysia is considered one of the major research interests in the realm of Asian politics" (Haque 2003: 242).

These "racial formations" (Omi and Winant 1994) or "racialization" categories (Miles 1989) – *bumiputera*, Malay, Chinese, and so forth – need to be seen as sociohistorical constructions rather than as essentialized natural categories. As Shamsul (1996: 480) argues about the category, Malay, " 'What it means' has always been altered, invented, redefined, reconstituted and boundaries expanded according to socio-historical circumstances."

Today for most Malays, Muslim identity has become increasingly important – constituting an "ethnoreligious resurgence" (Hefner 2001; Haque 2003; Husin 2008). According to a recent survey, when Malays were asked to choose their primary identity between Malay, Muslim, or Malaysian, 72% chose Muslim (Centre for Public Policy Studies [2006] as cited in Furlow [2009: 223]). Indeed, "Malay" is defined by the 1957 Constitution as one who professes Islam, speaks Malay, and

follows Malay customs. So with the category "Malay," ethnicity is directly tied to religion (Mutalib 2007).

This rise in Islamic identity has been explained in various ways. Religious identity is said to be especially distinctive of Asian cultures (Bakar 2001; Hooker 2004). The resurgence of identification with Islam in Malaysia, and throughout the world, has been called "Islamization," reemerging in the 1960s and 1970s (Houben 2003; Liow 2009) and energized by the 1979 Iranian revolution. As Malays became more prosperous and middle-class and moved to urban areas they became more religious in reaction to the seeming unfettered materialism and the excesses of globalization (Sachedina 2002; Thompson 2003; Aziz and Shamsul 2004). The Islam of the *kampong* ('village') proved inadequate for the urban context, leading to a decline in traditional values, so Malays searched for other more pious versions of Islam (Houben 2003; Fealy 2005). The move toward stricter versions of Islam serves to symbolically cleanse Malays from past Hindu influences and practices (Willford 2006). This Islamic resurgence can be seen as part of a Malay "cultural assertiveness" in state funding for Mosque construction, Islamic-style architecture, in banning the shadow play, or in the *fatwa* against yoga (Peletz 1997; Lee 2000). The identities of Malay and Muslim have become increasingly intertwined (Haque 2003). Malaysia is generally regarded as practicing a "moderate Islam" (Aziz and Shamsul 2004). Yet the government's championing of Islam and special privileges for Malays has been be seen by some as an impediment to ethnic relations and "a threat to national unity" (Hooker 2004: 160).

Many studies of multiculturalism have a "limited geopolitical perspective" within North America or Europe (He and Kymlicka 2005; Goh 2008: 233; Shome 2012). In the West, multiculturalism involves the question of the recognition and respect for ethnic minorities within a state (Taylor 1994). Multicultural societies such as Malaysia need to be seen in its postcolonial, South-East Asian context. In Malaysia's case, the problem of multiculturalism seems to be how to achieve a sense of unity or national identity along with pluralism. From our reading of the literature, there are competing views of Malaysia as a multicultural society: on the one hand, Malaysia is portrayed as deeply divided by ethnicity and religion with simmering tensions, while on the other hand, Malaysia is seen as among the most successful Asian countries in managing postcolonial ethnic relations with its emphasis on economic development rendering identity politics increasingly to the private realm. Another tension involves the role of the state as a political agent *vis-à-vis* multiculturalism (e.g., Malay special rights and privileges) and non-Malays' resentment of this policy.

Multiculturalism in most, if not all, contemporary societies is politicized. An ethnopolitical conflict perspective (Ellis 2006) offers a discursive perspective for

examining conflict which involves ethnicity. On this view, ethnicity gets activated through discourse. Various discursive resources can be drawn on (e.g., collective memory, narratives, religious values) in positioning one's own or other groups. There is a "grammar" of ethnic identity through naming, avowals, argument, or other discursive acts (2006: 58). Political leaders mobilize members through rhetorical appeals, such as by citing ethnic grievances, trauma, or victim narratives (Buttny and Ellis 2007). Ethnicity gets used in identity politics in accentuating identity, group differentiation, or cultural boundaries. When ethnic identity is activated it accentuates group borders and increases the psychological sense of separateness of one group *vis-à-vis* another. Ethnicity becomes most salient under controversial social conditions or competition over scarce resources. The most potentially contentious condition involves ethnically similar groups who live side by side but are religiously dissimilar (Henderson [1997] cited in Ellis [2006: 42]). Religion becomes intertwined with ethnic identity, hence the notion of "ethnoreligious identity."

Conflict in the form of argument can be helpful for ethnically divided groups to come together to air grievances and explain themselves to each other (Ellis 2010). Argument can be beneficial for laying out the parameters of what is at issue. Criticism makes relevant the criticized group's justification or explanation for the situation. Each side may have diverging assessments of the other's accounts. But listening to the other group's perspective is at least a first step toward acknowledging that both sides can have reasonable positions (Ellis 2010). So instead of looking at the rhetoric of political leaders, there is a need to examine how *ordinary Malaysians* make sense of multiculturalism. As Peletz (1997) observes, the voice of "ordinary Malays" has been ignored in the literature on Malaysia's Islamic resurgence.

3 Research focus and analytic perspective

As seen from the literature review, the special privileges for Malays or the role of Islam in Malaysian society are considered "sensitive topics," such that public discussion of them is prohibited by law (Haque 2003; Ganesan 2005; Gomez 2009). Talk about sensitive topics or complaints about other ethnic groups generally only occur within one's own group. Despite these obstacles, we wondered how a discussion of multiculturalism would unfold. How would a mixed group of Malaysians from different ethnoreligious backgrounds address one another's perspective and concerns? To facilitate such a conversation we invited eight Malaysians of diverse backgrounds to have lunch and to discuss multiculturalism.

This assemblage may be loosely seen as a focus group. We prepared questions to get the discussion going, but the conversation largely took its own course.

Our approach builds on Ellis's ethnopolitical conflict perspective (2006, 2010) that argument can be a valuable process for ethnically divided groups to hear the other side and to account for their own positions. We adopt a *social accountability perspective* (Buttny 1993) to focus on the kinds of accounts participants draw on to interpret the current situation in Malaysia. Accounts are persons' tellings of past events, present conditions, or future possibilities which purport to describe, explain, or assess that content. Accounts can take the form of a narrative or of propositional content. Accounts typically contain references to various categories of persons. We are interested in how these persons and their actions get represented; more specifically, how these actors are identified; what voice(s), if any, are they given; and how they are positioned by the speaker. By "identified" we mean the terms or categories used to reference the actors' ethnicity, religion, gender, age, and the like. We examine how these terms are discursively used in making explicit or implicit claims about these persons (Gumperz 1982). As will be seen, such discourse often focuses on problematic aspects of multicultural contact. In these accounts, persons become positioned – portrayed or evaluated favorably or unfavorably by the teller. How participants represent the contact between groups allows them to portray events and also to comment on them, to evaluate or explain. Such accounts work to position self and other, which in turn makes relevant a response from other group members to defend, explain, or make a counter-assertion.

To investigate these issues on multiculturalism, we raise the following research questions:
–   How do participants' accounts represent or evaluate the contact between ethnic groups?
–   What discursive practices structure or organize participants' accounts in dialogue on multiculturalism?

4 Data

Our data come from an audio recording of a group discussion or focus group conducted in April 2009. Participants were recruited through contact with an interfaith dialogue leader who invited people open to discussing multiculturalism. The eight participants were middle-aged to elderly (30 to 70 years of age), evenly divided by gender, and living in the capital area, Kuala Lumpur, or the Klang Valley. The ethnic composition of the group included three Malays, two Chinese, two Indians, and one who described herself as hybrid – of mixed ethnicity. A brief

sketch of the participants' ethnoreligious backgrounds is provided using pseu-
donyms: James, Chinese-Malaysian Muslim man; Jennifer, Chinese-Malaysian
Buddhist woman; Ibrahim, Malay-Muslim man; Norazam, Malay-Muslim man;
Dorothy who describes herself as hybrid and from Sabah; Peter, Indian-Malaysian
Christian man; Shanthi, Indian-Malaysian Hindu woman; and Ramlah, Malay-
Muslim woman. Participants spoke in English with some code switching with
Malay.

Our research team includes two Malaysian scholars, a Malay and the other of
Indian ancestry, and a visiting scholar from the United States. The North Ameri-
can and Indian-Malaysian researchers served as discussion facilitators for the
group. We had prepared questions, but allowed the discussion to take its own
course. The eight participants and two discussion facilitators sat around a large
table. The meeting lasted for two hours and twenty minutes. The meeting was
audio-recorded and relevant portions were transcribed using a modified Jefferson
format (Jefferson 2004; see the appendix).

5 The discursive construction of multiculturalism in Malaysia

We begin by looking at how participants characterize the state of multicultural-
ism through their accounts. Many interesting issues, concerns, or experiences
were told during the two hour and twenty minute discussion. A discussion point
that caught our attention was the use of "the good old days" in offering accounts.

5.1 "The good-old days"

Early on, the notion of "the good-old days" was brought up by a participant to
draw a contrast to the socially distant and politicized contact of today. This notion
of "the good-old days" was picked up on and responded to in various ways by
other participants. As will be seen there are different senses and assessments of
"the good-old days." All of our excerpts deal with participants' different accounts
and positionings on this collective memory of "the good days."

To get the discussion started, the facilitators posed a question about multi-
culturalism in Malaysia. Coincidently, a few days prior to our meeting, Prime Min-
ister Najib issued a call for "1 Malaysia." We asked: "What's your sense of the
current situation as regards religion and identity and race or nationality in the
sense of how things are, if I may ask a very broad question?"

Each participant was requested to make an opening statement of their views. The first two speakers gave rather broad abstract statements about the hope for national unity. The third speaker then offered the following account about a conference he attended on multiculturalism. Notice the contrast he draws between the past, "the good-old days", and today, the problematic present of being "polarized".

(1) (S: 3. Note: RB is one of the discussion facilitators)
```
1  James:        there's a workshop (.) they then asked people to
2                think like ah how do they think about how
3                Malaysia is supposed to be [(          ) very=
4  RB:                                      [Hm
5  James:        =colorful and how they see Malaysia is supposed
6                to be, ↑I just summarize what I feel at the end
7                of it, they felt that there's something which
8                they called §the good-old days§ and most of the
9                participants are quite ol(h)d h[h so they=
10 Participants:                               [hhhhh
11 James:        =remember the good-old days by people are free to
12               interact with each other and feel so free: and
13               they can visit each other's house:: and eat: and
14               sit together but now they feel that we have been
15               polarized >okay< there was the actually (count)
16               even though there is lip services of a- of
17               integration and so forth but a- but a by and
18               large political party has been creating more and
19               more polarizations among the group
```

This reporting from the workshop takes the form of a problem narrative: the collective memory of an idyllic past ("the good-old days") has given way to the problems of today ("polarized") (Gergen and Gergen 1983; Van Dijk 1993). James's narrative uses the membership category, "people" at the "workshop", which he laughingly describes as "quite ol(h)d" (line 9). James's characterization of "the good-old days" gets unpacked in terms of positive contact as "people are free to interact with each other and feel so free: and they can visit each other's house:: and eat: and sit together" (lines 11–14). These favorable relations are then contrasted with the problematic present, or "now", the feeling of being "polarized" (lines 14 and 15).

In telling this narrative, James draws on the voice of the old people via free indirect speech (Li 1986), mixing their words, "the good-old days", with his own

in summation. In drawing on the old people's voices, James can present their critical assessment with a footing of just conveying what was said. That is, he reports their criticism, "they feel that we have been polarized" (lines 14 and 15). In Goffman's (1981) terms, James positions himself as the "animator," rather than the "author," of this complaint.

James continues pointing to the "political party" as responsible for the increasing "polarizations among the group" (line 19). But it is ambiguous whether he is referencing the old people or speaking for himself. Left implicit here is the political party in question and what groups are polarized. James's problem narrative uses contrast categories: "the good-old days", when people were free to interact with each other, with the "now" of feeling "polarized" due to politics. On his account, the political level has negatively affected the everyday life of ordinary Malaysians.

Other participants draw on this phrase, "the good-old days", comment on it, and extend it in different directions. In the next extract, Jennifer extends the problem narrative in being more pointed about the politics. She is the second speaker after James (Extract [1]) and she offers the following explanatory account for the current problematic situation:

(2) (J: 4)
```
1 Jennifer: Yeah I agree with what James said about the
2          good-old days when we played together and nobody
3          ever talked about what race you were from it is
4          largely the government's fault and also of course
5          (            ) uhm how do you say it Ismal-iz-my-
6          <Is-lam-iz-ation> of government (        ) slowly
7          creeping in
```

"The good-old days" is used as a shorthand formulation for James's narrative. Jennifer's recounting of "the good-old days" adds the specific social activity, "played together". She contrasts this playing together with the current situation of talking about race. The use of "race" in everyday parlance is more akin to the social scientific notion of "ethnicity" (Miles 1989). Jennifer is more pointed in attributing responsibility for the negative change to the government, specifically, to the Islamization of government (lines 3 and 4). The national government is largely run by Malays who are Muslim.

In this extract we see the uses of two key terms, "race" and "Islamization", both of which are presented in a critical light as creating division among people. In both Extracts (1) and (2) we also have this contrast between everyday, ordinary activities (visiting, eating and sitting together, and playing) and the political

party/government. And the latter is singled out and criticized for damaging the positive relations among groups by emphasizing racial/ethnic differences. So in both these accounts we have a portrait of political ideology seeping into the everyday life and leading to a heightening of ethnoreligious difference and increasing social distance between groups.

In response to these negative assessments we get a somewhat more nuanced, defensive evaluation from the next speaker, Norazam, who is Malay. He offers a counter-account of the current situation.

```
(3) (N: 5)
1   Norazam:  this thing about racialization and polarization
2             >yeah it's there< but it's not as bad as what we
3             imagine (.) because- but like myself I have got
4             very close Chinese friends very close Indian
5             friends I don't say because I was abroad- it's
6             there because human nature is there like will
7             attract like so I have got other Malay friends
8             I've got Chinese friends Indian friends who
9             interact but we do have some problems because for
10            the last thirty forty years we had problems in
11            school (.) it started in schools because- I'm
12            very sure that the founding fathers of Malaysia
13            never wanted us to be separated it's just- it's a
14            development of history and we had the- we had
15            the- I do not know if you're aware RB that we
16            had a very painful episode in our history the May
17            13th riots [involving the two bigger communities
18  RB:                  [Hm uh
19  Norazam:  = the Chinese and the Malays the Chinese said
20            the Malays started it and the Malays said the
21            Chinese started it (    ) whatever it is? the
22            impact was there
```

Here Norazam formulates the criticisms of the prior speakers as "racialization and polarization" (line 1). But he moves to diminish the magnitude of these problems by his assessment, ">yeah it's there< but it's not as bad as what we imagine" (lines 2 and 3). He minimizes the prior speakers' complaints by a "yes, but" account. As he explains the intergroup tensions, "it's there because human nature is there like will attract like" (lines 5–7). This explanation invokes "human nature" along with an interpersonal-relations principle, "like will attract like".

By drawing on these quasi-scientific, folk explanations, Norazam attempts to naturalize, and thereby normalize, the social distance between groups.

In terms of the relations between groups, Norazam talks about his own relationships as having "very close Chinese friends very close Indian friends" (lines 4 and 5). But, as he elaborates, we "interact but we do have some problems" (line 9). Norazam moves to explain the current situation by broader historical causes: "problems in school" (lines 10 and 11) and "the May 13th riots" of 1969 (lines 16 and 17). Unlike the prior speakers he portrays these problems as understandable – as he puts it, "a development of history" (line 14). In accounting for the May 13th riots, Norazam draws on the voices of the conflicting ethnic groups by using choral speech (Tannen 2008), "the Chinese said . . . and the Malays said . . ." (lines 19–21). His assessment of these riots, "the impact was there" (line 22), represents the current strained relations. Again we see another historical explanation for the current social distance between groups. So we have competing collective memories or contested accounts for the current ethnopolitical tensions.

The next participant, Ibrahim, also Malay, references "the good-old days" in order to recognize the previously mentioned problems, but he offers different ways to see the current situation.

(4) (I: 7)
```
1   Ibrahim:  . . . I: I: also like to spend a little time
2             reminiscing on the good-old days because every
3             ti:me I give talks on inter-faith and often
4             questions from the older generation who say
5             why::: are the people here now not as warm: to
6             one another=last time we used to go to each
7             other's houses uhm I think the general perception
8             is ah it used to be good in the good-old days
9             and not any more uhm: (.) uhm but we cannot just
10            grumble on that without having a reality check to
11            what has happened?
```

Here Ibrahim's narrative abstract (Labov and Waletzky 1967), "reminiscing on the good-old days" (line 2), is hearably a bit ironic – perhaps echoing James's embedded laughter (Extract [1]) in noting the "old" participants. He uses choral speech to give voice to the view of the "older generation" (lines 4–7). His affective metaphor, "now not as warm: to one another", gives voice to the older generation's complaint along with their report of the good-old days, "we used to go to each other's houses" (lines 6 and 7). But he then immediately shifts footing to raise doubts about the older generation's problem assessment, as he puts it, "the

general perception is ah it used to be good in the good-old days" (lines 7–9). The implication here, of course, is that it really was not so "good in the good-old days." He continues to cast doubts by referring to the older generation's problem narrative as "grumbl[ing]" which he contrasts to "a reality check" (line 10). He then proceeds to lay out this "reality check" as a more accurate version of events.

As Ibrahim continues with an extended turn at talk, he offers a couple of explanations for what he calls the growing "difference" between groups. One is that each ethnic community wants its own schools to preserve their language and culture (not examined here). In addition, he offers a second explanation about Malays becoming more educated about their Muslim religion:

(5) (I: 8)
1   Ibrahim: and when after- after independence and then (.)
2   not immediately after independence there was a
3   slow but noticeable and now obvious difference
4   (.) in the attitude of the Mala:ys (.) and their
5   religion last time you can say the Malays were
6   all so open <u>be</u>cause they did not know much about
7   religion (.) so as the Malays became more
8   educated about religion and realized that there
9   were rules and regulations about being a Muslim
10   (.) it means not just: (.) calling yourself a
11   Muslim but also there are rules and regulations
12   to follow

Here Ibrahim formulates a version of what others have said about the good-old days: "you can say the Malays were all so open . . ." (lines 5 and 6). "Open" is an interesting metaphor which seems to echo James's previous version in Extract (1), "people are free to interact with each other and feel so fr<u>ee</u>:" (lines 11 and 12). But for Ibrahim, this "so free" and "so open" is not the idyllic past as in James's narrative, but reflects a state of Malay ignorance; as he puts it, "not know[ing] much about religion" (lines 6 and 7). The "reality check" for Ibrahim is the "rules and regulations about being a Muslim" (line 9). He does not specify what these "rules and regulations" are, but the implication seems to be that they proscribe against the free and open relations of the past. So Islam gets invoked to explain the changes in contact between Muslims and non-Muslims, between Malays and other groups. Unlike Jennifer's criticism of "Islamization" (Extract [2]), Ibrahim is not criticizing these changes.

As Ibrahim moves to conclude he returns to his prior formulations – "reality check" and "the good-old days" – to comment on the current social distance between groups.

(6) (I: 11)
```
1 Ibrahim:  ... so these are my observations about the reality-
2           check what happened how did it happen from the
3           good-old day- or the not-so-good-old days, of
4           course I have not mentioned the role of
5           politicians and all that that we know (.) add to
6           the problem every time that there's elections the
7           politicians need votes so you can be seen as a
8           hero they will bring up racial and religious
9           issues that we all know
```

Here Ibrahim continues to undermine the notion of "the good-old days" by correcting it to "the not-so-good-old days" (line 3). Again he contrasts "the good-old days" to "reality-check". This combined with his attributing "the good-old days" to the older generation becomes a way to challenge that viewpoint.

Ibrahim appends an explanation, mentioned previously, about "politicians" as a main source of group tension (lines 4–9). So again we have a portrayal of the political dynamic adversely affecting the interpersonal contact between ordinary people of different groups.

Another use of "the good-old days" comes a bit later on. Here an interlocutor, Norazam, ironically formulates Dorothy's account of her past as "the good-old days".

(7) (D: 25)
```
1  Dorothy:  ... I mean seriously coming from Sabah and Sarawak
2            (              ) before ya know the politics and the
3            (.) privileges that have been given because of
4            conversion and- and also your race ([  )
5  Shanthi:                                       [Yes
6  Dorothy:  = ya know my best days are there other than
7            (  [    )
8  Norazam:     [Good-old days hhh[hh
9  Dorothy:                       [Not good-old days- I'm
10           sorry it's still good I'm sorry I go back to
11           Sabah it's still good we still drink at the same
12           table we don't care you could have a God above
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13	you I mean it's just a Chinese God in a coffee
14	shop but here we are sitting down Muslims and all
15	eating drinking talking coffee shop so I think
16	that politics and- and this privileges that ya
17	know been used selectively has been a the one
18	that has divided us all

Here Dorothy is recalling living in the more open states of East Malaysia, Sabah, and Sarawak, which she contrasts with the government's recent policies on religion and race (lines 1–3). As she continues disclosing, "my best days are there", Norazam overlaps her saying, "Good-old days hhhhh" (lines 7 and 8). Given that the prior uses of "the good-old days" were associated with the elderly, such an ascription of Dorothy is hearably a mocking or a tease. In addition, Norazam appends laughter to underscore the irony. Dorothy does not attend to the humor and gives a serious response (lines 9–18), a "po-faced response" (Drew 1987). She resists Ibrahim's ascription with, "Not good-old days", but then immediately corrects herself by "it's still good" (line 11). In support she repeats her avowal, "it's still good", and then specifies the "good" activities: "sitting down … eating drinking talking" (lines 11–15). Notice how similar this listing of intergroup contact is to James's listing of social activities (Excerpt [1], lines 13 and 14).

Norazam's teasing ascription, "Good-old days", is hearably responsive, not only to Dorothy's avowal, "my best days are there" (line 6), but also to her criticisms of the government policies on religion and race. Given that the national government is effectively controlled by the Malays, and that Norazam is Malay, Dorothy's criticisms can be heard as directed at them. As she specifies the criticisms: "the politics and the (.) privileges that have been given because of conversion and- and also your race" (lines 2–4). The use of "privileges" here is a shorthand formulation for "special Malay privileges." Such privileges are part of the policy of positive discrimination in education and the economy for the Malays. So Norazam's ironic use of "good-old days" can be heard, not only as a tease for one reminiscing on the past, but also on a political level to disparage Dorothy's criticisms of Malay privileges.

6 Discussion

The project here has been to see what our discursive approach could reveal about multiculturalism through a small group discussion with ordinary Malaysians. Looking at our first research question of how participants represent or evaluate

interethnic group contact, we saw the theme of growing separateness between the Malays and the non-Malays. Discussing multiculturalism quickly turned into accounts about the decline of everyday social contact between Malays and the others. There was consensus that relations were more strained than in the past, but disagreement over the degree of this strain or how to explain it. Participants offered various explanations: "Islamization" (Extract [2]); Malays becoming more educated "about religion" (Extract [5]); "human nature" (Extract [3]); and so on. Politicians were cited as adversely affecting the everyday social life between groups (Extracts [1], [2], [6], [7]). So talk about multicultural relations merges into talk about religion and ultimately into talk about politics. There seems to be a consensus that the current state of multicultural relations is problematic, though differences in how problematic and how it got to be that way remain implicit.

Turning to our second research question of the practices used in constructing accounts and the social realities thereby claimed, participants offered accounts to characterize the situation in various ways: as having changed for the worse, as problematic, or as understandable. Especially interesting was the various uses or responses to the formulation, "the good-old days". "The good-old days" is used to reference various discursive practices within accounts, for instance, to tell a *problem narrative* of the loss of free and open relations between groups and to contrast the past to the present (i.e., from good to bad; Extracts [1], [2], and [7]). Other participants attempted to undermine this narrative by a counter-narrative of "the not-so-good old days" and contrasted "the good-old days" with "reality check", by negating it, by calling it "grumbl[ing]", or by using "the good-old days" ironically (Extracts [4]–[7]). Other terms used to assess multicultural relations include: "separated" (Extract [3]), "not as warm" (Extract [4]), "so open" (Extract [5]), and "still good" (Extract [7]).

In offering accounts participants at times used the practice of *voicing* to represent actions or to evaluate social actors. One kind of voicing was attributing words to others, so-called reported speech, for instance, to the older generation (Excerpts [1], [4]), or to what the Chinese and the Malays said (Excerpt [3]). Another kind of voicing involved a key word phrase to evoke a prior speaker: "the good-old days". Another form of voicing was referring to the talk itself, so-called metadiscourse: "nobody talked about..." (Excerpt [2]), "reminiscing" (Excerpt [4]). These various kinds of voicing play a key part in constructing the account to criticize, defend, or explain the teller's stance.

Accounts get formed by various discursive practices such as describing the *identifying details* of multicultural contact: "visit . . . eat and sit together" (Extract [1]); "played together . . . never talked about race" (Extract [2]); or "eating drinking talking" (Extract [7]). Participants' accounts portray not a single event or incident, but a *recurring state-of-affairs*, e.g., increased social distance; e.g., Malays

becoming more aware of their religion. In these accounts the persons/actors/ characters are represented not as individuals, but as an *aggregate* – as a group (e.g., the older generation; the government; the Malays). These two features of accounts – as recurring and as about an aggregate – are ways to underscore the problematic assessment as an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz 1986). Such accounting practices, without offering solutions, work to magnify the problem of multicultural relations.

These accounts of growing ethnic separation or the politicization of everyday relations are consistent with Fee's (2006: 214) claim that ethnicity affects how Malaysians comport themselves at all levels, from the public to the private. Our findings also comport with Mutalib's (2007: 40) observation that Malaysia is not so much a multicultural society but a "bi-modal society" between Muslims and non-Muslims (also see Mandal 2004). These accounts reflect an ethnoreligious resurgence of Islamic identification to differentiate Malays from non-Malays (Peletz 1997; Ganesan 2005). The reemergence of religion as a marker of identity and as a boundary in ethnopolitical conflicts seems to be occurring, not only in Malaysia, but throughout different parts of the world, e.g., Hindu nationalism in India; Orthodox Christianity in Serbia; evangelical Christianity in the United States; or Zionism in Israel and the Occupied Territories.

The non-Malays coalesce in criticizing the politically dominate Malay policies as well as the growing ethnic separation. Such challenges unite the politically weaker, non-Malays in opposition to the dominant group. This finding is consistent with majority–minority relations in which minority-group members join together to criticize the majority group (Ellis 2006). One is reminded of Freud's notion of "the narcissism of minor differences": the magnification of differences between groups who are otherwise alike (Blok 1998).

In terms of "imagined community" (Anderson 2006), for these Malays their ethnoreligious identity, rather than their national identity, appears most salient. As Nair-Venugopal (2009: 84) also observes about Malaysia, "national identity may be more of a problematic issue now than before." The challenge for the idea of "1 Malaysia" seems to be how to create an identity-widening process of working toward a superordinate identity for her diverse people (Ellis 2006). Shome (2012) notes a similar tension in neighboring Singapore between ethnic identity and a sense of a national identity. Hooker (2004) suggests reconfiguring "the Malay–Islam nexus" such that Islam could be presented as a civil religion in uniting rather than in dividing people.

In a related study of multiculturalism, participants tell of "the good old days" of positive relations between Jewish and African-Americans in their narratives of the old neighborhood (Gordon and Phillips 2011). These narratives are theorized as "voicing nostalgia" where nostalgia is taken not as a mere feeling or memory,

but as a "discursive construction" of ethnic relations and of place. In these narratives they also found the participants' explicit contrast between the past and the present. Some of our Malaysian accounts could be framed as nostalgia, but we also have anti-nostalgia in the counter-accounts. In the Gordon and Phillips (2011) study there is noticeably less ethnopolitical criticism or complaints of the other group. Both of these studies are consistent with discursive psychology in treating memory not just as a cognitive representation of the past, but as a form of discursive practice and social interaction (Edwards 1997).

The contribution from our study comes from the in-depth look at the accounting practices of ordinary Malaysians in discussing multiculturalism. To our knowledge no one has done a discursive analysis of Malaysians of different ethnic/religious backgrounds in dialogue. As ordinary Malaysians they draw upon their own personal experiences as well as on broader ethnopolitical discourses in criticizing, defending, or telling their side (Ellis 2006, 2010). The issues raised about multiculturalism are unavoidably politicized. These diverging ethnopolitical positions are reflected in the criticism–defense accounting sequences we examined during the discussion. But among our participants there was a willingness to face sensitive issues and engage each other.

In reflecting on this project, we acknowledge that a single focus group of eight people cannot be generalized to the state of Malaysian multiculturalism. But participants' accounts do draw on and reflect the broader arguments and positions found in the press and in everyday conversations. The particularity of these accounts fills in the fine structure of how participants apply the broader ethnopolitical discourses to their own situated circumstances – how the national debate becomes localized in our group discussion. Another caveat is the artificial character of the focus group in raising sensitive issues which are normally only discussed within groups. Our opening question put the sensitive issues of ethnicity, religion, and identity immediately on the table. Given the volatile character of these issues, it is not surprising that much of the talk centered on differences, grievances, or complaints. Another factor is the presence of the American scholar. As an outsider, the American more easily can raise "sensitive questions." Participants, in turn, may draw certain assumptions about the American's stance, e.g., as neutral, as uninformed, or as critical. The discussion coordinators mentioned at the outset that they intend to write an article on this meeting. This may have motivated participants to speak out and advocate for their position. Future research might look for more naturally occurring contexts to study such as interfaith groups or inter-civilizational dialogue. As the opening epigram suggests, there is a desire among some Malaysians for a public space where citizens can talk about ethnopolitical issues, address one another's concerns, and tell their side in order to move forward.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix: transcription conventions

The transcription system used here is adapted from the Gail Jefferson (2004) system.

[	Marks overlapping utterances.
=	Marks when there is no interval between adjacent utterances.
(.)	A short untimed pause or gap within or between utterances.
:	One or more colons mark the extension of a sound or syllable it follows. The more colons, the longer the sound stretch.
?	Marks a rising intonation.
-	Marks a halting abrupt cutoff.
↑	Marks a rising shift in intonation.
word	Underlining marks a word or passage said with emphasis.
>word<	Chevrons marks a passage delivered at a quicker pace than surrounding talk.
<word>	Inverted chevrons mark a passage delivered at a slower pace than surrounding talk.
hhh	Audible outbreaths including laughter
§word§	Words or a passage uttered in a staccato voice.
( )	Empty parentheses indicate inability to hear what is said.
(word)	Transcriptionist doubt, i.e., unsure if the word is correct

Bionotes

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