

THE PEOPLE WE KNOW: SOCIAL NETWORK DIVERSITY AMONG URBAN MALAYSIANS

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ABSTRACT

Social networks are an important source for individual social actors to access critical resources (e.g., information and support) and can be variably associated with tolerance, social harmony and nation building, also under conditions of rapid urbanisation. The purpose of this paper is to provide much-needed factual and quantitative details regarding the social networks of urban Malaysians. The approach includes self-report questionnaire data obtained in the first half of 2014 from a representative sample of 808 respondents, aged 31 to 55, living in five major cities/towns across the Klang Valley, Malaysia. Findings show that urban Malaysians function within social networks that are racially, culturally and socio-economically heterogeneous, interacting with all major groups in Malaysian society, including neighbours. For the vast majority, however, the observed degree of network diversity is medium to low. The analysis

also suggests that social network diversity is no indication of the closeness or importance accorded to the social relationships involved. A final finding is that social network diversity weakly correlates with respondents' sex, race and religion but not with their age or employment status. Overall, this study seems to point to the existence, among urban Malaysians, of a dual social network system: a more closely knit homogeneous network based on family ties versus a looser and more heterogeneous network of non-family contacts. Among the non-family contacts, the observed diversity can be hypothesised to be a diversity of necessity rather than one by choice. Potential political and social implications will be discussed.

Keywords: Diversity, urban Malaysians, race studies, social network, urbanisation

INTRODUCTION

How diverse are the social networks of urban Malaysians? And what are the differences and similarities in terms of age, sex, race and religion? Questions like these have become increasingly relevant in light of both the on-going urbanisation of multiracial and multicultural Malaysia and widespread concerns—also globally—over the way in which digital culture impacts the fabric of civil society. The proliferation of social networking websites like Facebook and Twitter, for example, has sparked renewed interest in the concept of diversity (Scott 2012: 1). For the purpose of this article, however, only the effects of urbanisation will be discussed.

A recent study by Masron et al. (2012) documents in detail the rapid urban population growth in Peninsular Malaysia in tandem with concentration tendencies in the West Coast states, notably the Klang Valley (see also Guan 2014; Hasan and Prema 2013); on urbanisation in South-East Asia, more generally, see also Jones (2014). In 2010, for example, urbanisation in Malaysia reached 71 percent, up from 62 percent in 2000, with the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur registering 100 percent urbanisation and the state of Selangor 91.4 percent (Hassan et al. 2013: 24; National Census 2010). Guan (2014: 253) reports that the annual growth rate of Malaysia's urban population averaged 2.3 percent between 2000 and 2010. This process is primarily due to further industrialisation and modernisation of the country—including a shift towards economic liberalisation since the mid-1990s—followed by improved infrastructure, natural population growth and internal migration, especially city-to-city (Hassan et al. 2013; Masron et al. 2012). Much of it is also due to deliberate

government policy-making, initially promoting balanced regional development but, over the last 30 to 40 years, also aimed at raising the country's global status (Guan 2014: 258–259).

Fast-paced urbanisation has long been associated with drastic changes in the socio-economic and political dynamics among individuals, families and whole communities (e.g., Ritzer 2005: 854), with some of these changes being seen as negative. In the Malaysian context, Samat et al. (2014), for example, found that urban expansion creates employment opportunities and improves people's livelihood but may also go hand in hand with a loss of agricultural land. Studies conducted within the social sciences are more interested in whether, and if so, to what extent, urbanisation influences people's social interaction, political participation and perceived sense of safety and security, and in Malaysia, more specifically, also the relationships among urbanisation, ethnic harmony and national unity.

It is significant in this respect that, drawing on existing indexes, Hassan et al. (2013: 27) developed a Quality of Life (QOL) index that distinguishes *national unity* as a new QOL domain alongside the more usual domains of social participation, health and public safety. National unity is defined as, among other things, a society's "readiness and willingness to accept diversity," with a range of indicators such as "perception of having good relationships with other people at workplace, school, neighbourhood and other institutions;" social participation, on the other hand, includes indicators such as involvement in community activities, registration as voter and volunteering (Hassan et al. 2013: 27, 29–30). The research explored to what extent respondents in rural areas differed from urban ones with regard to the perception of their quality of life. One of Hassan et al.'s (2013) findings is that urban respondents report slightly higher levels of satisfaction with *national unity* than rural ones (62 percent and 56 percent respectively) but lower satisfaction with *social participation* (70 percent and 71 percent respectively).

Observations like these can only be fully understood by focusing more narrowly on the types of relationships that Malaysians actually enter into, whether in the neighbourhood, at work, through voluntary organisations or chance encounters in public spaces. To that aim, it is critical to collect reliable data and to provide more descriptive adequacy about urban (or rural) Malaysians' social ties with others, i.e., "the people we know" as well as the social networks themselves, their composition and degree of diversity. Secondly, it is equally important to identify recurrent patterns in these social networks relative to "who we are" (e.g., age, sex, race and religion). Statistics like these help discover the factors that may impact on the promotion of national unity or the maintenance and growth of

social harmony (e.g., the role of residential integration) while they may also eventually inform urban planning or the development of other government policies.

Before proceeding, the current study is part of a larger-scale, ongoing research project into the interactions between urban Malaysians' online activities (e.g., blogging, Facebook and online shopping) and their civic engagement and participation in traditional forms of sociality (e.g., membership in neighbourhood associations, time spent in public parks and frequency of visiting places of worship). Although these and related topics have been extensively studied in other parts of the world, detailed studies of actual social networks among Malaysians—based on either personal ("ego-centric") or complete ("socio-centric") networks (Kadushin 2012: 17)—are relatively scarce, and the same applies to the availability of recent descriptive social network data. It is this empirical gap that the present paper, at least partially, seeks to address. There is, of course, a substantial and influential body of contemporary Malaysian scholarship—including a great amount of survey data—that pertains to social life (for example, ethnic diversity or the "new middle class") in urban settings (e.g., Embong 2001a, 2007; Evers and Korff 2004; Holst 2012). Where relevant to the more specific research topic of "the people we know" within the context of social network theory, these and similar references will be discussed below.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following four distinct but related research questions have guided the study. They are all descriptive questions (Creswell 2003: 113).

1. What categories of social actors are the social networks of urban Malaysians composed of?
2. What is the degree of diversity of urban Malaysians' social networks?
3. What is the degree of personal closeness within urban Malaysians' social networks?
4. To what extent are the above characteristics of social networks associated with differences in urban Malaysians' age, sex, race, religion and employment status?

For all questions, the key concept "social networks of urban Malaysians" will be measured and analysed in terms of the closeness of neighbourhood ties and the occupation, race and religion of the social network linkages reported. More detail on the study variables will be provided in the *Method*

section. Given the descriptive and exploratory nature of the current study, no distinction was drawn at this stage between dependent and independent variables and no hypotheses were formulated. Inferential statistics on the associations and causal or predictive relationships is still work in progress, and will be reported in the near future.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of micro-level social interaction and macro-level societal issues (e.g., national unity, democracy, public health, crime and poverty) in terms of social networks has a long history. Social network analysis, more particularly, dates back to the early 1970s (for a critical overview, see, among others, McGloin and Kirk 2010). Due to space limitations, this paper will not attempt a comprehensive overview of the field. For present purposes, it is sufficient to introduce the relevant key concepts "social network" and "social network diversity" and to review some of the existing Malaysian literature. More extensive discussions of social network theory and social network analysis can be found in, among others, Lin and Erickson (2008), Kadushin (2012) and Scott (2012). Note that many concise article-level introductions are available across such disciplines as criminology, family studies or medicine (e.g., Keim 2011; Kelly et al. 2014; McGloin and Kirk 2010).

Social Networks

The concept "social network" is usually defined as a set of social actors, whether individuals, groups or organisations, and the relationships (linkages or ties) among them (Brass 1992; see also Kelly et al. 2014); it is "the web of social relationships that surround an individual and the characteristics of those social ties" (Berkman 1985: 255).

Characteristics

Networks vary structurally in terms of *size* (the number of people or "units" included in the network), *composition* (socio-demographic aspects of the network units/partners such as age, ethnicity, education, occupation, social status, kin versus non-kin, etc.), *density* ("the proportion of realised relationships to the maximum number of possible relationships between the network partners") and *diversity* or heterogeneity (Keim 2011: 22).

Additionally, individual network linkages can be described in terms of *geographical dispersion/location* (e.g., the neighbourhood, the workplace, shopping malls and other public or semi-public spheres), *multiplexity* ("the measurement of the existence of multiple ties between nodes" such as the fact that a family tie can also be a business tie) and *tie strength* (as weak or strong). Strength can be operationalised in terms of the *contact frequency* among the network members (e.g., number of visits or text messages). See also Kadushin (2012: Ch. 3).

Diversity

Keim (2011: 22) defines social network diversity/heterogeneity as "the measurement of differences for network-partners for nominal/metric data." Put differently, it is "a collective measure of all ties in a given network" (Kelly et al. 2014: 3). Diversity thus contrasts with *homogeneity*, i.e., the extent to which the social network partners are similar (e.g., they all belong to the same lower-middle-income bracket). Distinct types of ties include kin and friendship; the ones examined in this study are occupational and neighbourhood (or residential) ties only. Note that social network diversity should not be confused with the notion of ethnic diversity or *ethno-diversity* as defined by, among others, Evers (2014: 38), i.e., "the degree of variety of ethnic groups living together on a common territory." As such, measures of ethnic diversity do not provide information as to the nature and/or frequency of social contacts across ethnic groups (see also below).

Occupational Ties

Gathering data about the various occupations making up a person's social network is a valid and reliable measure of diversity because occupations "vary in prestige" while at the same time, both higher and lower-prestige occupations offer equally unique opportunities (e.g., a lawyer versus a nurse). It follows that "[t]he more people someone knows in different occupations, particularly a range of occupations, the more likely he or she is to have access to a range of information and resources [tied to income, education, and authority]" (Hampton et al. 2011: 7). Occupational ties contrast with personal ties based on, for example, family members, friends or neighbours; these various ties may overlap with and reinforce occupational ties, a phenomenon referred to as multiplexity (see above). For ego-centric network research, diversity of occupational ties is measured by means of a so-called *position generator*, which is also an indicator of access to networked resources—for more information, see, among others,

Kadushin (2012: 170–172). For present purposes, it is sufficient to understand that even casual or weak-tie acquaintanceships with people in another, especially higher-prestige occupational class affords functional benefits.

Neighbourhood Ties

Neighbourhood social ties can be simply defined as the ties that exist among people living in the same neighbourhood, i.e., the social network ties among its residents. However, since these ties may include, and often coincide with, kinship and friendship linkages, the notion is somewhat more problematic in its use and interpretation in social network analysis. Like many other constructs, neighbourhood-level social ties can be measured in a variety of ways such as degree of "neighbouring" (or how people living in close proximity interact with each other, i.e., their informal daily interactions), the number of friends and relatives who live in the same neighbourhood, the nature of these social ties as pro-social or antisocial, etc. See, for example, Cullen and Wilcox's (2013: 338ff) discussion of neighbourhood ties in the context of crime and social control. To quote Hampton et al. (2011: 3), "familiarity with neighbors tends to be strongly and positively associated with network diversity." Yet, neighbourhood networks provide less diversity than other voluntary associations due to, among other things, the self-selection involved in choosing where to live and the homogeneity that this self-selection creates (for more details, see, among others, Hampton et al. 2011: 3–4).

Note that the resources afforded by a diversity of social relationships are often theorised in terms of "social capital." Following Coleman's (1988) functionalist approach, the notion can be usefully defined as a "resource for [rational or purposive] action," which is "embodied in relations among persons" and consists in three forms: "obligations and expectations, which depend on trustworthiness of the social environment, information-flow capability of the social structure, and norms accompanied by sanctions" (S118–S119). As borne out by numerous studies, someone's social network diversity has a favourable effect on their social capital. Having social capital in its turn has been shown to benefit, among other things, an individual's—sense of—well-being, his or her financial well-being, occupational and social upward mobility as well as adjustment to new environmental conditions (Kadushin 2012: 162–163). Physical health gains have likewise been amply documented (e.g., Cohen and Janicki-Deverts 2009; Kelly et al. 2014), also for developing countries in Asia (Kim 2013).

Determinants of Social Network Diversity

In general, research has shown that age, sex and race can all be meaningfully associated with participation in traditional social settings and network diversity (Lin and Erickson 2008). A comprehensive list of demographic factors can be found in, among others, Hampton et al. (2011: 8–9). It includes age, sex, race/ethnicity, marital status, education, employment status, type of housing, etc. These so-called "attribute data" differ from the "relational data" that pertain to the "contacts, ties and connections, and group attachments and meetings" among social agents (Scott 2012: 3).

Although race/ethnicity plays a prominent role in many social network studies and research agendas, religion has so far received comparatively less attention. Hampton et al. (2011), for example, does not include religion among the control variables in their U.S. survey; neither does Blokland and Van Eijk's (2010) analysis of the social networks in a mixed inner-city neighbourhood in the Netherlands. Merino's (2011) review of the literature on religion concludes that it may strengthen a community's inward orientation to the point where it leads to increased spatial and social isolation from others, risking more negative racial attitudes and stronger in-group ties and preferences. In other words, and to refer back to the "quality of life" survey (Hassan et al. 2013) mentioned earlier, it may reduce, and thus negatively affect, national unity at the level of neighbourhoods. It is not this article's intention to explore this issue further or offer more in-depth discussion. Rather, by incorporating religion as a variable, the present study only wishes to demonstrate awareness of its relevance, especially in the Malaysian context.

Social Network Diversity in Malaysia

Of all the main variables in play in the current study, it is especially urbanisation itself and urban neighbourhoods that have been extensively studied in Malaysia, especially in disciplines such as architecture (e.g., housing), urban planning and economics. In sociology, there is also a rich and varied literature on ethnic diversity in Malaysia and its relationship to processes of social class formation, identity construction and nation-building. This is understandable in view of the fact that "the Malaysian civil society is steeped in ethnic awareness and an ethnic slant in sociability" (Embong 2001a: 21). The research is often conducted against the backdrop

of broader societal trends such as development, modernisation, urbanisation and globalisation.

As for urbanisation, Evers and Korff's (2004: 11) volume on South-East Asia examines "the ideas, concepts, and struggles underlying the social construction of the city by the urban inhabitants themselves." In their discussion of Malaysia, the main argument is that *urban social creativity*—i.e., the creativity involved in sharing the religious, social, commercial and political space in the city—can be related to the deeper, historical contrast between the rural, so-called *kampung* outlook of the Malays and the more metropolitan mode of living of the (migrant) Chinese (Evers and Korff 2004: 115). Research into the emergence of a relatively affluent Malay middle class has shown that these underlying ideological differences have changed considerably, at least, in urban and suburban areas. As Goh (2001) points out, however, there is a persistent divide between lower-income Malaysians and those who benefit from the accelerating pace of modernisation. The yearning for local traditions (e.g., among some Malays) sits uneasily with the new opportunities (e.g., education, ownership, entrepreneurship) created by governmental policies since the 1970s as well as Malaysia's capitalist development and market forces (Embong 1998: 86; 2001b). Arguably, developments like these influence the composition of people's social networks in urban settings, not only the frequency and nature of their social contacts, also across races and ethnic groups, but also their heterogeneity.

Despite the notion of *Melayu Baru*, the middle class is essentially *multi-ethnic* (Embong 2001a: 19), thus connecting Malaysians from all races, ethnicities and religions. This is not only socio-economically the case but also with respect to certain salient middle-class characteristics as identified by Embong (2001b: 87–90; 2007): upward intergenerational mobility, dependency on loans and credit, consumerism, concern with security and so on. What is important for the present study is the fact that the formation of a multi-ethnic Malaysian urban middle class helps create opportunities for increased social interaction—and social network diversity—around shared social practices (e.g., managerial occupations, life in the suburbs or shopping). The new middle class also displays *internal status differentiation*: "[i]ts members are status conscious, and practise social closure to enhance their status and remain different from other classes" (Embong 2001b: 90). The implication of such "social closure" would be increased social (often informal) interaction with other middle-class members who belong to different races or religions but also decreased social interaction with ethnically similar people that belong to other social

groupings and/or occupational categories, e.g., factory workers or farmers (Embong 2001b: 89).

An important recent study on ethnic diversity is Evers (2014), who reports considerable variation across Peninsular Malaysia for the year 2010, with Selangor and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur both belonging to the "high diversity" category, with index scores of 0.58 and 0.56 respectively. It was also found that since 1970, ethnic diversity has decreased with the exception of Penang (Evers 2014: 44). However, as was observed above, ethnic diversity is not the same as social network diversity, and the ethnic composition of social networks—also offline ones—can and do vary independently of the ethnic diversity that characterises a "common territory" (e.g., a neighbourhood, town, city, state or region). For example, the study by Blokland and Van Eijk (2010) concludes that living in an ethnically diverse neighbourhood does not correlate with higher social network diversity, even among "diversity-seekers," i.e., people who would, for example, shop or eat out locally. Given that the current study took place in the Klang Valley, it is important to be reminded that the survey respondents live in ethnically highly diverse settings.

As far as social networks proper are concerned, research seems to focus on issues of political participation and/or is conducted in relation to social media, online communities and similarly mediated forms of interaction. There is a growing number of studies discussing these and related social issues for certain well-defined segments of Malaysia's population, e.g., the young urban middle class (Hashim et al. 2012; Uimonen 2003) or the elderly (Momtaz et al. 2011; Selvaratnam and Tin 2007). Among white-collar office workers and professionals, the use of social media for political purposes is now well established, with 45 percent being actively engaged in online discussions and 53 percent posting political messages (Hashim et al. 2012). An analysis of online media use, political participation and voting intentions (Willnat et al. 2013: 557) found, moreover, that "online media use was positively associated with higher levels of political participation among Malaysian voters." The use of social networking websites has also gained ground in higher education, with around 85 percent of students—i.e., the next generation of professionals and employees—who regularly interact with their peers, mostly, to socialise and to create informal learning opportunities (Hamat et al. 2012). At the other extreme, Minhat and Amin (2012) examined social support perceptions among Malaysia's growing number of elderly. It was found that "[s]ocial activity was the only leisure activity shown to have significant correlation with [...] perceived social support from family and friends," thus providing indirect evidence for the importance of maintaining a social network.

However, these and other studies that were consulted do not measure the actual composition (or heterogeneity) of their respondents' online social networks. To give an example, the extant literature does not provide answers to such questions as: How many Indians does a middle-class urban Malay businessman know? What is the nature of their relationship: colleague, shopkeeper, neighbour or in-law? And how strong is their relationship (e.g., a close friend, nodding acquaintance, etc.)? Hamat et al. (2012) do report that about 50 percent of university students also interact with their tutors or lecturers, which would thus increase the diversity of their respective social networks. However, the diversity of social ties like these may only apply to the online community itself—and not beyond. Reference can be made here to an interesting study by Jaafar (2014). She concludes from her detailed analysis of online communities such as *MalaysiaMAYA.com* or *VirtualFriends.Net* that there is indeed potential for multi-ethnic online communities to increase participants' social capital and to contribute to social integration; however, transferring social capital gains from an online to an offline medium (e.g., a neighbourhood, the workplace) remains a challenge.

Finally, mention should be made of Holst's (2012) study of the processes of ethnicisation and the construction of "ethnicised identities" in Malaysia. His empirical analysis is partly based on quantitative interviews with a sample of 1,000 Malay and Chinese university students. Holst (2012) is interested in describing students' inter-ethnic friendship ties, both in their hometowns and at university, and students' perceptions of which ethnic group is easier to make friends with. Findings are interpreted in light of the number of languages spoken and also correlated with, for example, socio-economic status (i.e., father's income). Although he does not adopt a social network approach and limits his sample to university students rather than examining a wider range of working-age adults as in the current article (see the *Data Source* section below), Holst's (2012) multi-disciplinary account is relevant in that it challenges the sedimented, often self-serving discourses about Malaysia as being rigidly and statically composed of three separate, homogenous groups (Malay, Chinese and Indian). Equally importantly, however, his work identifies and discusses opportunities for trans-ethnic cooperation—at least, among Malay and Chinese university students—despite the existence of constraints imposed by ethnicised education policies (e.g., *bumiputera* quotas).

To conclude, the studies reviewed above all gain special relevance in light of the multiracial, multi-religious and multicultural make-up of the country (National Census 2010) and the current government's *1Malaysia* programme aimed at "embracing diversity" through "emphasising

assimilation to a new national identity that supersedes ethnic divisions" (Oxford Business Group Malaysia 2010: 19). Though a case can thus be made for more social network research, at the same time, caution has to be exercised: in a recent large-scale study of social networks in Japan, Ikeda and Richey (2012: 94) argue that theoretical constructs and empirical generalisations obtained in the United States, or more broadly the West (countries with higher scores on *individualism*), do not necessarily apply to Asia (with countries scoring higher on *collectivism*)—see also Merluzzi (2013: 883–884). It is crucially important then to first collect, describe and analyse reliable data and to try and provide systematic accounts of Malaysians' social networks, whether online and offline.

METHOD

Data Source

Data collection consisted in a survey questionnaire adapted from Hampton et al. (2011), divided into respondents' characteristics and three major sections on respectively their Internet use (types of activities and frequencies), social activities (e.g., participation in public-sphere activities or membership in organisations) and social network linkages. For present purposes, the answers to only nine questions out of the total of 25 will be considered, namely, those that relate to the respondents' socio-demographics and the diversity of their social networks (see the section *Variables* below).

Being interested in Malaysians' social network diversity against the backdrop of continued urbanisation, the population for this study was defined as the Klang Valley, the country's most highly urbanised region. It includes the country's capital city, Kuala Lumpur, with a population of about 1.6 million (National Census 2010). The total population of the Klang Valley is estimated at 7.5 million. In other words, the Kuala Lumpur area alone accounts for 21.3 percent of the total population with the remaining 78.6 percent living in the rest of the Klang Valley. Data were sourced from the five survey sites from February to May 2014 (Table 1). To ensure representativeness in geographical scope, questionnaires were also administered in the cities of Petaling Jaya and Klang and the towns of Rawang and Kajang, resulting in the following distribution of cases (percentages in parentheses).

Table 1: Sample by race and survey site.

| Survey site | Race | | | | Total (%) |
|---------------|-------------|-------------|------------|-----------|-------------|
| | Malay | Chinese | Indian | Other | |
| Kuala Lumpur | 105 | 62 | 27 | 8 | 202 (25.0%) |
| Petaling Jaya | 78 | 57 | 17 | 5 | 157 (19.4%) |
| Klang | 78 | 53 | 16 | 5 | 152 (18.8%) |
| Rawang | 78 | 56 | 15 | 2 | 151 (18.7%) |
| Kajang | 74 | 54 | 18 | 0 | 146 (18.1%) |
| Total (%) | 413 (51.1%) | 282 (34.9%) | 93 (11.5%) | 20 (2.5%) | 808 (100%) |

As Table 1 shows, the sample was further stratified by race (i.e., representing the ethnic composition within the Klang Valley as based on the National Census 2010).

Variables

Neighbourhood Ties

Given the exploratory nature of the current study, only one measure is distinguished: the number of neighbours who live close by that a person knows by name (see also Hampton et al. 2011: 8). Seeing that respondents have to choose from among "None," "Only some," "Most" and "All" along a 4-point scale, the concept thus gauges both a quantitatively and qualitatively salient aspect of neighbourhood ties.

Social Network Diversity

Following Hampton et al. (2011: 7), diversity was measured in terms of whether or not respondents were acquainted with people in 22 occupations ranging in prestige from hotel bellboy to Chief Executive Officer. In case of a "Yes" answer, respondents also reported the degree of social closeness (*tahap keakraban hubungan*). Note that two occupations had to be adjusted to make the list suitable for use in Malaysia: Congressman and middle-school teacher were replaced by respectively Member of Parliament (*Ahli Parlimen*) and secondary school teacher (*guru sekolah menengah*).

Additionally, a respondent's social network position was determined in terms of acquaintanceship/friendship with people belonging to different races (three items) and religions (four items). The number of relevant survey

items (occupation, race and religion) thus totals 29, with measurements conducted along the same 5-point scale: "No one," "Yes: not close at all," "Yes: less close but still important," "Yes: close" and "Yes: very close." Social network diversity will be further operationalised by means of an additive index based on the relevant items (see the next section).

As a final note, the present study did not consider size or contact frequency as variables; the main reason is that the number of social ties or the frequency of interaction does not necessarily create social network diversity. Certain types of close-knit families, for example, have internal networks that are large, dense and multiplex but lack heterogeneity.

Socio-Demographic Variables

Of the many socio-demographic factors associated with social network diversity, only sex, age, race, religion and employment status will be considered in the present paper. As for age, given the focus on the diversity of social networks among working-population adults, only people aged between 31 and 55 were included. The assumption was that people over 30 would have more work experience, would have changed employment more frequently, would be more likely to be married and with children, would be more integrated in a particular neighbourhood or community and would be more active participants in a variety of social activities. All of this would then produce richer and more interesting data in the form of stable and more varied and extended social networks than those typical of teenagers and young adults. Cross-tabulation of age and sex of all 808 survey respondents can be shown as follows.

Table 2 reveals roughly similar percentages for men and women but also that the sample is slightly biased towards people aged 31–40. Note that the above categorisation of age is more fine-grained than those usually found in the literature (e.g., the National Census 2010), where the focus might be on the working-age population as a whole (people aged 15–64) rather than on people at different stages in their life.

Table 2: Sample by sex and age.

| Age group | Sex | | Total (%) |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | Male | Female | |
| 31–35 | 167 | 192 | 359 (44.4%) |
| 36–40 | 45 | 66 | 111 (13.7%) |
| 41–45 | 35 | 45 | 80 (9.9%) |
| 46–50 | 51 | 39 | 90 (11.1%) |
| 51–55 | 93 | 75 | 168 (20.8%) |
| Total (%) | 391 (48.4%) | 417 (51.6%) | 808 (100%) |

For the breakdown of the dataset by race, see Table 1 above. In terms of religious affiliation, 422 of the respondents are Muslim (52.2 percent), 200 Buddhist (24.8 percent), 111 Christian (13.7 percent), 70 Hindu (8.7 percent) and 5 "Other" (0.6 percent). In passing, every single respondent who ticked the "Malay" box in the questionnaire form ($n = 413$) also gave, without exception, "Muslim" as their religion.

Finally, as in Hampton et al.'s (2011: 8) study, employment status was divided into "full-time employed," "part-time employed" and "not employed for pay" (e.g., MA student or housewife [*suri rumah*]); instead of "other," two further categories were distinguished: "self-employed: professional" (e.g., architect) and "self-employed: business owner" (e.g., shopkeeper). The survey sample displays the following percentages for these five categories: 194 full-time employed (24.0 percent), 154 part-time employed (19.1 percent), 200 not employed for pay (24.8 percent), 130 professional (16.1 percent) and 130 business owner (16.1 percent). Though these categories may give some broad indication of the likely range of jobs represented in the sample, the survey questionnaire as such did not ask the respondents in employment to state their occupation.

It should be noted that the employment status percentages are the result of quota sampling and do not reflect the current situation of Malaysia's or the Klang Valley's working-age population, e.g.: in 2011 the number of self-employed (*bekerja sendiri*) stood at 15.6 percent of the employed labour force (Analysis of Labour Force in Malaysia, 2010 and 2011; 2013: 11) compared with a much higher 32.2 percent in the 2014 dataset, indicating over-representation even after adjusting the denominator.

Analysis Procedure

All analyses were performed using SPSS Statistics 22.0. Frequency distributions were calculated for all variables (though only some will be shown in this paper). In addition, where values on ordinal (ranked) scales could be meaningfully reinterpreted as quantifiable ones, descriptives will be generated to facilitate comparative analysis. When comparing two (categorical) variables, cross-tabulations and contingency tables will be provided to show their joint frequency distribution. To assess the strength of association among relevant pairs of variables, use will be made of Spearman's rank correlation coefficient.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Frequencies

A first significant finding is that only a very small minority of urban Malaysians do not know any of the names of the people with whom they live in close proximity. As Table 3 shows, the central tendency is to know at least "Only some" of the names (*sesetengah sahaja*), definitely not "Most" or "All."

Table 3: Neighbourhood ties.

| | Frequency | % |
|-----------|-----------|------|
| None | 44 | 5.4 |
| Only some | 531 | 65.7 |
| Most | 189 | 23.4 |
| All | 44 | 5.4 |
| Total (%) | 808 | 100 |

To continue with race and religion, Tables 4 and 5 show the number of respondents that know people who belong to their own or another race or religion; the tables also show, in case the answer is "Yes," how the respondents self-rate the closeness/importance of those ties.

Table 4: Social ties by race, acquaintanceship and degree of closeness.

| Acquaintanceship | Race | | |
|-----------------------|-------|---------|--------|
| | Malay | Chinese | Indian |
| No one | 45 | 69 | 82 |
| Yes: not close at all | 33 | 98 | 139 |
| Yes: less close | 68 | 160 | 151 |
| Yes: close | 108 | 146 | 126 |
| Yes: very close | 554 | 335 | 310 |
| Total | 808 | 808 | 808 |

Table 5: Social ties by religion, acquaintanceship and degree of closeness.

| Acquaintanceship | Religion | | | |
|-----------------------|----------|----------|-------|-----------|
| | Muslim | Buddhist | Hindu | Christian |
| No one | 48 | 107 | 111 | 103 |
| Yes: not close at all | 33 | 111 | 141 | 128 |
| Yes: less close | 67 | 148 | 163 | 128 |
| Yes: close | 90 | 126 | 115 | 109 |
| Yes: very close | 570 | 316 | 278 | 340 |
| Total | 808 | 808 | 808 | 808 |

It can be concluded from the data that the majority of urban Malaysians are "close" to "very close" with someone who differs in race or religious affiliation, whether or not these people live nearby.

Descriptives

This section presents the descriptive statistics for occupation, race and religion, and next, the social network diversity index (henceforth, SNDI) that can be computed from them. Table 6 displays the results in descending order, with the highest mean first.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics (occupation, race and religion).

| Value | Frequency | | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|--|-----------|-------|----------|-----------|
| | "No" | "Yes" | | |
| Muslim | 48 | 760 | 4.36 | 1.165 |
| Malay | 45 | 763 | 4.35 | 1.145 |
| Chinese | 69 | 739 | 3.72 | 1.338 |
| Christian | 103 | 705 | 3.56 | 1.474 |
| Indian | 82 | 726 | 3.55 | 1.404 |
| Buddhist | 107 | 701 | 3.54 | 1.450 |
| Hindu | 111 | 697 | 3.38 | 1.449 |
| Secondary school teacher | 155 | 653 | 2.97 | 1.320 |
| Security guard | 177 | 631 | 2.58 | 1.237 |
| Policeman | 253 | 555 | 2.56 | 1.364 |
| Full-time babysitter | 312 | 496 | 2.55 | 1.507 |
| Nurse | 261 | 547 | 2.47 | 1.333 |
| Taxi driver | 273 | 535 | 2.46 | 1.366 |
| Hairdresser | 292 | 516 | 2.35 | 1.333 |
| Receptionist | 275 | 533 | 2.34 | 1.244 |
| Administrative assistant in a large company | 311 | 497 | 2.31 | 1.277 |
| Personnel manager | 316 | 492 | 2.31 | 1.307 |
| Lawyer | 348 | 460 | 2.24 | 1.346 |
| Professor | 370 | 438 | 2.14 | 1.303 |
| Chief Executive Officer of a large company | 385 | 423 | 2.10 | 1.272 |
| Computer programmer | 382 | 426 | 2.10 | 1.261 |
| Operator in a factory | 387 | 421 | 1.97 | 1.163 |
| Bookkeeper | 434 | 374 | 1.95 | 1.209 |
| Janitor | 383 | 425 | 1.94 | 1.128 |
| Writer | 485 | 323 | 1.85 | 1.248 |
| Production manager | 492 | 316 | 1.84 | 1.230 |
| Member of Parliament | 516 | 292 | 1.76 | 1.180 |
| Farmer | 533 | 275 | 1.71 | 1.163 |
| Hotel bellboy | 601 | 207 | 1.46 | 0.914 |

For all variables, $N = 808$ (no missing values), with 1 as the minimum score on the 5-point scale ("No one") and 5 as the maximum ("Yes: very close"). The frequencies refer to the respondents (in absolute numbers) who either

do not know ("No") or do know ("Yes") someone in a particular occupation or belonging to a particular race or religion.

It can be concluded from Table 6 that urban Malaysians' social networks are diverse in the sense that 21 out of 29 items (or 72.4 percent) have means (or average values) higher than 2, meaning that most respondents are personally acquainted with at least one person in that category; for only 8 out of 29 items (or 27.6 percent) are the means lower than 2. This finding is even more significant in view of the very low standard deviations. As for the occupations least attested, practically no one in the dataset knows a hotel bellboy, farmer or Member of Parliament. As can be ascertained from the frequency column in Table 6, only 207 out of 808 respondents (or 25.6 percent) know, for example, a hotel bellboy (though not very well at all), compared with, for example, 653 (or 80.8 percent) who report a close or somewhat less close (but still important) social relationship with a secondary school teacher (the highest mean of all occupations).

The descriptives further corroborate the patterns observed in Tables 4 and 5 above: the social networks of Malaysia's city/town dwellers include people from outside their own racial categories, especially Malays, followed by Chinese and Indians. The highest mean score for all religions is Islam, which precedes Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Unlike the values for the variables listed above, values for SNDI (as based on these 29 items) range from a minimum of 1 to a maximum of 4.66 (rather than 5), with $M = 2.57$ and $SD = 0.622$. The latter statistic indicates that the data points are all clustered around the mean, lending support to the conclusion that for the average survey respondent, diversity does *not* equate with importance or closeness. Urban Malaysians have access to a heterogeneous range of social contacts ("the people we know"), including "some" neighbours they know by name (see Table 3). However, the analysis shows that most of these contacts are neither particularly close nor very important. On the 5-point scale, 2.57 falls between "Yes: not close at all" and "Yes: less close but still important."

SNDI values were next divided into three categories: low (1.00–2.33), medium (2.34–3.66) and high (3.67–5.00). This kind of regrouping and recoding facilitates comparison and provides a more general overview of the dataset, as can be seen from the following 3-by-4 contingency table.

Table 7: Social network diversity by neighbourhood ties.

| | SNDI | | | Total (%) |
|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|
| | Low | Medium | High | |
| None | 25 | 107 | 111 | 44 (5.4%) |
| Only some | 179 | 111 | 141 | 531 (65.7%) |
| Most | 66 | 148 | 163 | 189 (23.4%) |
| All | 13 | 126 | 115 | 44 (5.4%) |
| Total | 283 (35.0%) | 482 (59.7%) | 43 (5.3%) | 808 (100%) |

The table shows that for the vast majority of respondents (94.7 percent), the degree of network diversity is medium (59.7 percent) to low (35.0 percent).

To round off this section, the above SNDI findings regarding "the people we know" can also be meaningfully related to "who we are," i.e., the survey respondents themselves. The question then becomes whether social network diversity in the Klang Valley varies according to a person's sex, age, race, religion and/or employment status. The key descriptive statistics have been summarised in the following overview table.

The highest scores within and across these socio-demographic variables show that Indian/Hindu respondents have the most diverse social networks of all ethnic/religious groups, followed by the full-time employed and to a lesser extent, professionals and business owners; next, men score higher on social network diversity than women; finally, a more heterogeneous set of social ties is also typical of people in their early thirties as well as those in their late forties.

Further cross-tabulation (not shown here) reveals that women aged 36–45 report the lowest SNDI (2.34) but also that their social networks become more diverse again as they grow older; by contrast, among men, the diversity score seems to be age-insensitive, remaining steady at around 2.63 between the ages of 31 and 55. Interestingly, of all respondent subgroups, it is Indian/Hindu men in their early fifties who have the highest SDNI score (3.06). Discounting the scores for "Other," the lowest SNDI score—i.e., the highest homogeneity—can be found among self-employed Christian women aged 46–50 (2.04), followed by Christian men of the same age (2.21) or aged 41–45 (2.20) who work part-time. On the status of employment, women working part-time aged 41–45 score the lowest (2.10) while men "not employed for pay" in their late thirties score the highest (2.91). Overall, however, high social network diversity seems to be mainly a characteristic of (1) full-time female employees (2.75), with peaks in the age brackets 31–35 and 46–50, and (2) self-employed men (2.66–2.67), especially those who own a business (2.70) and are Indian (2.96) or Malay (2.73). Note that as

larger numbers of socio-demographic features are combined and the picture becomes more fine-grained, absolute frequencies per table cell decrease, rendering valid generalisations difficult.

Table 8: Social network diversity by sex, age, race, religion and employment status.

| | <i>n</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------|-----------|
| Male | 391 | 2.63 | 0.628 |
| Female | 417 | 2.51 | 0.610 |
| 31–35 | 359 | 2.63 | 0.590 |
| 36–40 | 111 | 2.48 | 0.687 |
| 41–45 | 80 | 2.46 | 0.585 |
| 46–50 | 90 | 2.57 | 0.703 |
| 51–55 | 168 | 2.54 | 0.607 |
| Malay | 413 | 2.52 | 0.643 |
| Chinese | 282 | 2.54 | 0.588 |
| Indian | 93 | 2.91 | 0.515 |
| Other | 20 | 2.35 | 0.612 |
| Muslim | 422 | 2.53 | 0.644 |
| Buddhist | 200 | 2.56 | 0.620 |
| Hindu | 70 | 2.90 | 0.569 |
| Christian | 111 | 2.54 | 0.510 |
| Other | 5 | 2.21 | 0.844 |
| Full-time employed | 194 | 2.72 | 0.717 |
| Part-time employed | 154 | 2.39 | 0.623 |
| Not employed for pay | 200 | 2.44 | 0.592 |
| Self-employed: professional | 130 | 2.66 | 0.508 |
| Self-employed: business owner | 130 | 2.64 | 0.533 |

Correlations

Two more statistics must be considered before moving on to the discussion. First, as for the key social network variables under investigation in this study, the results for network diversity reported above (Table 6) seem to reinforce those for neighbourhood ties (Table 3). More statistical validity can be obtained, however, by subjecting these two ordinal variables to the Spearman's rank correlation measure of strength of association. It can be concluded that there is indeed a statistically significant—albeit weak—positive relationship between the number of neighbours that someone knows

by name and the diversity of that person's social network ($R_s = 0.137$, $p < 0.01$).

Secondly, correlational analysis for each of the socio-demographic variables relative to SNDI can be represented as follows.

Table 9: Spearman's rank correlation coefficients.

| Variable | R_s |
|-------------------|---------|
| Age | 0.065 |
| Sex | 0.131** |
| Race | 0.174** |
| Religion | 0.133** |
| Employment status | 0.035 |

** $p < 0.01$

Only SNDI correlations with sex, race and religion are statistically significant, suggesting a positive contribution of these three variables to someone's social network diversity as well as the likely significance of corresponding between-groups differences. In other words, and referring back to Table 8, the higher SNDI scores that were attested for men (2.63), Indians (2.91) and Hindus (2.90) may not be due to chance only. Though differences among the races and religions are relatively small (see Table 8), it is thus possible to speculate that Indian Hindus define a homogeneous subset within the sample; the implication would be that in terms of social network diversity, Malays, Chinese and "Other," on the one hand, and Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and "Other," on the other, have more in common with each other than with either Indians or Hindus. It should be noted, however, that the correlations are all weak, ranging from 0.131 to 0.174, i.e., well below the 0.300 cut-off value (Saunders et al. 2003: 363).

As a final point, here as elsewhere in the findings, race and religious affiliation tend to yield comparable social network diversity results. The main reason lies in the much-observed "inherent closeness of Malay ethnicity and religion" (Hassan 2001: 134), which is borne out by the strong positive and statistically significant correlation between both variables ($R_s = 0.914$, $p < 0.01$).

DISCUSSION

To summarise the findings for each of the four research questions identified at the beginning, the study has provided empirical and statistical evidence that generally: (1) the social networks of urban Malaysians are composed of all the major race/religion categories in Malaysia; (2) when including neighbours and occupations, the overall degree of diversity of these networks is medium to low; (3) the degree of personal closeness involved in the various social ties is also medium to low; and (4) correlations with respondents' socio-demographics have been found to be statistically significant for sex and race/religion but not for age or status of employment.

Of course, the race/religion frequency distributions reflect to a large extent the ethnic composition of the 808 respondents; for example, the larger proportion of Malays explains the extreme values for "No one" and "Yes: very close" in the Malay and Muslim columns respectively, compared with the other categories. Given the inherent connection between both, this larger proportion also accounts for the striking similarities between both factors in the study, perhaps at the risk of glossing over certain more subtle or complex social network tendencies among non-Malay/Muslim and non-Malay/non-Muslim respondents. Further research—based on a larger sample of these respondents—is surely needed, also with respect to other observations or patterns to emerge from the dataset. For example, whether the higher values for "Yes: very close" are due to a higher number of presumably closer same-race/religion ties (as part of largely *homogeneous* social networks) has not yet been investigated.

Having said that, the survey data show that at least in urban areas in the Klang Valley, "the people we know" include the major races and religions that make up Malaysia's population. Interestingly, this heterogeneity cannot be solely attributed to the Klang Valley's new middle class represented in the sample. Employment status—along with occupation—is the basic criterion of social class (e.g., Embong 2001b: 85) but the lack of any statistically reliable correlation between employment status and social network diversity implies that social class as such has not been a major contributing factor. Significantly, also respondents who are "not employed for pay" report ethnically and culturally diverse social ties. Note that the network diversity findings differ from those obtained for neighbourhoods in London (Butler 2003) or Rotterdam (Blokland and Van Eijk 2010): in the towns and cities of Malaysia's Klang Valley, the high degree of ethnic diversity—linked as it is to the high degree of urbanisation (Evers 2014: 44)—does translate into ethnically heterogeneous networks. This kind of network heterogeneity does not seem to extend, however, to

neighbourhood or occupational ties, both of which are less strong. Moreover, respondents know "only some" nearby neighbours by name while the occupational diversity data reveal that the occupational ties realise only about 72 percent of all possibilities, with ties being neither particularly close nor important.

The conclusion seems warranted that the social networks of urban Malaysians are moderately diverse but also that they involve weaker, so-called *arm's-length* ties, rather than the stronger, more *embedded* ties that are typical of tightly knit networks (Uzzi 1999). It can be derived from the data that these closer, more embedded ties apparently only hold for family members, i.e., the largely *homogeneous* nuclear and/or extended kinship groups characterised by shared race and religious affiliation. None of the neighbourhood or occupational ties score high in terms of either the personal closeness or importance attached to them; on the assumption that family ties are by definition close and important, it follows that the neighbourhood and occupational networks must be non-kin. In other words, both the observed network diversity and the arm's-length nature of the ties are among non-family contacts only.

To the extent that urban Malaysians' *non-kin* social networks can be characterised as displaying so-called "weak-tie network diversity" (Granovetter 1973), it may follow that on this dimension at least, city/town-level *social integration* is also weak. After all, as Kelly et al. (2014: 3) put it, "[t]ie strength is a measure of closeness operationalized as the level of intimacy or frequency of contact between the respondent and his or her network members. [...] Similar to network size, measures of tie strength provide information about social integration." The absence of strong ties has also been associated with a lack of trust. The predominantly Western literature on social network diversity has found that "communities with greater diversity tend to be those in which there is less interpersonal and inter-ethnic trust" (Kadushin 2012: 183).

On the other hand, the stronger collectivist values among Asians—also in Malaysia—might imply that tie strength is not necessarily so directly associated with either social integration or trust. Further investigation is required to test these associations empirically. Moreover, as Granovetter's (1973) groundbreaking work has shown, weak-tie social networks can be very effective: weaker ties allow one to reach beyond one's own (often much less diverse) network and build bridges with contacts, information and additional resources provided by networks that would otherwise have been out of bounds. Within the functionalist "social capital" perspective, the argument is then that such bridges can be effective in achieving certain objectives at the individual level (e.g., finding a job).

Regardless of the strength and effectiveness of urban Malaysians' non-family network linkages (and the exact degree of social integration and trust associated with them), the current study seems to point to the existence of a dual network system rooted in a kin versus non-kin dichotomy: a more closely knit homogeneous network based on family ties versus a looser and more heterogeneous network of non-family contacts. Whether the family-based network is smaller or larger has not been examined. The main observation, however, is that interpersonal closeness and importance would then only be a feature of relationships within the former network.

If so, the findings of this paper would support Merluzzi's (2013: 883–884) discussion of social capital in collectivist national cultures. As she points out, social network research cannot be dissociated from key cultural values: the relationships that people make (or not) have to be interpreted in light of the meanings and values placed on them within a particular culture. Collectivism—commonly associated with Asia—values "cooperation, consensus, [and] the importance of the group." This core value privileges the creation of cohesive social networks consisting of a "close set of interconnected contacts." The social networks typical of collectivism tend to be networks based on *closure* of the social structure (a person's contacts are themselves interconnected) (Coleman 1988) rather than *brokerage* (a person's connections with "disconnected others") (Burt 1992).

What rapid urbanisation in the past two decades might have added to this tendency is the emergence—in Malaysia, that is—of a moderately diverse network of perhaps mainly *functional* ties aimed at achieving individual social and economic benefits within the city or town setting. As pointed out above, social capital is about access to resources for action, and thus, ultimately, about greater effectiveness. Hypothetically, the 31–55-year-old Malaysians in the survey can realise this greater effectiveness without having to bond too strongly with "strangers" belonging to different racial or religious categories. The observed social network diversity and the interdependence that it entails can perhaps be described, borrowing a phrase from Patton (2010: 89), as a "diversity of convenience," or even a diversity *of necessity* rather than one *by choice*. Observations like these are in keeping with general characterisations of Malaysia as "a society of multi-ethnicities," i.e., a society in which diverse cultures co-exist without necessarily blending into each other (Embong 2002). What social network studies add to this is a clearer appreciation of what this observed co-existence entails in terms of people's sociability.

CONCLUSION

Interest in social networks, their composition and diversity, is rarely purely academic; research findings often have political relevance or come with social implications, motivating the development of programmes for change and transformation. The focus of the current study was exclusively on Malaysians in urbanised areas. Regarding the social consequences of urbanisation, and quoting early work by the Chicago School, the dominant perception has been that urbanisation produces "(1) impersonality and anonymity of everyday life, (2) loss of trust among people, and (3) various forms of social disorganisation" such as crime, drugs and gang violence (e.g., Ritzer 2005: 854). As for (1) and (2), both may lead to reduced social participation, less civic engagement and for some citizens, even partial withdrawal from public or semi-public life. Arguably, in racially and culturally diverse nations like Malaysia, these tendencies may also affect social harmony and the value of the democracy, both of which remain, to all intents and purposes, valuable public goods. Enhancing social cohesion is therefore often a priority in terms of governmental initiatives (for an overview of the urban planning policies related to social integration, see, e.g., Guan 2014). As was observed above, the current government seeks to promote ethnic harmony and national unity through the *1Malaysia* programme.

This article has not addressed any of these larger-scale macro-societal issues directly nor attempted to relate the various quantitative findings more closely to the wider academic scholarship of Malaysian Studies (e.g., research into the new Malaysian middle class). It is hoped, however, that other researchers will find the data useful in their own work. The main objective was to present facts and figures, and to discover statistically significant patterns among urban Malaysians. Another shortcoming is that the social network analysis was limited to ego-centric data and that only the diversity or heterogeneity of social ties was considered. It would be both interesting and instructive to construct socio-centric networks for various categories of Malaysians although this would require a different methodology from the one adopted in this study.

All the same, the following observations can be made in conclusion. First of all, there is robust statistical evidence that (1) urban Malaysians entertain varied social relationships well beyond the family and (2) their non-family networks tend to be relatively heterogeneous and inclusive in terms of race and religion. In other words, positive effects can be expected in terms of social capital gains and the way in which social capital

influences social and political participation, and eventually, the quality of the democracy (e.g., Ikeda and Richey 2012). However, seeing that men entertain more socially diverse networks than women, these positive effects may not accrue to women in equal measure, and the same caveat holds for particular race/religion subgroups. Secondly, research has found that "more heterogeneous social networks are important in exposing people to opposing viewpoints, the development of rationale for one's own viewpoints, and the positive development of tolerance for those unlike one's self" (Mutz 2002, quoted in Porter and Emerson 2013: 733–734). Further study is required to find out whether these effects also materialise when the social network diversity consists of mainly weaker ties (as observed in this study) and when the social network is online and/or international. Regarding the latter, the "wired lifestyles" of Malaysia's urban middle class have led to greater (and more global) social network diversity and also exposure to alternative discourses, impacting national identity (re)construction and nation building (Uimonen 2003). The extent to which this has been at the expense of participation in traditional social settings will be examined in a separate study.

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