

## **USING SUPERORDINATE GOALS TO ENHANCE SOCIAL INTEGRATION AMONG STUDENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The research motivation comes from our observation of a weak social integration between local (Malay) and International students at the International Islamic University Malaysia. It is based on a social experiment where a situation of superordinate goals (i.e., goals that can't be achieved unless two groups work together) was introduced. Using observation and open-ended questionnaire, it was found that before the experiment took a place, 45% of international students had negative perceptions toward Malays while 37% of Malay students had negative perceptions toward international students. When participants got socially integrated during the experiment, 97% of Malay and international students had positive perceptions of each other. The experiment had two stages. The first where there was no need to communicate with the other group. The second stage was where all groups needed each other to fulfil specific tasks. It was found that the time consumed to communicate with another group in the first stage was 9%. However, in the second stage, 41% of the time was used to communicate with the other group. The wider implications of this study are explored in the discussion.

**Key words:** social integration, superordinate goals, leadership

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 1954, Muzafer Sherif's conducted the Robbers Cave experiment. He organized a summer camp for boys in Oklahoma and randomly divided participants into two groups.

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In the first week, each group started bounding. Neither group knew about the existence of the other group. During the second week, the two groups were brought together and competition was encouraged. This led to increased hostility between the two groups. To end the experiment, a situation was created in which the water-supply needed to be fixed. This problem was too big for any one group to solve so the two groups worked together to solve this shared problem. This created a superordinate goal. This strengthened the social relationship between the two groups' members to the extent that they became friends (Forsyth, 2006).

In the light of the multiple problems that exist in the world today in which groups are confronting one another regularly, the use of superordinate goals to reduce conflict and enhance social integration seems promising. However, very little research has been done since the initial experiment with regards to superordinate goals.

Thus, emerged the idea of testing the usefulness of superordinate goals to enhance the integration of students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). IIUM has a student population which comprises 70 percent Malaysian and 30 percent international students. Typically, students socialize with individuals of their own cultural background.

#### *Aim of the study*

The aim of the study is to see whether superordinate goals can lead to greater social integration among local and international students at IIUM. Three objectives were identified.

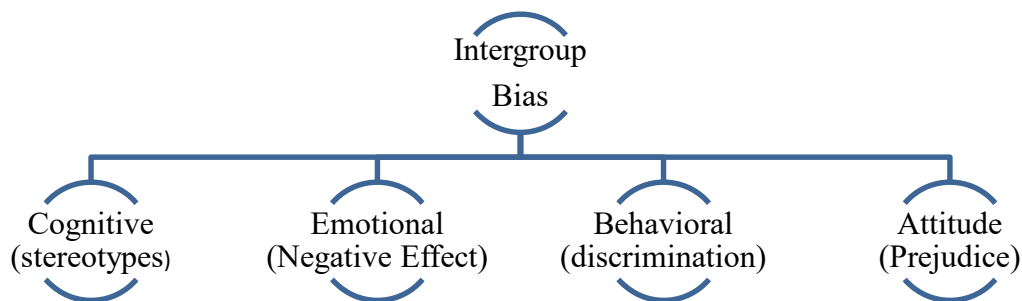
- 1- To identify the perceptions of in-group members toward out-group members before and after the experiment.
- 2- To examine whether superordinate goals can enhance social integration between Malay and international students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on superordinate goals is somewhat confusing because different authors use a different terminology. Superordinate goals are goals that cannot be achieved unless two groups work together (Forsyth, 2006). A similar construct is “intergroup contact”. Intergroup contact assumes that members of two groups will experience less conflict if

they regularly interact with each other. Research suggests that intergroup contact can be effective on the condition that members of both groups have similar social status (Gomez & Huici, 2008). Superordinate goals seems to work even when differences of status are involved. Jasis (2013) replaced the term superordinate goals with “collaborative goals”. These are goals that can bring mutual benefits to both groups. Jasis (2013) focused more on achieving goals rather than strengthening intergroup relationships.

Relationship between groups can be understood generally in two main perspectives, competition and cooperation. The first is where a certain group does the best to achieve its interests at the expenses of the other group while cooperation is when groups work together to achieve mutual interest (Forsyth, 2006). Typically, in-group members are evaluated in a more favorable way in comparison to out-group members. This creates an in-group and out- group bias Forsyth (2006). In some cases, in-group members look at themselves as those having more human characteristics compared to out-group members who have fewer human characteristics (Brown & Hegarty, 2005, Rohmann, Niedenthal, Brauer, Castano, & Leyens, 2009). Figure 1 summarizes the types of biases that are commonly found in the literature according.



**Figure 1:** Types of Bias  
Source: Qawasmeh (2015)

Qawasmeh (2015) notes that intergroup bias can take four different forms: cognitive (stereotypes), emotional (negative effect), behavioral (discrimination) and in attitude (prejudice) (e.g., Mackie & Smith, 1998, Wilder & Simon, 2001, Engberg, 2004, Dovidio, et al, 2004, Denson, 2009). Changing the perception of people toward other group members would in fact change others' perception toward in-group members (Gomez & Huici, 2008). Numerous studies have been conducted to identify effective ways to reduce intergroup bias. Table 1 identifies five ways to reduce bias (Qawasmeh, 2015)

**Table 1:** Ways to Reduce Bias

Ways to reduce bias	1. Conduct diversity workshops to increase awareness
	2. Curricular and co-curricular diversity activities
	3. Peer-facilitated training
	4. Gaining support from authority figures
	5. Providing quality information related to out-group

Source: Qawasmeh (2015)

Diversity workshops have been found to enhance students' awareness toward interracial relationships (Engberg, 2004). Denson (2009) demonstrated that both curricular and co-curricular diversity activities reduce intergroup bias among universities students. Another approach is peer-facilitated training (Engberg, 2004). If in-group members who demonstrate positive attitude towards other groups are supported by authority figures, this can lead to a reduction in bias and an increase in social interactions (Gomez & Huici, 2008). Gomez and Huici (2008) used "vicarious intergroup contact" in their study aiming to reduce prejudice among groups. Participants were divided into three groups. The first group had minimal information about the out-group. The second group and the third group were provided with accurate information about the out-group abilities and competencies. The finding indicated that the group with the most accurate information had the highest positive attitude and less prejudice towards out-group members (Gomez & Huici, 2008).

A special challenge relates to the social integration of groups from different races and ethnicities. Race is a controversial topic. It can be construed as being biological, a social construct, part of cultural diversity and part of power relations

(Johnston, 2014). Typically, most of the studies on this topic have been conducted in the United States. In Malaysia, the scenario is equally complex. Malaysian are divided into multiple ethnic groups (the dominant ones being Malays, Chinese and Indians). Over the last decade, the Malaysian government has tried to attract a substantial portion of foreign students – including students from Africa, the Middle East, China, and Bangladesh among others (Taman, 2013). For educational institutions, diversity can be classified into three categories. The first is the structural one that presents the proportion of different races and cultures within a specific institution. The second is classroom diversity that includes both curricular and co-curricular activities. The last is the informal social interaction diversity where students interact outside the boundary of schools such as social and sport activities (Denson, 2009). To date, few studies have explored the degree of social integration in Malaysian universities. One study did suggest though that minority groups develop more interracial relationships (Tamam, 2013). Typically, Malaysian Indian students have more interracial interactions than Malaysian Malays and Malaysian Chinese (Tamam, 2013). Tamam (2013) suggests that Malaysian Malays identify themselves based on their race whereas Malaysian Indians identify themselves based on their nationality. Lian (2011) investigated how African students who study in Malaysia form friendship with other Malaysian and international students. Almost 70 percent of African students can easily establish friendship with international student but only 10 percent establish friendship with Malaysian students (Lian, 2011).

In the light of these facts, scholars have explored ways to enhance social interracial integration in universities around the world. Some Malaysian universities have made it compulsory for students to pass racial relationship and culture understanding courses. However, this has not improved interracial social integration (Tamam, 2013). Some scholars have noted that the quality of programmes organized by universities is sometimes at fault (Rose-Redwood & Rose-Redwood, 2013). Tamam (2013) recommends that student clubs in Malaysian universities should be formed on a non-racial basis. Most scholars (Rose-Redwood, 2010, Tamam, 2013) stress the need to empower minority groups in universities by increasing their representation in students' clubs, association and classes.

To date, few scholars have explored the use of superordinate goals to enhance interracial social integration in universities. One exception is the study done by West, Pearson, Dovidio, Shelton, and Trail (2009). Thus, these authors wanted to test whether

the use of superordinate goals could solve the challenge of interracial social integration in universities worldwide.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The limited numbers of studies involving superordinate goals meant that we could not simply rely on the standard methodology in the field. Due to a variety of constraints, these created an experiment that lasted about two hours. In the first stage, groups of Malay students and groups of international students worked in the same room. They had to solve a problem. This problem did not require social interaction with other groups. Basically, they were given questions written in form of codes. They firstly needed to decode the questions and then answering them. In the second stage, new coded questions were given to each group. This second problem required the help of other groups. Each code is equivalent to one alphabet letter. To identify relevant letter, each group was given two answer sheets in form of wheel. The first wheel was used to decode the three questions in the first stage. The second wheel was used to decode the four questions in the second stage. It is important to mention that different questions were given for each group in the first stage in order to reinforce the common identity. However, in the second stage, same questions were given to both groups. At this stage, questions touched the problem of social integration between Malay and International. Table 2 reveals questions that require answering after decoding them by both groups.

**Table 2:** Questions that Require Answering after Decoding Them by Both Groups

<b>Stage One</b>	
<b>Questions for Malay groups</b>	<b>Questions for international groups</b>
List the most three things you like about your traditions	List three benefits you gain being international students
What is the most glorious part about your history?	State the most awaited moment being student abroad
What type of food is unique in your culture?	What are the countries you came from?

**Stage Two**  
**Questions for Malay and international groups**

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State two reasons why there is no efficient interaction between international and Malay students.

Everyone should choose and tell a person from the other group a touching story  
Choose different person from the other group and discuss ways to enhance social Interactions.

The two groups should agree on one initiative aims to promote social integration.

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Open-ended questionnaires were used before and after the experiment. Everything was recorded and the authors analysed the videos afterwards to observe the changes in behavior of each group. A pilot test was conducted to verify and improve the research protocol.

The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) offer courses for bachelors, masters and PhDs. Its total student body numbers 25,000 students from about 100 nationalities in three campuses and a variety of faculties. It was therefore impossible to find a representative sample of the student body. A statement was posted on the IIUM Facebook asking students to participate in this research. Each volunteer would receive US\$ 3 as a token of appreciation. We ended up with a sample of 39 volunteers (19 Malay students and 20 international students). It is assumed that the triangulation of the theory, the video recording and the open-ended questionnaire helped to ensure that the findings are reliable and valid.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

The data presented is based on open-ended questionnaires and the video recordings. Although it is difficult to relate the findings of the video recordings, they were useful for the researchers. The difference in body language of students before, during and after the experiment was crystal clear. If need be, certain sequences could be rewound until the researchers were satisfied that they had understood what happened. As two researchers were involved in analysing the data, the coding didn't depend on the interpretation of one individual.

After some thought, the decision was made to present the data mainly in percentages. Presenting qualitative data in percentage seems counter-intuitive at first but it still seemed the easiest to highlight the change in the patterns of the behaviour throughout the experiment.

### *Perception of Others*

The first research question dealt with the perception of Malay and international students before the experiment. One has to appreciate that both Malay and international students are socialised differently. Most Malay students enter a one-year pre-university programme (called a foundation programme) after their secondary school exams. During this period, Malay students form relationships that will last throughout their studies. Some Malay students enter into the university directly into the first year. They often complain that they can't socialise with Malay students who went through the foundation programme. All international students enter into the first year. Thus, despite the university's best efforts, right from the start, there is a separation between international students and Malay students. Typically, Malay students and international students form homogenous groups. In some classes, instructors insist in mixing students but this is not a university policy, so it's at the discretion of the instructor. In other words, prior to the experiment, patterns of behaviour had been formed over several years.

Another consideration is the language factor. Although all IIUM students are at least bilingual, when Malay students form a group, they will naturally speak in Malay. If Malay students need to work with international students, they have to speak in English. Although most Malay students have a reasonably good command of English, it still requires more effort than communicating in their mother tongue.

An example of a negative perception would be, "*the other group does not want to take and give help*". An example of a neutral perception would be, "*my perception is neutral, it is not a competition/ they are just foreign students with their own culture*". An example of a positive perception would be, "*I have positive perceptions, with more heads we could finish quicker*". The overall results are shown in Table 3.

It is observed that each group tends to have a negative perception of the other, with international students having a more negative perception.



**Table 3:** Overall Perception of Malay and international students (%)

Perception of Others	Malay	International
Negative	36	45
Neutral	42	35
Positive	22	20

Both Malay and international students were asked to record their thoughts during the experiment. Participants reported 53 thoughts. The researchers classified these into four main categories. The first relates to the process of completing the task. The second relates to communicating and seeking help from the out-group. The third concerns the need for in-group members to strengthen their own identity. The last category concerns the desire to finish quickly.

Typically, Malay students concentrated on completing the task (about 40%), communicating with the out-group (about 40%), building the in-group identity (10%) and completing the task quickly (about 10%). International students were concerned with completing the task (about 38%), communicating with the out-group (about 38%), strengthening the in-group (about 17%) and finishing quickly (about 7%). This is not surprising as international students form a more heterogeneous group compared to Malays.

It should be noted that as the experiment evolved, the nature of their thoughts evolved. One participant wrote, *“I was completely concentrating on solving our problems. Moreover, processes at beginning were going smoothly. Thus, we did not give intention to Malay group. However, when things become more difficult, we thought that they might have a person who is smarter than us.”* Another participant wrote, *“At the beginning, I thought it is difficult to finish the experiment but after a while I realized that discussing together would change things”*.

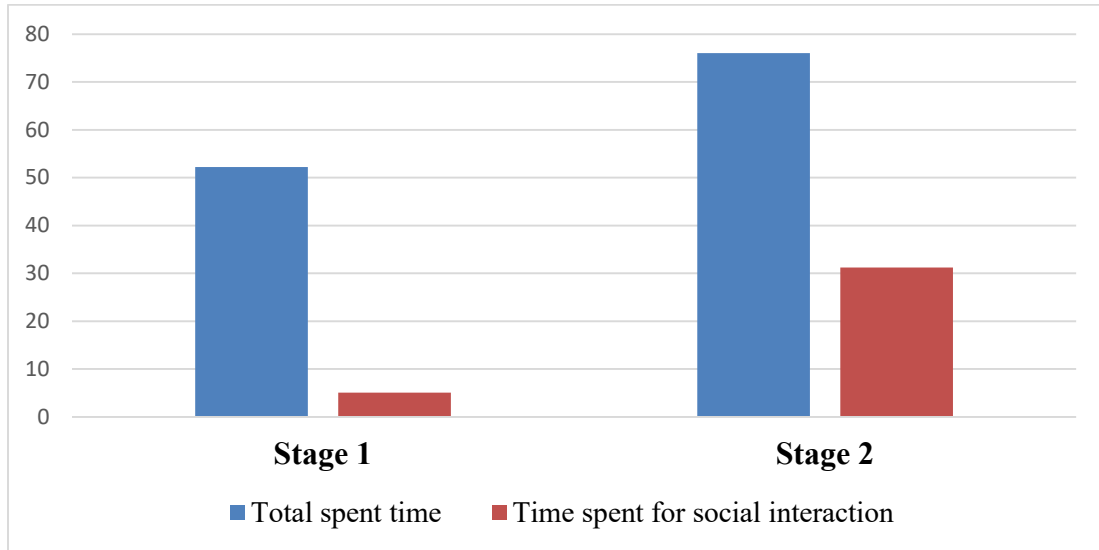
#### *Superordinate Goals*

The second research question was whether the use of superordinate goals would enhance the social integration between international and Malay students. The interaction between the groups was recorded.

There were four groups of Malay students, and four groups of international students. A indicates Malay students and B indicates international students. They were working next to one another so that A1 could interact with B1 and so forth. Table 4 shows the average results for Malay and international groups while Figure 2 visualizes the results.

**Table 4:** Time Spent during Each Stage for Groups of A and B (Minute)

Groups	First Stage		Second Stage	
	Total spent time	Time spent for social interaction	Total spent time	Time spent for social interaction
A1 vs. B1	53	8	72	30
A2 vs. B2	45	4	72	29
A3 vs. B3	66	8	74	31
A4 vs. B4	45	0.5	86	35
<b>Average</b>	<b>52.2</b>	<b>5.1</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>31.2</b>



**Figure 2:** Average Time Spent during Each Stage for Groups of A and B

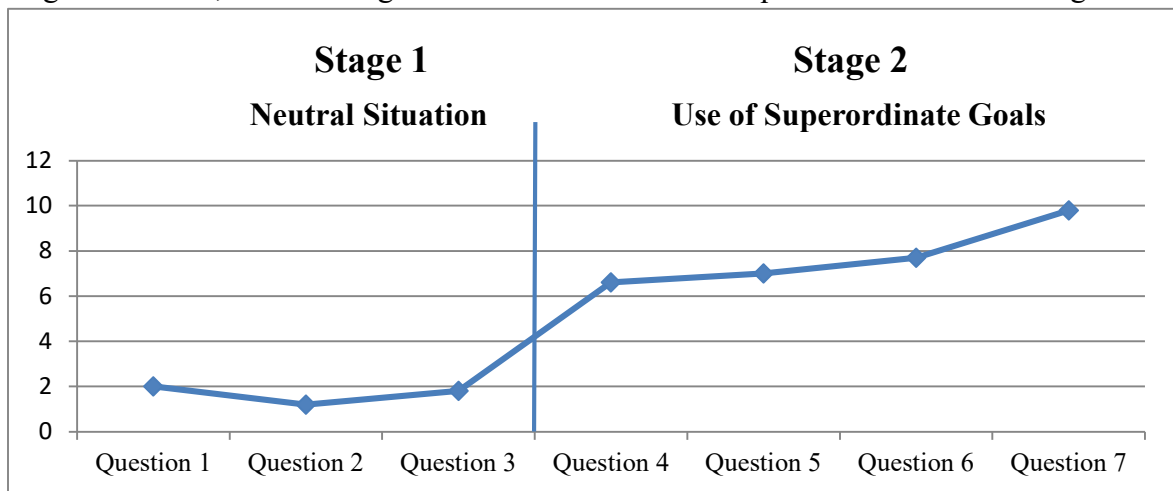
The average time spent by groups of A and B to complete the first stage is 53 minutes. Out of this time, an average of 5.1 minutes were spent socializing between

groups, which is almost 9.6% of the time. However, the average time spent in the second stage was one hour and 16 minutes. Members of both groups spent an average of 30 minutes working on the questions together, which represents 41% of the time in the second stage. Table 5 shows the time spent to interact between groups based on each question.

**Table 5:** Time Spent by Each Two Groups Interacting with Each Other Based on Every Question (Minute)

Groups	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5	Question 6	Question 7
A1 vs. B1	6	1	1	8	6	6	10
A2 vs. B2	0.5	1.5	2	5	6	8	10
A3 vs. B3	1.5	2.5	4	6.5	7.5	7.5	9.5
A4 vs. B4	0	0	0.5	7	8.5	9.5	10
Average	2	1.2	1.8	6.6	7	7.7	9.8

Figure 3 shows the average time spent to interact between groups based on each question. It is clear that groups' members interacted more in the second stage compared to the first stage. Moreover, interaction got more intense when more questions are resolved together.



**Figure 3:** Average time spent for social interaction between A groups and B groups based on each question (Minute)

The common behavior among groups was that the Malay groups' members took more initiatives to approach the international groups. In fact, the international groups had

never approached the Malay groups as a group; it was only one or two members who approached the Malay groups. Thus, this behavior is consistent with the perceptions of Malay students who had less negative perceptions toward the international before they got involved in the experiment.

Apart from observing the recordings made, the researchers listened to the conversations throughout the sessions. The following points seemed relevant.

1. *Leadership:*

The leader of each group played an essential role in either increasing or decreasing social integration. As the questions became more complex, the influence of the leader diminished as each group had to seek the help of other groups to complete the tasks.

2. *Friendship:*

When groups have strong friendship ties, they communicated less with the other group. Certain groups had weaker friendships ties so communicating with others was easier.

3. *Shyness:*

Generally, many students were shy to communicate with the opposite gender in the other group. This was less of a problem for senior students.

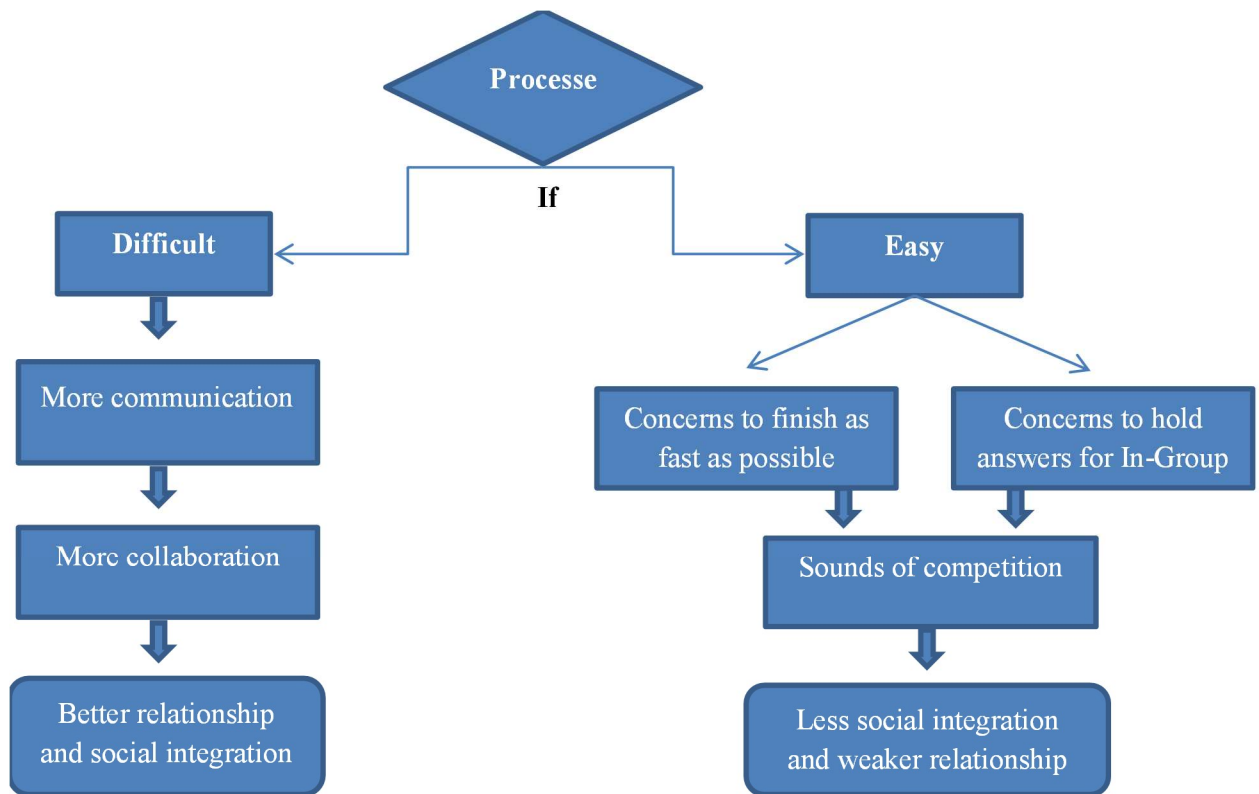
4. *Trust:*

Junior international and Malay students seemed to trust less members of the other groups. They would ask questions to members of the other group and then return to their group and solve the problem within their group. The seniors were more trusting of others. They would generally work on the same problem side by side.

One might argue that the amount of time spent together might not be a valid way of measuring social integration. Sherif (1958) found that it was not enough that in-group and out-group members spend time together. They had to work on a shared problem to develop meaningful bounds. Our experiment required students to spend time together and work on a shared problem. We suspect that many social integration programmes do not work because the assumption the organisers make is, “*if they are spending time together, they are becoming more integrated*”. We believe that our experiment shows that getting

groups to solve a difficult problem together is key to creating social integration in universities. To conclude, it seems that the use of superordinate goals does enhance social integration between Malay and international students.

We derived figure 4 based on the analysis of all thoughts came to participants minds during the experiment and the behaviors of participants throughout stage one and two.



**Figure 4:** Building Social Integration

We relied on the answers from the open-ended questioners to assess the perception of participants after the experiment. Thirty-eight participants out of 39 ended up with a positive perception of others. Only one participant had negative perception who stated that “*still the same situation*”. Some of the positive comments include, “*they*

*really gave cooperation and worked as one team/ the other group interacted and helped my group/ it is not hard to find solutions if we work together/ I realized that they are helpful and friendly / we engaged very easily/ everyone communicated perfectly in sharing ideas and stories/ they have confident to speak, they became friends”* Some participant wrote, *“my first impression was wrong, the other group was really nice/ / my perception was completely wrong, they are charming, helpful and respectful”*

To summarise, 45% of international students had negative perceptions of Malay students while 37% of Malay students had negative perceptions of international students before the experiment. After the experiment, 97% of participants reported positive perceptions towards others. The amount of time spent communicating between groups jumped from 9% to 41%. Our conclusion is that superordinate goals significantly enhanced the social integration of Malay and international students. These findings are consistent with the theory of superordinate goals (Forsyth, 2006).

#### *Importance of the Findings*

When we started this project, several things became obvious. First, the theory of superordinate goals – if it were widely applied in education and in commercial organisations – can go a long way to helping the social integration of ethnic groups all over the world. Second, we were surprised at how little research has been done in this area since Sherif (1958). It is possible that the initial research – taking a group of people in a park for a couple of weeks – cannot easily be applied in a more routine context. Other researchers have used a methodology that yielded interesting insights but don't apply in most organisations. Qawasmeh (2015) was able to use a methodology that involved people working in an office environment and requiring nothing more sophisticated than pen and paper. This makes it a lot easier to replicate in educational institutions or in commercial organisations. As long as individuals understand that the purpose of using superordinate goals is not to solve problems more effectively but to integrate different groups of people, then these authors assume that this study can easily be replicated.

### *Limitations of the Findings*

There are a variety of limitations that could be mentioned (e.g., sampling, the reliance on open-ended questionnaire and so forth). The main limitation seems to be that we were not able to assess whether these changes in perceptions towards others were temporary.

## **CONCLUSION**

The data was collected in 2016 and formed the main body of an MBA final year project. For multiple reasons, the data was not previously published. Five years later, the urgency of using superordinate goals seems more and more obvious. The Covid-19 crisis has showed that in times a crisis, people have a tendency to focus on their personal problems and ignore the bigger picture.

This seems to happen at the individual level, the organizational level, at the national level, and at the international level. Strangely enough, the literature on superordinate goals seems to be not very well known. Few leaders seem to use superordinate goals in the public discourse. Instead, there seems to be a shift to relying on identity politics to push through divisive issues. At the international level, the Trump presidency and Brexit stand out.

The authors hope that this study will be seen in this light. Ultimately, the data of this study seems quite trivial – the social integration of 39 students is hardly noteworthy. However, we believe that this study is important because it is another reminder of the power of superordinate goals to bridge social and cultural divides between different people.

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