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Abstract

This thesis seeks to explain the high educational attainment, that is, university education, among children of Chinese-Malay parentage. Using social capital theory, I posit that by having a parent from the dominant Chinese group, these mixed children have been able to tap on a wider and richer pool of social resources, giving their educational performance a boost. It is such networks that form a conduit for the transmission of cultural competencies required to succeed academically. As such, Chinese-Malay children enjoy a distinct advantage over their 'pure' Malay peers. At home and in school, the former benefit from a merging of worldviews and networks, expanding the reservoir from which their cultural repertoire can be honed. It is precisely the *social* aspect of the advantages enjoyed by Chinese-Malay children, through their access to a more promising opportunity structure in society that this paper highlights.

1. Introduction

My interest in the educational attainment of children of Chinese-Malay parentage was piqued when I began to notice, year after year, an increasing proportion of them being represented among the top Malay students in national examinations. In 2012, almost a quarter of the recipients of the annual awards for the best General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A-Level) candidates, presented by the Malay-Muslim community self-help group Mendaki went to students of Chinese-Malay heritage (Mendaki, 2012). This was despite the generally low levels of Chinese-Malay intermarriage in Singapore: in 2010, there were only 153 of such unions, out of the total number of 4,133 Muslim marriages recorded under the Administration of Muslim Law Act (Saw, 2012: 120; Department of Statistics, 2011). Furthermore, from general observations, there appears to be a disproportionate number of Chinese-Malay students among Singapore Malay undergraduates at the three local publicly funded universities. Confirming my perception that such mixed children tend

to have high educational performance was my own respondent, herself of Chinese-Malay heritage who remarked that “mixed children are supposed to be ‘smart’”. This curious statement, which I later adopted as part of the title for this academic exercise, seems to suggest that the intelligence of Chinese-Malay children has a genetic basis, a proposition I soundly reject owing to its biological determinist premise. How can we then explain this social phenomenon? Indeed, answering this question is all the more pertinent in the face of the persistent educational gap between Malays and the other ethnic groups in Singapore. It is therefore hoped that by embarking on this exploratory study on Chinese-Malay children, we can better understand the “mechanisms” (Bourdieu, 1996: 1) underlying Malay educational underattainment too.

Literature on the theory of social capital (Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2000) posits that individuals with diverse and extensive social networks have greater access to resources affecting “action outcomes” (Lin, 2000: 786) such as finding a well-paying job. We also know that the differential distribution of social capital in society is reflective of the inequality that exists between different status groups such as gender, class or ethnicity. In fact, social capital theorists postulate that one way for individuals from subordinate groups to transcend their disadvantaged social status and improve their life chances is to forge social ties with members of dominant groups in order to gain “better information and influence” (Lin, 2000: 787). To be precise, scholars have argued that finding connections across ethnic boundaries (Stanton-Salazar and Dornbusch, 1995) can help ethnic minorities gain a better status. For example, in the United States, it has been found that the social isolation of blacks from whites (Blau, 1991 quoted in Lin, 2000) contributed to the poor educational performance of black children in a white-dominated culture. It is not too far-fetched to suggest therefore, that in an ethnically stratified society (Chiew, 1991: 138) like Singapore where the Chinese have a higher average skill level compared to Malays who are underrepresented in high-skilled jobs (Straits Times, 4 July 2009) and in the local universities (Ministry of Education, 2012), it would benefit the latter to establish social ties with the dominant Chinese group. It is against this background of aggregate ethnic disparity in socioeconomic resources that motivated me to study the mobility benefits of children of Chinese-Malay parentage. By

having a parent from the dominant group, these mixed children have arguably been able to tap on a wider and richer pool of social resources, giving their educational performance a boost.

Sceptics would question the central place accorded to social networks in explaining the high educational attainment of Chinese-Malay children. In response, I argue that social networks have an indispensible role in transmitting the cultural competencies required to succeed academically. This is where Chinese-Malay children enjoy a distinct advantage over their 'pure' Malay peers: being of mixed parentage avails to them a merging of worldviews and networks, expanding the reservoir from which their cultural repertoire can be honed. The fact that cultural resources – which enjoin one to good academic performance – flow through social networks can be seen in practice via the home and school environments. At home, such children benefit from two worldviews imbued by their Chinese and Malay parents with respect to the role of education. Some may challenge this observation and accuse the author of adopting an 'essentialist' mindset. I however contend that we should instead view culture as a "tool kit" of "symbols, stories, rituals and worldviews" used by people to solve problems in different contexts (Swidler, 1986: 273). Indeed, ethnicity represents a crucial factor in the "social phenomena" affecting "parenting styles", and that ethnicity moulds a child's "subjective perception" of the world (Quah, 2003: 64-65). Quah (2003: 65) further highlights that the ways parents choose to socialise their child are influenced by the passing on of what Weber (1978: 387-390) termed as a "consciousness of kind" constituting an ethnic group. Hence, there should be no doubt whatsoever about how parents' worldviews are shaped by ethnicity. In school, having a parent from the dominant Chinese group has also enabled these mixed children to associate and build networks with both Chinese and Malay peers, enlarging the pool from which social resources can be tapped.

By showing how cultural resources flow through social networks and influence the educational attainment of Chinese-Malay children, I also intend to drive home the points that firstly, micro-level social conditions serve as an avenue for the reproduction and

amelioration of inequalities; and secondly, the "either/or" premise of the structure-culture debate is "problematic" (Sarkisian and Gerstel, 2004: 830). The former is aimed as a critique of current literature on Malay educational and socioeconomic underattainment, which has been explained largely through macro socio-historical factors. For the latter, the problematic structure-culture dichotomy is dissected when one realises that culture needs a conduit, represented by network *structures*, in order to be transmitted at home and in school. As Swidler (1986: 273) posits, culture's "causal effects" are best analysed by looking at its "strategies of action" comprised of routinised patterns and "persistent ways of ordering action" over time. Certainly, education and ethnicity are influenced by "the interaction between social and cultural factors" (Wilson, 1998: 509) and that a social capital perspective which synthesises structure and culture together would be more useful.

This thesis intends to explain the high educational attainment of Chinese-Malay children by showing how the home and school environments of such children combine to create a habitus (Bourdieu, 1977) that encourages high educational attainment, that is, university education, for the child. Using the "ethnicity as cognition" (Brubaker et al, 2004: 31) approach, I argue that (1) the high educational attainment of these mixed children can be explained from the reconstituted "*Weltanschauung*" ('worldview') (Ashmore, 1966: 215) of the child pertaining to the status of education. Such children enjoy the benefit of an upbringing which incorporates two cultural perspectives – one enjoining education as a means to achieve social status, the other, for inculcating an individual of wholesome character guided by Islamic values. This reconstitution of worldviews is translated into daily practices of childrearing – pointing to high intra-family social capital (Coleman, 1988) – conducive to academic success. (2) Beyond the home environment and in school, these Chinese-Malay children are able to identify and build networks with both Chinese and Malay peers, expanding their knowledge of cultural competence (Erickson, 1996) and earning for themselves educational returns. Having a parent from the dominant ethnic group has also gained these Chinese-Malay students social acceptance by Chinese peers and teachers in school, avoiding the negative stereotypes usually attached to 'pure' Malay students. This

social acceptance has widened for them their social networks from which resources can be tapped (Lin, 2000).

The next chapter will outline existing literature about the educational and socioeconomic state of Singapore Malays, and on the theory of social capital, in attempting to explain Chinese-Malay children's high educational attainment.

2. Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

While systematic sociological analyses pertaining to the link between ethnicity and education in Singapore are sparse (Kang, 2005: 18), the issue of persistent aggregate Malay educational and socioeconomic underattainment vis-à-vis the other ethnic groups, in particular, the dominant Chinese majority, has received considerable public and scholarly attention. As recently as 2010, the United Nations (UN) Special Rapporteur on racism, Githu Muigai, urged the Singapore government to institute "special measures" in the form of a "stimulus package" within a specific timeline to address "acknowledged historical inequalities" afflicting the educational performance of Malay students (Straits Times, 29 April 2010). Muigai noted that while Singapore's education system rests on the principle of equal opportunity for all, the educational attainment of Malays "remained below the national average" (Straits Times, 29 April 2010). In addition, Muigai suggested that Malays continue to occupy marginal positions in national life as can be seen from their underrepresentation in "senior positions of the armed forces, the police...as well as in the judiciary" (Straits Times, 29 April 2010), and not to mention, in the higher echelons of the civil service. The situation is not at all encouraging in the other employment sectors: the share of Malays in PMET (professionals, managers, executives and technicians) jobs decreased from 23 per cent in 2000 to 21 per cent in 2005, although more PMET occupations were created during the same period (Straits Times, 4 July 2009). There is hence a crucial link between achievement in school and future income earnings, and this is reflected in the "much lower" (Mutalib, 2012: 53) average occupational and income levels of Malays compared to the Chinese. To be precise, Alatas (2002: 293) documents Malays as "overrepresented" in the occupational niches of "clerks, office-boys, unskilled and semi-

skilled workers, drivers and carpenters." Thus, it is not a surprise that Malays as a group have been found to "occupy the lowest position in the economy" (Ko, 2002: 205), with the relative income position of Malays against the Chinese declining rapidly between 1966 and 1972 (Lee, 2006: 174).

2.1 Singapore's Ideology of Meritocracy & Multiculturalism

Any discussion about the educational and socioeconomic position of Malays will not be meaningful without explicating the ideological context of the Singapore state, which is premised upon meritocracy and multiculturalism. Both had their roots in the birth of Singapore as an independent political entity following its tumultuous separation from the Malaysian Federation in August 1965. Singapore's founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew viewed as incompatible Malaysia's model of consociational democracy which sought to ensure the political and economic dominance of the indigenous Malays – the bumiputeras ('sons of the soil') – in society, despite implicitly accepting it when he signed the Merger Agreement with Malaya's then prime minister Tunku Abdul Rahman. Thus, when Singapore assumed the mantle of independent nationhood, Lee's People's Action Party (PAP) government advocated an ideology of ethnic equality based on meritocracy. The former took its official status in the form of the policy of multiculturalism which enjoins "respect for and tolerance of all the ethnic groups and cultures represented in the society, and equality under the law" (Mauzy & Milne, 2002: 56), covering the three major ethnic groups of Chinese, Malays and Indians. The Chinese form the bulk of Singapore's population at 74.1 per cent of the resident population in 2010, with Malays occupying 13.4 per cent and Indians, 9.2 per cent (Department of Statistics, 2011). This principle of equal treatment for everybody regardless of ethnicity fits in nicely with that of meritocracy, defined as the belief that "each individual's social and occupational position is determined by individual achievement" only and not by ascriptive criteria such as "race, class or parentage" (Mauzy & Milne, 2002: 55). However, while meritocracy presupposes ideologically a level playing field where 'everyone' has equal access to resources to develop their potential, in practice this remains a moot point. Those from low-income households are arguably disadvantaged from the start in a system that legitimises inequality. Indeed, while education is officially seen as

the popular enabler in Singapore's meritocratic system, it invariably ends up as the vehicle through which class status and inequality get transmitted through generations. It was Lee (quoted in Straits Times, 16 February 2011) himself who made this observation when he noted that "more than half" the students at elite schools such as Raffles Institution "had fathers who were university-educated", compared to only 13.1 per cent at the maximum for neighbourhood schools such as Chai Chee Secondary. It can thus be seen that families higher up the socioeconomic ladder possess greater amount of resources which can be used to maximise their children's life chances. Furthermore, the policy of multiculturalism may act as a "powerful force against ethnic discrimination" and "chauvinism" (Hill and Lian, 1995: 93, 98), but it also serves as a "means of disempowerment" (Chua, 1998: 36). This is because by virtue of the policy's ethos in according equal status to the four ethnic categories (inclusive of the nominal category 'Others'), the option for an ethnic group to politicise its ethnic identity in order to "make claims on behalf of its own interests" (Chua, 1998: 36) is obliterated.

2.2 Educational Underattainment of Singapore Malays

The discouraging state of Malay educational performance can be gleaned from statistics made publicly available by the government. For example, we know that a disproportionately large amount of Malay students languish in the slower-track Normal Academic or Normal Technical streams at secondary school (Association of Muslim Professionals, 2010: 10). This is due in part to their poor performance at the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) where around 40 per cent of Malay students failed to achieve a pass grade for mathematics, which is a core subject, between 2002 and 2011 (Ministry of Education, 2012). In contrast, the national pass rate for mathematics at PSLE had hovered about 80 per cent during the same period (Ministry of Education, 2012). In terms of advancement to post-secondary education, the figures are equally discouraging. Only approximately 60 per cent of Malay students made it to a polytechnic, centralised institute or junior college between 2002 and 2011, with the rest being consigned to an Institute of Technical Education (ITE) which prepares its graduates for mainly low-wage vocational jobs (Ministry of Education, 2012). On the other hand, the national average for students gaining entry to a non-ITE tertiary

institution stood at around 80 per cent in the said period (Ministry of Education, 2012). The harsh reality of Malay educational underperformance is replicated at the GCE A Levels where "less than half" (Mutalib, 2005: 56) of all Malay students who sat for the examination were successful in being admitted to local publicly funded universities such as the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU). In fact, among the Singapore citizens admitted to those universities between 2001 and 2011, Malays comprised only 3 to 5 per cent, compared to the Chinese who formed the overwhelming majority at about 90 per cent (Ministry of Education, 2012). There is no doubt therefore that the Singapore Malay community is trailing behind their ethnic counterparts, in particular, the dominant Chinese group, educationally. This stubborn gap persists even though Malays have made absolute gains such as more than doubling the proportion of its Primary One cohort entering post-secondary institutions, from 36 per cent in 1990 to 81 per cent in 2005 (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, 2010).

Certainly, while several government leaders have been at pains to stress Malays' absolute educational progress over the more crucial relative interethnic differences, the former only has the effect of obfuscating the inequality in educational status. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was explicit in his preference for Malay leaders to eschew comparison with other ethnic groups, pointing out at the 3rd National Convention of Singapore Muslim Professionals in 2012 that "we should not just focus on the difference between the Malay community and the other communities" since it was a "moving target" (quoted in Association of Muslim Professionals, 2012). He concluded that where Malay educational progress was concerned, "each decade has been better than the previous one" (quoted in Association of Muslim Professionals, 2012), sidestepping the issue of the yawning interethnic disparity. Likewise, Law Minister K Shanmugam in March 2013 called for "significant optimism" in the educational future of Malay children, arguing that they were "still among the top" worldwide in terms of performance in the 2011 'Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study' (Timss) survey, with their top 10 placing

among 42 education systems around the world for both subjects (quoted in Sunday Times, 10 March 2013).

Occasionally though, the community would be cheered by stories of Malay students who have performed exceptionally well. For example, Farid Rashid and Natasha Nabila brought honour to the community by placing first nationally in the PSLE during the 1990s (Mutalib, 2012: 45). More recently, in 2012, Adil Hakeem Rafee broke a 44-year drought by becoming the second Malay ever to be bestowed Singapore's most prestigious academic award, the President's Scholarship (Straits Times, 16 August 2012). However, as Mutalib (2012: 46) rightly notes, these achievements, which often attract a barrage of media attention and constitute front-page news material, are the "exceptions rather than the rule". In fact, statistics point to a burgeoning challenge on the horizons for the community, with indications that the GCE O Level achievement gap between Malays and the other ethnic groups had widened (Association of Muslim Professionals, 2000: 139-40), on top of Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs Dr Yaacob Ibrahim's lament that the high dropout rate of Malay ITE students had reached "worrying levels" (quoted in Association of Muslim Professionals, 2010: 9).

2.3 How this Thesis is Different

The Malay-Chinese educational gap is therefore well-established. Less straightforward however, are the reasons behind the disparity in overall educational attainment. Much of the scholarly literature on the educational state of Malays appears to be caught in the problematic structure-culture divide. By attributing the Malay educational malaise to either structural or cultural determinants, one glosses over the fundamental point that human agency (culture) is "fully determined and fully determinative" (Wacquant, 2002: 244 quoted in Adzahar, 2009: 8). In short, there is a structure to culture, in that the latter provides the "ritual traditions that *regulate* ordinary patterns of authority and cooperation...(and constraining) action over time..." (Swidler, 1986: 284, emphasis mine). This paper is different from many of the previous scholarship and rhetoric on Malay educational achievement in its attempt to synthesise the structuralist and cultural perspectives. The

latter is done by examining how the expanded social networks of Chinese-Malay children have conferred on them educational advantages. These networks then act as a conduit through which the cultural resources required to succeed academically are transmitted. Indeed, children of such interethnic marriages tend to be overrepresented among top-performing Malay students in national examinations (Mendaki, 2012), and, judging from a cursory view, in the population of Malay students at the three local publicly funded universities. In fact, former Minister-in-charge of Muslim Affairs and Speaker of Parliament Abdullah Tarmugi himself is a product of Chinese-Malay marriage (Sunday Times, 1 August 2004). It is hoped, therefore, that in analysing the home environment of such mixed families, along with the children's educational experience and social networks, this paper can make a modest contribution to further understanding the reasons pointing to aggregate Malay educational underachievement. Nevertheless, let us first take a look at existing literature on the factors affecting Malay educational performance.

2.4 Influence of Home Environment & Peer Networks

As I will show, much of the work on Malay educational progress has focused on macro socio-historical determinants, rather than investigating family background and social networks together. Yet, it is those two sites of analysis representing "a subterranean level of routine (and everyday social) interactions" (Chua, forthcoming: 1) that constitute one of the main drivers of inequality, in addition to macro conditions. For example, family environment at home has been found to be a "powerful factor" influencing the academic performance of children and their "interest in learning", among others (Kellaghan et al, 1993 quoted in Quah et al, 1997: 320). Furthermore, in another study, Chua and Ng (forthcoming) find that having an educated parent "boosts educational attainment more for Chinese than Malays", adding that parental resources "seem to trickle down less" for Malays (quoted in Sunday Times, 10 March 2013).

Ethnographic surveys of Malay students' peer networks and their educational aspirations in the tradition of Ogbu (1978, 1981, 1985), Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1987) are available, but they are studied largely in isolation from the family environment. For example, Stimpfl

(2006: 82, 86) observes that Malay students in the slower-track Normal stream, many of whom having working class background betray "resistance to school conformity" because they perceive that they would never be able to achieve success in the exam-based meritocracy, and therefore "peer standing and association" among fellow Malay friends in school "provide a source of status". To them, studying and high academic achievement signify a "surrender" (Stimpfl, 2006: 86) of 'Malayness' and becoming 'Chinese'. Adzahar's (2009: 14, 16) academic exercise similarly investigates the phenomenon of peer associations in a "largely 'Malay', 'working class'" Bedok town and how they influence "perceptions of success" of Malay students. He concludes that peer relations in the neighbourhood "strongly influenced" (Adzahar, 2009: 51) the Malay youths' lack of academic motivation, thus underscoring the importance of social capital in the reproduction of ethnic inequalities.

It is this application of the theory of social capital, both 'within' (Coleman, 1988) and 'outside' (Lin, 2000) the family milieu which is lacking in studies about Malay educational and socioeconomic underattainment. Indeed, existing scholarly literature on home and peer influences on the educational achievement of Malay children remains embedded in larger works pertaining to the sociology of family or sociology of education, and not as a social capital-centred analysis. Nevertheless, the former constitute a helpful starting point for scholars interested in the link between ethnicity, family environment, peer networks and academic attainment.

2.5 Social Capital Within the Family

Within the family, Kang (2005: 34) observes that compared to Chinese parents who view education as a means to achieve high social status, Malay parents simply encourage their children to "avoid the bottom" rather than "aiming for the top". This is because Malay parents tend to adhere to the philosophy of the Malay "adat" (Kang, 2005: 35), emphasising holistic character-building for the child and eschewing the single-minded pursuit of attaining top position in school. Quah (2003: 75) finds that Buddhist or Taoist parents, who are mostly Chinese, are more likely to "discount and discourage child's opinions" and emphasise "respect for authority over reasoning" compared to parents of other religious backgrounds. This strict parenting style of Chinese parents is reflected in their tendency to use "physical

punishment” in disciplining their child, in contrast to Malay and Indian parents’ reliance on “reasoning and rules” (Quah, 2003: 76).

Arguably, the authoritarian parenting style of the Chinese may have some effect on the educational achievement of their children through, for example, the firm enforcement of a household timetable allocating slots for studying and rest. What Kang (2005) and Quah (2003) do not make specific is that this greater “attention” and “physical presence” of Chinese parents is a form of intra-family “social capital” (Coleman, 1988: 111), which acts as a conduit for the transmission of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1977) or “endowments such as cultural and linguistic competence...(ensuring success) in schools” (quoted in Abercrombie et al, 2000: 81). In fact, Coleman (1988: 109) argues that limitations in family human and financial capital can be overcome if there is a high level of social capital between the parents and children. Giving the example of Asian immigrant families in the US, Coleman (1988: 110) finds that even though the parents were lowly-educated, they managed to help their children succeed in school by purchasing “two copies of each textbook needed by the child” so that the mother could use the second book to study herself and assist her child.

Indeed, in Singapore, Hamid and colleagues (1995) find that “parental supervision” and “home environment” are correlated with the poorer “learning performances” of Malay students (quoted in Chang, 2002: 139). The salience of ethnicity and home environment is further shown in the results of Quah and colleagues’ (1997: 339) study that when parents’ ethnicity was considered, “significant group differences in mean (primary school subjects’) scores” were found between the Chinese, and “two other ethnic groups” (i.e. the Malays and the Indians).

2.5.1 Ethnicity & *Weltanschauung*

Using Brubaker and colleagues’ (2004: 52) ‘ethnicity as cognition’ approach, I argue that ethnicity should be treated as “a way of understanding, interpreting and framing experience.” Furthermore, this perspective furthers the “social constructionist agenda” since the study of cognition presupposes “socially shared knowledge of social objects”

(Brubaker et al, 2004: 52). The usefulness of the 'ethnicity as cognition' approach to examining ethnicity and parenting style is evident in the former's capacity to illuminate the way "social and cultural structures" work in "ordinary minds and seemingly insignificant everyday practices" (Brubaker et al, 2004: 53). In short, ethnicity can have a significant role in shaping one's *Weltanschauung* ('worldview'), defined as "a perspective and interpretation of the universe and its events held in a sustained way by an individual or by a group" (Ashmore, 1966: 215). For example, for the Chinese, the fact that education has a venerated status could be traced back to "the second half of the sixth century" (Miyazaki, 1981: 136 quoted in Quah, 1991: 38) with the establishment of the imperial civil service examinations. The transmission of such a *Weltanschauung* from Chinese parents to their children then constitutes a type of cultural capital, which, when acquired by the children, takes the form of "habitus" (Bourdieu, 1977), or "a system of predispositions" (quoted in Chang, 2002: 133) pointing to a home environment conducive to high educational achievement in Chinese families.

2.6 Social Capital Beyond the Family

The role of social capital beyond the family in influencing the educational aspirations and performance of Malay children has also received scant attention. This conceptualisation of social capital refers to "investment and use of embedded resources in social relations for expected returns" (Lin, 2000: 786). Arguably, in Singapore's context, those resources are mostly held by the majority Chinese community who are dominant socially, economically and politically. Indeed, the distribution of social capital then mimics inequalities in society where the former can be concentrated along gender, familial, class or ethnic lines. For example, in a forthcoming study, Chua and Ng show that Malays have "less social capital" (quoted in Sunday Times, 10 March 2013) as reflected in their possessing less contacts who are university graduates, compared to the Chinese. Chua further argues that job-seekers from minority ethnic groups such as Malays are more likely to land a high-skilled job if they are referred by a Chinese person (Sunday Times, 10 March 2013). Forging connections beyond ethnic lines and facilitating "cross-group ties" (Lin, 2000: 787) is therefore a way for Malays beset by their "minority" (Amersfoort, 1978: 222-223) status to transcend their

disadvantaged position and access "better resources and better outcomes" (Lin, 2000: 787). However, while such interethnic connections are beneficial, they are rare.

2.6.1 Bridging Social Capital

The formation of such interethnic networks through, for example, intermarriages and "bureaucratic mentor-protégé ties" (Lin, 2000: 787) avails the opportunity for a member of a socially disadvantaged group to capitalise "the strength of weak ties" (Granovetter, 1973: 1360) and unlock the quality of "bridging social capital" (Putnam, 2000 quoted in Field, 2008: 36) in accessing resources that "lie outside of one's immediate social milieu" (Johan, 2013: 136). It is precisely for this reason that this paper is studying the mobility impact of children of Chinese-Malay parentage, who tend to do better than their 'pure' Malay peers in school. Their having a parent from the dominant Chinese ethnic group has arguably opened up for them a wider reservoir from which to tap social resources and benefit educationally.

However, in Singapore's education system where students are streamed early on according to academic ability, the tendency for people of similar ethnic, educational and class background to cluster together is strengthened, as the principle of "homophily" posits (McPherson et al, 2001: 415). Among Malay students who are overrepresented in the slower-track Normal streams and in ITEs, this lack of interethnic mixing reduces opportunities for bridging social capital with the dominant Chinese, thereby equally restricting chances for Malays to enrich their social capital and attenuate their social disadvantages. As Stimpfl (2006) and Adzahar (2009) show, the peer networks of such Malay students have the effect of moderating or lowering their academic aspirations and ultimately, performance.

2.7 Critique of Current Literature on Factors Affecting Malay Educational Performance

As mentioned earlier, current literature on the educational state of Malays focuses more on macro socio-historical determinants, than the role of home environment and social networks. In the structuralist tradition, currently available works by Rahim (1998), Li (1989) and Barr and Low (2005) solidly lay the causes of the poor socioeconomic and educational

condition of Malays on the government's shoulder. Rahim (1998: 51) argues that the PAP government's perpetuation of the "cultural deficit thesis" which portrays Malays as indolent, easily contented, uncompetitive and in need of a mindset change has the effect of absolving the government from "actively assisting (the) socially disadvantaged" Malays who are overrepresented in the lower socioeconomic and educational strata. This is because the ideology of Malay cultural deficiency places the responsibility on Malays themselves to "reform their 'deviant'" ways, on top of invoking the rationale that state assistance might entrench a "crutch mentality" (Rahim, 1998: 51). Similarly, while Li (1989: 166, 174) does not deny "the effects of culture", she ultimately makes the point that "culture mirrors class and ethnic divisions" (quoted in Mutalib, 2012: 35) and that the poor educational status of Malays is linked to their being "concentrated in the lower-income sector" of the Singapore population. By placing an overemphasis on the structuralist perspective, the two authors run the risk of adopting a "one-dimensional view" (Manap, 2008: 16) of ethnicity and treating the latter as merely "class under another name" (Goldberg, 1999: 367 quoted in Manap, 2008: 16). Indeed, the structuralist framework reeks of "over-determinism" and ignores the "consciousness and agency" of social actors in negotiating the meanings attached to ethnicity and education (Adzahar, 2009: 8).

Rahim's (1998) and Li's (1989) 'blame the state' line is also adopted by Barr and Low (2005: 162) who posit that Singapore's systems of meritocracy and multiculturalism "are no longer concerned primarily with intercommunal tolerance...but are aggressive programmes of assimilation of the racial minorities into a Chinese-dominated society." In particular, they contend that the Malays' socioeconomic marginalisation is caused by "discrimination" from the dominant Chinese majority who "refuses to admit that they are dominant" (Barr and Low, 2005: 171). The co-authors attack the policy of meritocracy which to them accentuates the image of the "Singaporean ideal of 'Chineseness'" (Barr and Low, 2005: 173), that is, one obsessed by material wealth and academic grades. However, Mutalib (2012: 130) correctly surmises that the charge that the Singapore state "deliberately discriminates" against Malays is "harsh" since the outcome of government policy "should not be equated with its...objectives."

On the other side of the coin, Kassim (1980) and Zoohri (1990) rely on cultural determinants to explain the Malays' poor educational status. Kassim (1980: 125) criticises the parental attitude of Malays, saying that they are "ignorant of the needs of the child to study...(and of the) ways to create a conducive (study) environment" at home. He also argues that elements of "Malay culture" such as "over-indulgence in ritual feasts" run contrary to Islamic teachings which emphasise thriftiness, and that the "money spent could otherwise be used for educating the children" (Kassim, 1980: 130-131). However, these anecdotal observations should not be taken as conclusive evidence that such practices *explain* aggregate Malay educational marginality. Along the same cultural vein, Zoohri (1990: 5) takes a leaf out of colonial collaborator Abdullah Munshi's autobiography the *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849) by asserting that Singapore Malay rulers in the 19th century lacked traits which were "essential for economic development" such as "industriousness, perseverance, rationality" and discipline. Zoohri (1990: 4) further argues that the rulers' "neglect for education" had "immobilised" the Malay masses. Nevertheless, as Alatas (1977: 138) postulates, Munshi should not be taken as an impartial observer of Malay affairs owing to his being "a captive mind in the world of colonialism". Having internalised the ideology of the 'lazy native', Munshi was "full of praise for British rule" and turned a blind eye to the fact that Stamford Raffles, widely honoured as the founder of modern Singapore in 1819 "developed and exploited the opium trade" which had so afflicted the Malays' social condition (Alatas, 1977: 134, 138).

Furthermore, in line with the social network focus of this paper, I argue that Raffles had a major hand in perpetuating the lack of interethnic mixing and bridging social capital between the Chinese and Malays as we see today, to the disadvantage of the latter. This is because Raffles' Town Plan of the early 1820s, which compartmentalised ethnic groups such as the Chinese, Malays, Indians, Arabs and Europeans into different residential areas promoted "ethnic separation and reinforced the growth of ethnic ghetto concentrations" (Teo and Savage, 1991: 317). This segregation in living arrangements was reinforced in the workplace through the ethnic division of labour encouraged by the British colonial rulers,

where Malays for example were concentrated in "traditional fishing and agriculture" (Hirschman, 1986: 345), and the Chinese, in mining and mercantilism. According to Furnivall (1948), colonial ethnic segregation in everyday life had resulted in the development of a "plural society" in which "different sections of the community live side by side, but separately" and where people of various ethnic groups meet but only as individuals in the "market place...buying and selling" (quoted in Yeoh, 2003: 2). Today, the impact of this lack of cross-group ties can be seen in the fact that Malays are less likely to land a high-skilled job since they have less contacts who are from the dominant social capital-rich Chinese group (Chua, forthcoming quoted in Sunday Times, 10 March 2013).

2.8 Subsequent Chapters

This study of the children of Chinese-Malay heritage then becomes all the more pertinent as I trace the educational advantages they enjoy at home and in school, by virtue of having a parent from the dominant social group. The next chapter will outline the methodological issues faced in gathering and analysing qualitative interview responses by these mixed children and their parents, while the subsequent two chapters (Chapters 4 and 5) aim to underline how the merging of worldviews and networks through the parents' intermarriage has created a habitus conducive to high educational aspirations and performance for the Chinese-Malay children.

3. Methodology

3.1 Structuration Theory

Given the research aim of this paper to explain the high educational attainment of children of Chinese-Malay parentage by synthesising the structural and cultural (agentic) elements embedded in the home environment and the social networks of the children themselves, I propose the use of Giddens' (1979) structuration theory in better analysing the information gathered from in-depth interviews of the parents and children. Giddens rejects the structure-agency divide in making sense of social reality, arguing that:

> structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction of practices. Structure enters simultaneously into the constitution of the agent and social practices, and 'exists' in the generating moments of this constitution (Giddens, 1979: 5 quoted in Stones, 2005: 16).

To Giddens therefore, underpinning structuration theory is this "duality of structure and agency" in which "objectivity" (implying the absence of human agency) and "subjectivity" (where human agency is exercised) are not "logically exclusive" (quoted in Parker, 2000: 8-9). In fact, central to Giddens' conceptualisation of the theory is the notion that individuals, in negotiating everyday life, draw on their "knowledgeability of the social structures" (quoted in Stones, 2005: 25). The latter is based on a plethora of commonsensical knowledge about various "contexts of activity", giving rise to a "practical consciousness" in the social actor (quoted in Parker, 2000: 58). However, at the same time, Giddens' agents are self-reflexive in that they are not mere passive receivers of structural circumstances but will "(apply) structures in novel" situations (quoted in Parker, 2000: 60), thereby possessing the capacity to produce diverging results from existing structures. Structure is hence both "enabling and constraining" for the social actor (Lehmann, 2007: 66 quoted in Khidzer, 2011: 20).

The home environment and the social networks of children of Chinese-Malay parentage represent the "fields of action" that together create a "habitus" conducive to high educational attainment for such mixed children (Bourdieu, 1977 quoted in Abercrombie et al, 2000: 31). By applying structuration theory, we can then better capture the interplay between structure and culture (agency) within each of the fields mentioned, and understand the mechanisms in everyday life that predispose these Chinese-Malay children to academic success. For example, through the lens of structuration theory, we are able to examine the effects of home environment as a whole on educational attainment, from the inter-constitutive relationship of parenting style, parents' attitudes towards education and family socioeconomic status, all of which mediated by ethnicity. Similarly, the theory allows us to evade the problematic structure-culture dichotomy by providing its users the

conceptual framework to simultaneously consider the structural location of these students in the education system, and the social agency inherent in their educational aspirations.

3.2 Qualitative Interviewing Process

In the course of my research, I conducted qualitative interviews with four Chinese-Malay families of three members each (father-mother-child sets), bringing the total number of individuals interviewed to 12. The qualitative in-depth interview method was chosen since I needed data that could *explain* the high educational attainment, that is, university education, of these mixed children based on routine, everyday practices and subjective interpretations of educational experiences (Mason, 2002: 3-4). Such a research undertaking focusing on social process and social meaning requires "depth and roundness of understanding" in the respondents' "contextual accounts" (Mason, 2002: 65). Hence, the interview questions were semi-structured and the interview schedule merely served as a guide with much room left for free expression of views related to the topic, in order to elicit responses high in richness and complexity. Only then could I aspire to achieve "thick description" and understand, as much as possible, "the meanings that elements of a culture have for those who live within that culture" (Geertz, 1973 quoted in Babbie, 2010: 155-156). I ruled out as unfeasible participant observation method due to the prolonged (and unwelcome) infringement of privacy it would entail.

In sourcing interviewees, I sought out to find university students of Chinese-Malay descent, and through them, gain access to their parents. The former was not an easy task. While I mentioned earlier in this paper that students of such mixed background were disproportionately represented among Malay undergraduates at the three local publicly funded universities, their absolute numbers remained small. Furthermore, they were not easily identifiable through physiognomic features, and the fact that I did not have any close friend of such heritage added to the obstacle. Yet a number of potential respondents failed to reply my emails requesting for an interview, and one parent felt uncomfortable to be interviewed on being recommended to me by her daughter, necessitating a search for a replacement father-mother-child set. As such, I relied mostly on the "snowball sampling"

(Babbie, 2010: 193) method to obtain interviewees who suited my requirements. It follows then, that the information gathered cannot be generalised to all children of Chinese-Malay parentage, although the former can provide a useful starting point to understanding the social phenomenon.

The interviews were conducted using the pen and paper method of note taking. This was because a majority of the interviewees were not comfortable with their views being recorded for posterity via a tape recorder. Besides, I wanted to create an informal and friendly atmosphere in which a more conversational and engaging style of interview could be done, in line with Burgess' (1984: 102) concept of "conversations with a purpose" (quoted in Mason, 2002). Upon reaching home and gaining access to a word processor, I would proceed to draft more detailed field notes, which included "verbal and non-verbal cues" (Mason, 2002: 75), from the initial ones taken. I also assured the interviewees that their rights as research subjects would be protected. Before starting an interview, I sought the interviewees' "fully informed consent" (Lincoln and Guba, 2001: 94) and reminded them that should they feel uncomfortable at any point of the interview, they could request to withdraw immediately. In addition, I promised all my interviewees "protection of privacy and confidentiality" (Lincoln and Guba, 2001: 95) in that all information received would be destroyed within a month of completion of the research, and only pseudonyms would be employed. I gave the respondents – both students and their parents – the liberty to choose their own preferred venue and time for the interviews so as to keep them in their comfort zone. In the end, interviews were held on university campus grounds and at public places such as cafes. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and was conducted in mainly English.

Qualitative researchers are enjoined to be "active and reflexive" (Mason, 2002: 66) in the data collection process. This means being aware of one's ontology and how that might affect the interview process. There were a few instances during my interviews with the parents when my position as a young undergraduate was brought to relief. I felt powerless when the much older parent interviewees took it upon themselves to give me some 'advice'

on parenting style so that, I was told, I could benefit from it when I got married and settle down in the future. The fact that I am generally a shy person did not help, and at times the experience was certainly like being trapped in an awkward situation. However, I managed to remind myself that I needed to focus and conduct the interviews professionally so that I could get my thesis done. I had to gently guide my respondents back to the intended topic when they veered off course. Indeed, achieving a "good balance between talking and listening" (Mason, 2002: 75) is an essential skill for any qualitative interviewer which could be honed only with sufficient practice. At the same time, I was well aware that establishing rapport with my interviewees could open doors to more honest and complex responses (Babbie, 2010: 317). This meant being open to responding to the interviewees' own queries about my family background, and I was comfortable with it.

4. Home Environment of Chinese-Malay Children

4.1 Social Capital within the Family

This chapter will investigate how the home environment of Chinese-Malay families socialises children of such parentage towards high educational attainment. To this end, I conducted interviews with four families of varying socioeconomic backgrounds, whose children were currently undergraduates at local publicly funded universities. From the interview responses, I found that regardless of the socioeconomic status of these mixed families as indicated by total household income, housing type and parents' educational level; the parents expended much "time and effort" on their child's intellectual pursuit, translating to high "social capital in the family" for the child's education (Coleman, 1988: 110). Indeed, Coleman argues that limitations in the family financial and human capital can be overcome where providing a home environment conducive to high academic performance is concerned if there are "strong relations between children and parents" as underscored by the "physical presence" of, and "attention given" by the parents to the child (Coleman, 1988: 111). Such a relationship is evident in the Chinese-Malay families I interviewed:

> When our child was younger, we (my husband and I) would supervise her while she did her school assignments, after dinner. Her dad would help out with maths and I would be on her side, assisting my daughter with her Malay language homework. We tried to do this regularly, although we could not do so everyday due to sheer lethargy. But nearer to the exam period, my husband and I made it a point to do this almost daily.
> (B2, 49, Malay mother, middle-middle class)

> I want my children to do well in school, (in spite of) my O Level background. So, during the time when my children were in primary and secondary school, their dad and I insisted on buying for them assessment books and making sure they attempted the questions regularly. There was not any other choice – other parents were doing it too, and if we did not force our kids to work harder, they would lose out.
> (D2, 56, Chinese mother, working class)

This close attention by the parents towards their children's educational endeavours, reflecting the high social capital of Chinese-Malay families is alluded to by Coleman (1988) when he highlights the case study of the British philosopher John Stuart Mill's (1806-1873) family. Coleman (1988: 109) posits that while Mill's father did not possess an education which exceeded that of the latter's contemporaries, the senior Mill had a strong intellectual relationship with his son, and taught him "Latin and Greek" at a very young age. It was this social capital within the family that provided the initial impetus for Mill's philosophical foundations, and which fostered "the creation of human capital in the next generation" (Coleman, 1988: 109) by serving as a conduit of access to the adult's stock of knowledge.

4.2 Concerted Cultivation

The high social capital in Chinese-Malay families which contributes to creating a highly supportive academic environment for the child is also complemented by what Lareau (2003: 648) calls the practice of "concerted cultivation" in childrearing by these parents. Concerted

cultivation involves the parents enrolling "their children in numerous age-specific organised activities (seen as) transmitting important life skills to children" (Lareau, 2003: 648). Furthermore, the daily lives of children with such parents are also structured by a semblance of a household schedule which must be strictly adhered to. In Singapore's context, concerted cultivation can be seen when parents send their children to enrichment courses including private tuition for academic subjects, classes for musical instruments and ballet classes, among others. Using information gathered from qualitative interviews and observations of black and white American families, Lareau (2003: 648) postulates that it is mainly the "middle class" families, irrespective of ethnicity, who practice this form of childrearing. However, my own interviews reveal that not only the Chinese-Malay upper-middle class families implemented the concerted cultivation method of childrearing; even the working class and lower-middle class families did the same:

> As I'm the one working, I relied on my wife to keep an eye on our children and make sure that they did their homework, when they were younger. Yes, I can still remember...we set aside time for all our kids to do their school assignments together and either I or my wife would check that all questions had been completed. Ours was a no-nonsense approach. No TV or going out before they had done their assignments or studied for their tests.
> (D3, 56, Malay father, working class)

> Yes. We were both strict with our children. Having said that, I think my wife was stricter...we would not call it a household schedule but I knew after dinner it was study time for the children. And yes, before our daughter entered primary school, we sent her for phonics classes. We also ensured that she received tuition for her weaker subjects while in primary and secondary school.
> (C3, 63, Chinese father, lower-middle class)

> I taught them (my children) to set priorities in life and the importance of obeying rules, for example, they must complete their homework first before playing with friends or watching their favourite TV programmes. Both my daughters also attended Electone (electronic organ) classes almost up to teacher's grade. Both attended tuition for their Malay language and tuition for subjects which they were weak at. Furthermore, I myself attended talks by early childhood professionals and wrote to MOE on my eldest daughter's post-secondary education choices.
> (A2, 50, Chinese mother, upper-middle class)

4.3 Ethnicity & Reconstituted *Weltanschauung*

Using the "ethnicity as cognition" (Brubaker et al, 2004: 31) approach, I argue that irrespective of family socioeconomic status, the presence of a Chinese parent in the family had resulted in the reconstituted "*Weltanschauung*" ('worldview') (Ashmore, 1966: 215) of the child pertaining to the status of education. In other words, the limitations in financial and human capital faced by the working class and lower-middle class Chinese-Malay families were mediated by ethnicity, allowing such mixed families to transcend their socioeconomic situation and create a home environment that encourages high educational attainment. In my interviews with the Chinese parents, I found that the notion of education as a means to achieve high social status featured prominently in their responses, and that in association with their Malay spouses, they made sure that this worldview undergirded their day-to-day running of the household:

> Every parent would wish to see their children do well in life and achieve good results in their education, and, needless to say, gain entry into university. It would all depend on the child's aptitude and ability to achieve...I have always specifically told my children to do their level best in studies...they must make the effort to do their best. I would check their results.

(C3, 63, Chinese father, lower-middle class)

> I want my children to do well in school so that they could have a better life than what we're currently having, living in a three-room flat. In Singapore, you cannot get anywhere without a degree...which is why I insisted that my children get good grades. I made them do assessment books...anything below an 'A' and I would ask them, 'how come'? At the end of the day, people want to see if your results and school performance are good.
> (D2, 56, Chinese mother, working class)

Such a philosophy venerating education arguably stems from the organisation of traditional Confucian Chinese society where "the highly educated person is assigned high...prestige" (Chiew, 1991: 151). In particular, the "*shi* or scholar" occupied the top-most position in a "four-status hierarchy" which included "*nong* (farmer)", "*gong* (labourer, craftsman)" and "*shang* (merchant)" at the lowest social position (Chiew, 1991: 151). However, this does not mean that Malay parents do not value education. The Malay parents I interviewed echoed their Chinese spouses' view on the importance of attaining the highest level of education possible, but the former also focused on developing a wholesome character for the child, based on the teachings of Islam:

> Like every parent, we wish to see our children do well in their studies and achieve the highest level of education...anyway as Muslims, we should think more of the future life after this world. Although we hold importance to a scroll of Bachelors' degree or PhD, this is not the ultimate goal in life. Character and good manners are important also.
> (C2, 60, Malay mother, lower-middle class)

> A university education is important – or else you can't get anywhere! When our daughters were younger I was very concerned about their grades. If they got 70 per cent instead of 90 per cent or above for their subjects, I would

> question them. Our children understood how serious we were about their studies – a month before exams, absolutely no TV for them! But I believe a sound grounding in Islamic values is extremely important too. We sent our daughters to part-time madrasah (religious school) and for 'mengaji' (reciting the Holy Qur'an) sessions. We (told them not to miss) their five daily solat (prayers) because earning His grace would result in success in this world.
> (B2, 49, Malay mother, middle-middle class)

Therefore, the children of these Chinese-Malay parents I interviewed were exposed to two worldviews concerning education: the Chinese parent would emphasise education as a means to doggedly achieve upward social mobility, whereas his or her Malay spouse would add that education without a good Islamic upbringing is not holistic enough to foster a person of good character. While these two philosophies seem antithetical to each other, it is evident that these Chinese-Malay families had been able to wed them together as complements, resulting in the best possible educational outcome for their children through everyday practices at home. It is not too far off to surmise that in families where both parents are Malay, such a reconstituted worldview in the status of education would have been less likely to be present. Indeed, the parents in the Chinese-Malay unions I interviewed (both Chinese and Malay) differentiated themselves from Malay parents in general, stereotyping the latter as not setting high standards for their child's education:

> Sometimes I feel that Malay parents do not realise the importance of education and adopt an 'anything goes' attitude. They often feel satisfied at (their children) getting average grades, with just a pass, and they would adopt anything that is (of) convenience.
> (A2, 50, Chinese mother, upper-middle class)

> Generally I feel that the Chinese think differently from us Malays...Chinese parents tend to be more serious about education, wanting their children to go university and all...

(B2, 49, Malay mother, middle-middle class)

In linking the aggregate poor educational performance of Malays to supposed 'deficiencies' in Malay parenting style, my parent interviewees were demonstrating "strong cognitive assumptions" about the way in which ethnicity ""work" in practice" (Brubaker et al, 2004: 37). Instead of simply debunking the stereotypes as false, I contend that they should be reconceptualised as "cognitive structures" containing "knowledge, beliefs and expectations about social groups" (Brubaker et al, 2004: 39). After all, it is such "categorical thinking" (Brubaker et al, 2004: 39) that resulted in the agency of the parents in Chinese-Malay unions to practice a parenting style enjoining high educational performance for the child.

In conclusion, the home environment of children of Chinese-Malay parentage is conducive to high academic performance in three major ways. Firstly, these mixed families exhibited a high level of intra-family social capital in terms of attention spent on the intellectual development of their children. Secondly, regardless of socioeconomic status, such families practiced "concerted cultivation" (Lareau, 2003: 648) by sending their children to enrichment classes and making sure that time was set aside at home for studying. Finally, the fact of having ethnically Chinese and Malay parents in the same household had exposed these children to two different conceptions of education – one for social status and the other for character building guided by Islamic values. This had resulted in the reconstituted "*Weltanschauung*" ('worldview') (Ashmore, 1966: 215) of the child pertaining to the status of education, something less likely to be seen in families where both parents are Malay.

In the next chapter, I shall discuss the findings of my interviews with the mixed children themselves, and investigate how peer networks in the school environment predispose them to high educational attainment. Indeed, it is only through examining both the home and school environment can we obtain a full picture of the everyday mechanisms pointing towards good academic performance for these Chinese-Malay children.

5. School Environment of Chinese-Malay Children

5.1 Structural Location in Education System

This chapter attempts to explain how peer networks embedded in the educational experience of children of Chinese-Malay parentage predispose them to high educational attainment, using information gathered from in-depth interviews with these students. Indeed, scholarly research about the impact of social networks on educational performance in Singapore has remained largely underexplored. Yet, as Chua (forthcoming: 1) points out, it is this constellation of quotidian interactions with people around us that serves as an important platform for the "amplification" of educational disparities. For example, Khidzer (2011: 21) argues that the pervasive practice of streaming in Singapore's education system which places students in different academic tracks according to ability level has the effect of "imbuing stream-specific identities and aspirations". Along the same line, Lim (1999) posits that "students realise their streamed identity through interaction with others", and this identity becomes "entrenched" as they progress through the educational levels based on examination results (quoted in Khidzer, 2011: 21). All of the Chinese-Malay students I interviewed hailed from the faster-track Special or Express streams, and studied in the highly sought-after independent or autonomous schools, before continuing their studies at NUS or NTU. A dominant theme broached in the interviews is that the high-performance academic environment in those streams and schools had a significant effect in shaping the educational aspirations of Chinese-Malay students, in the form of expectations placed on them via "peer socialisation" (Johan, 2013: 140):

> As I grew up I got streamed with all the people smarter than me so that in itself was encouragement to do better...
> (A1, 22, NUS student, upper-middle class)

A1 studied in elite institutions such as Raffles Girls' School (Secondary), followed by Raffles Junior College under the through-train Integrated Programme which allows bright students to skip the GCE O Levels and sit for the GCE A Level examinations at the end of a six-year stint. For D1 and C1, being in the Special stream in autonomous secondary schools was a significant motivator towards high educational achievement:

> I was in the Special stream and so people did expect some standard from us. Besides, I did not want to end up at the bottom of the class...
> (D1, 21, NUS student, working class)

> Yes...Special stream...the surroundings, yes...I was surrounded by people who were serious in their studies. Got extra push.
> (C1, 21, NTU student, lower-middle class)

It is not surprising that these students should be greatly influenced by their peers in the academic environment, regardless of family socioeconomic status. As the theory of "homophily" (McPherson et al, 2001: 415) postulates, individuals consciously or unconsciously tend to "associate with those of similar group...characteristics" (Lin, 2000: 786), including those who share the same "interests, histories and dreams" (Christakis and Fowler, 2009: 17). In this case, students in the same high-achievement milieu identify with one another's academic goals and aspirations, which are "closely linked to academic achievement and performance" (Archer and Francis, 2007: 113 quoted in Adzahar, 2009: 11). In fact, Harvard University professor Nicholas Christakis and University of California (San Diego) associate professor James Fowler argue that not only do human beings tend to "influence" one another, they "copy" their peers and others around them too, citing the example of "students with studious roommates (becoming) more studious" (Christakis and Fowler, 2009: 22). Similarly, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Tina Rosenberg in her book gives a compelling example of the power of peer pressure in how collaborative study groups in the University of California (Berkeley) helped to drastically increase calculus pass rates for African-American and Hispanic students in the 1970s (Rosenberg, 2011: 97-123).

5.2 Expanded Cultural Repertoire

However, the structural location of Chinese-Malay students in the education system is not the only factor that predisposes them to high educational attainment. Their very identity as mixed children has enabled them to build networks and identify with both Chinese and

Malay peers, although they are Muslims. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the majority Chinese community in Singapore are dominant socially, economically and politically, and thus possess a significant level of social capital. Interethnic networks with the Chinese would then allow minority groups such as Malays to overcome their disadvantaged status and access higher-quality information and resources. As a corollary, I found that the Chinese-Malay students I interviewed were adept at developing different types of cultural "repertoire" (Erickson, 1996: 221) for use in different situations, owing to their having a 'dual perspective' as mixed children. For example, they exhibited "cognitive awareness" (Lin, 2000: 787) in establishing social ties with Chinese peers regarded as possessing high educational aspirations, as study partners:

> Most of my Malay friends (in secondary school) were more relaxed and they tended to play a lot. For example, during breaks, they would just hang around school and talk. But for my Chinese friends, they're a bit more studious. They would go to the library to look for past year papers/textbooks. So it (hanging around Chinese peers) kind of kept me motivated in my studies.
> (C1, 21, NTU student, lower-middle class)

> In primary school, because I was in a Higher Mother Tongue class, I had a constant group of Malay friends. But in secondary school, junior college and even (now) in university, my regular group of people are Chinese...they are generally hard working...I have very few Malay friends whom I hang out with.
> (B1, 23, NTU student, middle-middle class)

> I also felt my Chinese friends (in secondary school) were more motivated and serious about studying, as was I. I felt that they had more ambition as well...(in contrast), largely (for my Malay friends) I felt they might have the 'as-long-as-I-pass' kind of attitude to (studies).
> (A1, 22, NUS student, upper-middle class)

At the same time however, these students insisted on retaining Malay-Muslim friends through active participation in their schools' Malay Cultural Society or in similar ethno-religious activities, such as visiting one another's homes during the Muslim festival of Eidul-Fitri. In the first place, Malay-Muslim students were underrepresented in the faster-track streams and in independent or autonomous schools. It is of no surprise therefore that as co-religionists, Chinese-Malay students would at least get to know the other Malay students. As social capital expert and Harvard University Professor Robert Putnam (2011) posits, it is "completely normal" that "people be able to have special ties with other people like them" (quoted in Straits Times, 31 March 2011):

> In secondary school...there were so few of us Malays and we were all in the Malay (Cultural) Society, so it was quite natural for us to be together.
> (A1, 22, NUS student, upper-middle class)

> I was in the Malay Cultural Society back then in junior college and we would visit one another during Hari Raya.
> (D1, 21, NUS student, working class)

It can thus be seen that these Chinese-Malay students could leverage on their mixed identity and tap on the social resources of both their Chinese and Malay peers for "instrumental" (study partners) and "expressive" (ethno-religious solidarity) returns respectively (Lin, 2000: 786). In turn, the students' ability to connect with two "distinct layers of social structures" (Chua, forthcoming: 5) – the Chinese and Malays – had enabled them to develop "cultural variety" and competence (Erickson, 1996: 221). Indeed, Erickson (1996: 221-222) argues that individuals who interact with "a wider variety of people" must concomitantly "respond to a wider variety of culture", and in the process, giving such individuals the opportunity to hone "a wider repertoire" of culture for use in different contexts. I therefore posit that the Chinese-Malay students' 'dual perspective' and wider social networks have availed them a more comprehensive cultural "toolkit" (Swidler, 1986:

273) to “navigate successfully in many settings” (Erickson, 1996: 224) and earn educational returns.

5.3 Social Acceptance & Escaping Stereotypes

Linked to the above point on tapping the social resources of Chinese peers, the fact of having a parent from the dominant ethnic group (the Chinese) also translates into educational benefits for these Chinese-Malay children in terms of escaping the negative stereotypes usually attached to Malay students. This is because such mixed children typically exhibit ‘Chinese’ facial features like being fair-skinned, increasing the likelihood of social acceptance by Chinese peers and teachers in school:

> My (Chinese) mum...is fair-skinned. And so I am fair-skinned too...people (in secondary school and junior college) also assumed I'm ('pure') Chinese and I felt to some extent they would treat me better or more seriously or that I was perhaps better or smarter than my 'Malay-looking' friends. They couldn't put me in the stereotype of a Malay (student).
> (A1, 22, NUS student, upper-middle class)

> I am fair-skinned. I have quite distinctive 'Chinese' features...and so they (peers in secondary school) tended to be more open towards me...easier for me to blend in, interact, socialise. So if I were to go to them for help in studies, they were more receptive and approachable. Friends who were less accepting of Malays would open up more towards me too. And would ask me the questions which they wouldn't ask their Malay peers.
> (C1, 21, NTU student, lower-middle class)

In contrast, studies (Rahim, 1998; Ferguson, 1998; Steele, 2003; Stimpfl, 2006) have shown that ethnic minority students like Malays are likely to be viewed by teachers and peers alike as “disruptive and underrate their academic potential” (Rahim, 1998: 205). Such “prejudicial attitudes” and low expectations by authority figures in school have the effect of denting

Malay students' "self-esteem and confidence" since they are socialised into internalising "lower levels" of academic achievement (Rahim, 1998: 205). This is especially true for Malay students in the slower-track Normal streams and in non-autonomous or non-independent schools where they are overrepresented. In the US, Ferguson (1998: 311) finds that teachers' "perceptions and expectations are biased" towards the dominant whites and that "teacher behaviours appear less supportive" of African American students. Similarly, Steele (2003: 278) posits that the reason black students tend to underperform academically compared to whites of similar socioeconomic status lies in the "stereotype threat" faced by the former, a "significant" part of which concerns "intellectual ability". Steele (2003: 281) observes that the "bad press" blacks had to endure surrounding the black-white educational disparity added to their apprehension when sitting for standardised tests.

Perniciously, such ethnic stereotyping can leave Malay students feeling stigmatised as 'failures' in the face of their Chinese peers, and set in train a "self-fulfilling prophecy" when they act out the negative labels unfairly placed on them (Rahim, 1998: 206). As Chua (forthcoming: 4) argues, labels are "sticky", and have "enduring effects on life evaluations, offsetting the influence of buoyant expectations" (Schafer et al, 2011: 1053). Needless to say, these biased attitudes by teachers against Malay students which are then internalised and reproduced by Malay students themselves and those from the dominant ethnic group act as a barrier to meaningful interethnic interaction, and prevent Malay students from accessing social resources that lie outside their immediate educational milieu. On the other hand, Chinese-Malay students, by virtue of their phenotypical features, are rendered a fate more hopeful. Being fair-skinned means they could eschew debilitating stereotypes by members of the dominant ethnic group, since they are seen as 'one of us'. Unfortunately, this observation confirms that despite the "problematic" status of 'race' as a "meaningful concept" (Manap, 2008: 31), Singaporeans as members of a "racialised" society (Lian, 2006: 219) still regard "the physicality of bodies...(as) the visible announcement of...race" (Knowles 2003: 43 quoted in Manap, 2008). This "corporeality" (Barot and Bird, 2001: 602) is then evidence of how 'race' is concretised in the everyday life of Singaporeans.

To sum up, the high educational attainment of children of Chinese-Malay parentage can be explained from three factors pointing to their high social capital in the school setting. Firstly, their structural location as students in the faster-track Special or Express streams, and in prestigious independent or autonomous schools significantly shaped their educational aspirations. Secondly, as children of mixed heritage, they were able to identify and build networks with both Chinese and Malay peers, expanding their knowledge of cultural competence. Finally, having a parent from the dominant ethnic group had gained these Chinese-Malay students social acceptance by Chinese peers and teachers in school. In particular, they were able to avoid the negative stereotypes usually attached to 'pure' Malay students.

6. Conclusion

This paper has been an exposition about the educational advantages conferred on Chinese-Malay children by virtue of their mixed parentage. In particular, through the merging of worldviews and networks made possible by their parents' intermarriage, these children have been exposed to a wider range of cultural repertoire, increasing their knowledge of cultural competence. Indeed, it is this wider cultural variety imbibed by the mixed children that has enabled them to fit comfortably into the dominant culture of Singapore society which associates good academic performance with high social status and well-paying jobs.

The home and school environments represent the sites upon which these cultural influences are transmitted. At home, such children enjoy the benefit of an upbringing which incorporates two cultural perspectives – one enjoining education as a means to achieve social status, the other, for inculcating an individual of wholesome character guided by Islamic values. This reconstitution of worldviews is translated into daily practices of childrearing pointing to a home environment conducive to high academic achievement regardless of family socioeconomic status, such as time set aside strictly for studies, and the children's enrolment into enrichment classes. In school, being part-Chinese has enabled these mixed children to associate and build networks with both Chinese and Malay peers, enlarging the reservoir from which social resources can be tapped. In addition, having a

parent from the dominant ethnic group has given these mixed children an escape route from the negative stereotypes associated with Malay students, on top of gaining social acceptance by Chinese peers and teachers. Together, the home and school environments combine to create a habitus enjoining high educational aspirations, and ultimately, performance.

It is precisely the *social* aspect of the advantages enjoyed by Chinese-Malay children, through their access to a more promising opportunity structure in society that this paper seeks to highlight. This paper is, in fact, a rebuttal to the biological determinist notion suggested by one of my respondents (and used in the title of this thesis) when she quipped that:

> Well, mixed children are supposed to be 'smart'...maybe we're just maintaining the status quo?
> (B1, 23, NTU student, middle-middle class)
> Indeed, there is no conclusive evidence that genetic factors have any role in influencing the intelligence of Chinese-Malay children, whereas the effects of social capital on the life chances of individuals are well-documented. In Singapore, where research linking social capital and ethnicity is starting to gain traction, the latest evidence shows that compared to Malays, the Chinese have significantly "greater" access to forms of social capital such as ties to "university graduates", "private housing dwellers" and "weak ties" which are "beneficial pathways to novel and influential resources" like "job information" (Chua, forthcoming: 22). It would thus benefit Malays as members of an ethnic minority community to forge interethnic connections such as intermarriages with the dominant Chinese group, thereby allowing the former to access higher-quality resources and outcomes.

Furthermore, by showing how social networks serve as a conduit through which cultural resources flow, I wish to highlight as problematic the structure-culture dichotomy prevalent

in much of the currently available literature on Malay educational and socioeconomic marginality. The artificial structure-culture divide is overcome in this paper through the synthesis of both perspectives via the lens of "structuration theory" (Giddens, 1979). It is hoped that by doing so, we can have a more nuanced understanding of the interaction between structure and culture, and of how varying levels of access to social networks can privilege certain groups in the acquisition of cultural capital, while leaving other groups culturally impoverished. By having one parent from the dominant ethnic group, children of Chinese-Malay heritage are therefore able to circumvent the situation of low social capital which would have afflicted them had both their parents been Malay.

The social capital deficit of Malays highlighted in this paper is a refreshing take on the issue of Malay educational and socioeconomic underattainment which has thus far been described in existing literature as emanating from mainly macro socio-historical factors. Yet, seemingly routine and insignificant everyday social interactions also serve as an arena for the "amplification and attenuation of inequalities" (Chua, forthcoming: 1). For example, Malays continue to be overrepresented in the slower-track Normal streams and in ITEs, while making up only 3 to 5 per cent of the Singaporean population admitted to the local publicly funded universities. Opportunities for interethnic mixing and "bridging social capital" (Putnam, 2000 quoted in Field, 2008: 36) with the dominant Chinese in particular, are therefore severely diminished.

Due to time and manpower constraints, I only managed to conduct in-depth interviews with 12 individuals from four Chinese-Malay families. The information gathered from the interviews cannot therefore be generalised to *all* children of Chinese-Malay parentage in Singapore, although the former can provide a useful starting point to understanding the high educational attainment of such mixed children. Future research should attempt to cover a wider sample of the population, drawn from a database of Malay undergraduates with Chinese-Malay parentage, via the Malay-Muslim self-help group Mendaki. Such an approach would help to ensure the validity of the information acquired from the respondents.

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Appendix A

Brief Profile of Informants

Respondent	Age	Highest Education/Currently Studying	Occupation
A1 Daughter	22	Bachelor’s	NUS Student
A2 Mother (Chinese)	50	Diploma	Engineer (Sales)
A3 Father (Malay)	52	Diploma	Engineer
B1 Daughter	23	Bachelor’s	NTU Student
B2 Mother (Malay)	49	Vocational	Housewife
B3 Father (Chinese)	50	Vocational	Marketing Director
C1 Daughter	21	Bachelor’s	NTU Student
C2 Mother (Malay)	60	A Level	Housewife (Retiree)
C3 Father (Chinese)	63	O Level	Personal Driver
D1 Daughter	21	Bachelor’s	NUS Student
D2 Mother (Chinese)	56	O Level	Housewife
D3 Father (Malay)	56	O Level	Logistics Manager

Family	Residence Type	Total Household Income ($)
A	Condominium	9000
B	HDB 5-room	4500
C	HDB 4-room	1300
D	HDB 3-room	1800

Appendix B

Sample of Interview Schedule for Parents

Ethnicity:
Age:
Highest Education:
Occupation:
Salary:
Residence Type:

1. What are your attitudes towards your children's education? From the start, did you have high hopes for your children e.g. expect them to enter university?

2. How important is your children's attainment of good grades (e.g. 'A' grade instead of 'B' etc.) to you?

3. Do you see education as a means to achieve high social status i.e. in terms of landing a high paying white-collar job?

4. On parenting style, are you more likely to discount and discourage your children's opinions and emphasise respect for authority over reasoning?

5. When your children were younger, did you enforce any strict household timetable for them to follow, especially time set aside for studying?

6. Have you ever taken the initiative to contact your children's teachers in school to find out more about how they were performing academically?

7. In thinking about your children's educational future, have you ever consulted (a) your relatives/friends or (b) institutional agents such as teachers/websites of government agencies like MOE?

8. Have you ever sent your children to tuition (academic) or enrichment (non-academic e.g. piano) classes?

9. Government statistics show that among the Singapore citizens admitted to NUS/NTU/SMU, Malays comprised only 5 per cent, compared to the Chinese at about 90 per cent. Do you think this is partly due to Malay parents not realising the importance of education and adopting an 'anything goes' (*sikap sambil lewa*) attitude?

Thank you for your time.

Appendix C

Sample of Interview Schedule for Children

Age:
Educational Institution:
Course of Study:

1. Do you think your parents have played an important role in your educational career thus far? Please elaborate.

2. How strict were your parents in wanting you to achieve good grades in school?

3. Have your parents ever enforced strict rules at home pertaining to time set aside for studying and other academic matters?

4. Have you ever attended tuition or enrichment classes?

5. Do you discern any difference in your father's and mother's attitudes to education?

6. Do your peers influence your educational aspirations? Please elaborate.

7. Who did you usually hang out in school with, when you were younger?

8. In school, do you feel that you have been treated differently because of your part-Chinese identity? Please elaborate.

Thank you for your time.