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Multi-ethnicity as a moderator of contextual effects on tolerance: the case of Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Grounded in intergroup threat theory, much research has illustrated the negative impact of the contextual presence of ethnic minorities construed as threats by the mainstream society on racial attitudes. This study examines the possibility that the presence of other “non-threatening” ethnic minorities could undermine such negative impact. We contend that the presence of genuine diversity can promote multicultural experiences and reduce people’s tendency to single out specific ethnic groups as threatening. Analysis of telephone survey (N = 2407) and government by-census data in Hong Kong shows that proportion of district residents being South Asians and proportion of district residents using Mandarin as their usual spoken language were associated with lower levels of social and political tolerance when proportion of district residents being other ethnic minorities was low. The negative impact became weaker when proportion of other ethnic minorities increased. The pattern of results was more conspicuous among less educated citizens.

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Researchers interested in ethnicity and migration issues have examined the effects of the presence of immigrants and ethnic minorities in residential contexts on people’s beliefs and attitudes. Numerous studies have shown the negative effects of a large presence of ethnic minorities at the neighborhood level on social trust and attitudes toward other ethnic groups (Gijsberts et al., 2011; Quillian, 1995). However, some studies have shown that the contextual presence of ethnic minorities can lead to positive attitudes toward immigration and lower levels of racial prejudice because of positive contact (Meeusen et al., 2017; Oliver & Wong, 2003). In recent years, many researchers have examined the conditions that shape the effects of the contextual presence of ethnic minorities (Craig et al., 2018).

One type of conditional impact that has yet to receive analytical attention is how the presence of various ethnic minority groups in a locality moderates the influence of each other. Assuming the scenario in which a minority group is perceived as a threat by the dominant majority, hence its sizable presence tends to elicit negative responses, is it nonetheless possible that the group would be perceived as less threatening when mixed with a range of other ethnic minorities?

Asking this question means taking multi-ethnicity seriously. People in contemporary societies typically live and interact with multiple ethnic groups, and not all groups are considered threatening. Many previous studies have shown that the effect of the presence of minority groups depends on the minority group (Bowyer, 2009; Ha, 2010). However, even in these studies, the effects of various minority groups were treated separately. In contrast, the present study considers the possibility that the degree of the multi-ethnicity in the residential context shapes the response to specific ethnic minority groups.

This study examines the effects of the presence of minority groups on tolerance; that is, the extent to which people are willing to endure, accept, or embrace cultural, social, and political differences

(Walzer, 1997). In any words, this study examines the effects of the presence of ethnic differences on the acceptance or embracing of cultural, social, and political differences in general. This study provides evidence based on representative survey data and government by-census data from Hong Kong, which is a Chinese society with a colonial history and a global city in the world's economy. The next section further reviews the relevant literature and develops the key arguments put forth in this article. It then introduces the case and states the hypotheses. The method and the results of the data analysis are described. Finally, the implications of the findings are discussed.

Literature review and theoretical arguments

In a seminal article, Putnam (2007) put forward the hypothesis that ethnic diversity in a neighborhood could lead people to withdraw from public life and distrust their neighbors. Theoretically, the phenomenon might result from three mechanisms. First, from a social control perspective, people of different ethnic origins share fewer common norms. Lower levels of trust result when people find it more difficult to understand and predict the actions of others. Second, because people prefer homophily, they may retreat from community life if the community becomes too heterogeneous. Third, specific minority groups might be perceived by the dominant majority as cultural threats or competitors for material resources (Gijsberts et al., 2011; Laurence et al., 2019). Negative feelings thus ensue.

The third argument, in particular, comes from the tradition of intergroup threat theory, which can be traced to Blumer (1958). According to this theory, members of the dominant group tend to harbor feelings of superiority and suspicion toward subordinate groups. They perceive themselves as the rightful owners of the society's resources. The presence of subordinate groups is therefore seen as threatening their interests. Threats and competition, such as those regarding jobs and work, can be real or perceived (Polavieja, 2016). In any case, threats could be seen as stronger when the subordinate groups increase in size (Hjerm, 2007). Therefore, at the local level, the proportion of ethnic minorities has been found to relate to stronger racial prejudice and stronger opposition to immigrants (e.g., Dustmann & Preston, 2001; Gravelle, 2016; Martinez-I-Coma & Smith, 2018; Quillian, 1995, 1996).

Nevertheless, there have also been studies coming up with limited or close to null findings regarding the presumed negative impact of the contextual presence of ethnic minorities (Campbell et al., 2006; Gijsberts et al., 2011). Moreover, based on the theory of intergroup contact proposed by Allport (1954), the presence of a larger proportion of ethnic minorities in a neighborhood can be seen as providing more opportunities for intergroup contact, which may help build understanding and undermine negative stereotypes (Jolly & DiGiusto, 2014). Several studies in the literature showed the positive effect of the contextual presence of ethnic minorities on attitudes toward outgroups (e.g., Danckert et al., 2017; Meeusen et al., 2017; Oliver & Wong, 2003).

These competing theoretical views imply that in empirical reality, the effects of contact and threat may cancel each other (Van Assche, Asbrock et al., 2018). Other researchers have attempted to identify the conditions that shape the direction of the effects of residential context. Although there is still no conclusive evidence regarding whether certain conditions are necessary and/or sufficient for positive contact, some research has shown that contact may become negative in the absence of several conditions, such as equal status, common goals, cooperation, and the presence of authoritative support (Kotzur et al., 2018; Thomsen & Rafiqi, 2018; Wilson-Daily et al., 2018). From the perspective of threat theory, people who feel socially or economically insecure should be more likely to perceive outgroups as presenting threats and competition. J. A. Van Assche et al. (2014) found that in the Netherlands, the contextual presence of ethnic minorities had a positive impact on intergroup attitudes in secure neighborhoods but a negative effect in neighborhoods with high levels of social threat (also see Branton & Jones, 2005). Other researchers have examined how personality factors (e.g., Van Assche, Asbrock et al., 2018), types of outgroup ties (Dirksmeier, 2014), and the scale of geographical units (Cho & Baer, 2011; Weber, 2015) moderate the influence of the contextual presence of ethnic minority groups.

More pertinent to this study, the effect of the presence of minority groups was found to be dependent on the minority group being examined. Ha (2010), for instance, found that White Americans were more positive toward immigrants when they lived in areas with higher proportions of Asians, yet they were more negative toward immigrants when they lived in areas with higher proportions of Hispanics. Bowyer (2009) showed that in the UK, the presence of Blacks at the ward level led to lower levels of racial hostility, whereas the percentage of Pakistanis at the district level led to higher levels of racial hostility. In the Netherlands, Van Heerden and Ruedin (2019) found that only the increase in the proportion of visible non-White immigrants in a residential area led to increasingly negative attitudes toward immigrants.

Such findings are unsurprising. Minority groups vary in their cultural proximity to the dominant group, historical relationship with the dominant group, visibility in social life, and willingness to assimilate into the dominant culture. These factors can shape whether the dominant majority perceive a certain minority as a threat (Fietkau & Hansen, 2018; Ostfeld, 2017). When a minority is seen as a threat, an increase in group size can represent an intensification of the threat. However, if a group is not perceived as a threat, it is unlikely to become one just because it increases in size. One implication here is that a perceived threat might moderate the impact of the presence of ethnic minorities. Indeed, in an analysis of two UK surveys, Laurence et al. (2019) found that racial diversity in the residential context led to negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities mainly when people had already perceived the presence of threats.

This study examines another potential implication of the multiplicity of ethnic minorities. In addition to how members of the majority may react to various ethnic groups, people may react to the same ethnic group differently depending on the presence or absence of other minorities. Several considerations are pertinent here. First, in a multicultural environment where at least some minority groups are perceived as non-threatening, people are likely to have a wider range of intercultural contact. Social psychological research has shown that multicultural experiences can bring about various positive outcomes, including the ability to deal with cultural differences and higher levels of receptiveness of ideas from foreign cultures (C. Chiu & Hong, 2005; Leung & Chiu, 2010). When people's intercultural competence increases, they should be less likely to see ethnic minority groups as threatening.

Second, according to the defended neighborhood thesis (Van Heerden & Ruedin, 2019), immigrants are more likely to be opposed when communities undergo sudden change compared with when they undergo incremental change. Analogously, if a community already has a range of minority groups, the presence of one or two specific minority groups should not matter as much as it does when the community only has one or two minority groups.

Third, the presence of multiple ethnic groups in the everyday environment could "normalize" cultural differences; that is, people are more likely to see cultural differences simply as a fact of social life when they are surrounded by and have contact with multiple differences. When cultural differences are normalized, people may realize that it is questionable to single out only one or two specific groups as threatening.

We therefore expect multi-ethnicity to undermine the negative effects of the contextual presence of minority groups that are perceived as threats. That is, when a minority group that is generally construed as a threat is present in an environment where few or no other minority groups exist, the perceived threat could become particularly conspicuous and powerful in shaping the attitudes of the majority group members. However, if the same group is present in an environment where many other "non-threatening minorities" exist, the negative contextual effects could be weakened.

In this study, the dependent variables are social and political tolerance. Tolerance refers to the extent to which people are willing to endure, accept, or embrace cultural and political differences (Walzer, 1997). At a specific level, social and political tolerance can be differentiated (Lee, 2014). Social tolerance refers to people's willingness to accept disliked others into their everyday lives (e.g., Hadler, 2012). Political tolerance refers to people's willingness to recognize the rights and liberties of members of disliked groups (e.g., Gibson, 1992, 2008). We focus on tolerance in general, that is

tolerance toward a range of groups, instead of tolerance toward ethnic minorities in particular. The “spillover effects” of racial attitudes have been widely examined in public opinion studies. Because of the perceived relevance of policy outcomes, racialization through elite rhetoric or the racial characteristics of sources (e.g., Benegal, 2018; Sheagley et al., 2017; Tesler, 2012), racial attitudes can influence attitudes toward policies that are not directly related to race and/or organizations associated with political leaders of a specific race.

The possibility of spillover raises the question of whether the contextual presence of minorities could influence attitudes beyond ethnicity matters. In the present study, the exact rationale for a spillover effect differs from those discussed in the previous paragraph. The expectation is that perceived threats arising because of the presence of certain ethnic minority groups could heighten people’s sense of insecurity in general. The general sense of insecurity could lead to defensive attitudes toward other marginal groups. If this is the case, we should be able to observe an increase in intolerance of a wide range of groups.

Context and hypotheses

The empirical analysis focuses on Hong Kong, which was a British colony for more than 150 years before being returned to China in 1997. The city has long seen itself as the meeting point between East and West. It became an international financial center in the 1980s when it also began to receive an influx of laborers from Southeast Asia (mainly as domestic helpers). Nevertheless, Hong Kong has remained an overwhelmingly Chinese society. According to the 2016 by-census, 92.0% of Hong Kong residents were Chinese. Filipinos and Indonesians, many of whom worked as domestic helpers, constituted 4.6% of the population. Despite its colonial history, “Whites” constituted only 0.8% of the Hong Kong population in 2016.

Despite the city’s self-image as “Asia’s world city,” academics and commentators have repeatedly called attention to the presence of racial prejudice in Hong Kong society (Chow, 2013). Prejudice against two minority groups has been particularly widely acknowledged and examined. The first group comprises South Asians, including Indians, Pakistanis, and Nepalese. According to Law and Lee (2013), Chinese and South Asians lived together congenially in the early colonial period. However, the rise of a “Hong Kong Chinese” identity since the 1970s led to ethnic tensions. In the 1980s, Economic restructuring led to perceived competition between local Chinese and South Asians. The situation was exacerbated by biased media portrayals and the lack of an effective multicultural policy (Erni & Leung, 2014; Law & Lee, 2012). The result were widespread experiences of discrimination among South Asians in Hong Kong (Tonsing et al., 2016).

Another group that has been the target of prejudice comprises new immigrants from mainland China. Historically, many Hong Kong citizens were refugees fleeing from China in the immediate post-WWII period. However, Hong Kong people started to differentiate themselves from mainlanders in the 1980s and 1990s (Ma, 1999; Mathews, 1997). Between 1997 and 2017, 1.5 million new citizens from the mainland arrived in Hong Kong (O’Neill, 2017). In the late 2000s and early 2010s, immigration from the mainland became controversial as social and political conflicts between Hong Kong and China intensified. Several studies in the 2010s documented Hong Kong citizens’ negative attitudes toward mainland migrants (Fong & Guo, 2018; Lee et al., 2016, 2017).

While most mainland migrants and local Hong Kongers are ethnically Chinese, the former are distinguishable if they speak Mandarin, the official language in China, instead of the local language, which is Cantonese. In a recent analysis, Lee and Liang (forthcoming) found that Hong Kong citizens living in districts with higher proportions of people speaking Mandarin as their daily language favored more restrictive immigration policies.

Based on this background, we posit that South Asians and people who speak Mandarin as their everyday language are the two main groups generally perceived as “threats” by the dominant majority in Hong Kong. All other ethnicities are grouped together. This focus does not entail that Mandarin speakers and South Asians are the only two groups that experience prejudice. For example, media coverage has noted prejudice against the 2,000 Africans living in the city (Zheng & Leung, 2018). Nevertheless, South Asian and Mandarin speakers remain the two relatively sizable minorities that are well-documented as being the subject of prejudice.¹ Other minority groups that might also be perceived as threats are too small, so it is not feasible to focus the analysis on them. When they are combined with other non-threatening groups, the resulting category of “other minority groups” should also not be perceived as particularly threatening. These are working assumptions based on the following hypotheses and analyses. As specified earlier, the main dependent variables in this study are social tolerance and political tolerance. Based on the previous discussion, the following hypotheses are stated:

H1: Citizens living in districts with higher proportions of South Asians exhibit lower levels of social and political tolerance.

H2: Citizens living in districts with higher proportions of residents speaking Mandarin as their everyday language exhibit lower levels of social and political tolerance.

South Asians and Mandarin speakers are the two groups specifically perceived as threatening in Hong Kong. The presence of other ethnic minorities should not solicit similar negative effect. Therefore, to avoid a null hypothesis, *H3* is stated as follows:

H3: The impact of the contextual presence of other ethnic minorities is less negative than that of the contextual presence of South Asians and Mandarin speakers.

More importantly, as explained earlier, ethnic groups that are usually the targets of prejudice might be perceived as less threatening when they are mixed with a range of other ethnic groups. In this study, it means that the substantial presence of “other ethnic minorities” may weaken the negative effects of the contextual presence of South Asians and Mandarin speakers. Therefore, the following hypothesis is stated:

H4: The effects of the presence of South Asians and Mandarin speakers specified in H1 and H2 are weaker in districts with higher proportions of other ethnic minorities.

Method and data

Survey method and sampling

The individual-level data analyzed below came from three telephone surveys conducted in late May and June 2012, June and July 2014, and May 2016, respectively, by a research center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Because the three surveys employed largely the same questionnaire, they were combined into a single data set for analysis. The respondents were Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong residents aged 18 years or above. To obtain the sample, telephone numbers from the residential directories were compiled. The last two digits of the numbers were replaced by the full set

¹According to the by-census in 2016, 80,028 South Asians were living in Hong Kong, and 131,406 residents used Mandarin as their “usual spoken language.” The relationships between the two ethnic minority groups and the mainstream society were also spotlighted during the huge wave of protests in Hong Kong in the second half of 2019 and the COVID-19 coronavirus in 2020. While there were moments of “reconciliation” or “reconnection” between the South Asian community and the mainstream society during some protest events, the conflict between mainland migrants and local Hong Kongers has intensified since the outbreak of the COVID-19 coronavirus.

of double digits from 00 to 99 to include non-listed numbers. Specific numbers were randomly drawn by computer during the fieldwork. The most recent birthday method was used to select the target respondent from a household.² The sample sizes were 806, 800, and 801 in the three surveys. The response rates were 38%, 34%, and 34%, respectively, following the American Association of Public Opinion Research's Response Rate 3.³ The samples did not differ in age, gender, and educational level. Family income was higher in 2016 because of increases in nominal salaries over the years. Compared with the population, people with higher levels of income and education were oversampled. The data were weighted according to the age \times gender \times education distribution of the population.⁴

Operationalization of individual-level factors

Following the World Values Survey, *social tolerance* was measured by asking the respondents whether they would mind having people of other ethnicities, recovered mental patients, homosexuals, sex workers, and political radicals as neighbors. The answer options included "not at all," "a little bit," and "would mind." The answers were reverse-coded and averaged to form the index ($M = 2.24$, $S.D. = 0.49$, $\alpha = .63$). Regarding *political tolerance*, the respondents were asked whether they would feel objectionable when the same five groups "strived for their rights or profess their ways of life publicly." The answers were registered on a four-point scale (1 = "not at all," 4 = "strongly"). They were reverse-coded and averaged to form the index ($M = 3.41$, $S.D. = 0.59$, $\alpha = .67$).⁵ Social and political tolerance were correlated at $r = .50$ ($p < .001$), which was not strong. The two remained conceptually and empirically distinct.

The control variables included several possible individual-level covariates of tolerance. *Trust in strangers* was the average of the respondents' level of trust in the following: 1) people they met for the first time; 2) people of a different nationality (1 = completely don't trust to 5 = completely trust, $M = 3.43$, $S.D. = 0.74$, $r = .53$). Tolerance may also be related to social perceptions. *Perceived fairness of society* was measured as the average of the respondents' response expressed on a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to four statements: 1) everyone enjoys equal opportunities in Hong Kong society; 2) there are many opportunities for upward social mobility in Hong Kong; 3) in Hong Kong, individual abilities and efforts are the most important determinants of success; 4) the social system in Hong Kong is fair overall ($M = 3.33$, $S.D. = 0.72$, $\alpha = .70$). *Pessimism about the future* was measured as the average of the respondents' estimation of whether four aspects would improve or deteriorate in the next five years: 1) the rich-poor gap in Hong Kong; 2) the fairness of Hong Kong society, 3) the opportunities for upward mobility; 4) their family's living standard. The three-point scaled items (3 = the answer signifying deterioration, 1 = the answer signifying improvement) were averaged to obtain an index ($M = 2.25$, $S.D. = 0.52$, $\alpha = .70$).

Demographics that were controlled included sex, age, educational level, family income, whether the respondent was born in Hong Kong, and whether the respondent had lived for more than one year in a foreign country.

²Sampling was therefore based only on residential phone numbers. Despite concerns about the rising number of households without fixed lines, S. W. K. Chiu and Jiang (2017) showed that in the mid-2010s in Hong Kong, survey samples derived from residential numbers were more representative of the population than samples derived from mobile numbers were.

³Response Rate 3 included cases of unknown eligibility in the calculation. The current response rates were typical of telephone surveys in contemporary Hong Kong.

⁴The sample was not weighted according to family income because of the lack of information about the age \times family income and gender \times family income distributions of the population. Weighting the samples by education should have alleviated the sample-population discrepancies in family income.

⁵The Cronbach's alpha values for social and political tolerance were not high, which reflected a significant degree of target-specificity regarding Hong Kong people's social and political tolerance. However, combining them is conceptually meaningful because the aim of the present analysis was to examine social and political tolerance in general.

Table 1. Correlations among district-level variables.

	1	2	3	4
1. % South Asians	--	0.67**	0.48*	0.13
2. % speaking Mandarin		--	0.82***	0.78***
3. % other ethnic minorities			--	0.75***
4. Median income				--

Entries are Spearman correlation coefficients. N = 18. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Operationalization of district-level factors

The survey asked the respondents to indicate the district where they lived. The respondents were then categorized as living in one of the 18 “District Council districts” in Hong Kong. The districts in urban areas are approximately 10 km², whereas the districts in the New Territories are sometimes larger than 150 km². Such variations mean that “living in the same district” might have different implications for residents in the different districts. Nevertheless, the District Council district remains the only feasible unit based on which the individual-level telephone survey data could be matched with population data.⁶

District-level data were derived from the 2016 by-census,⁷ which included information about ethnicity as well as people’s “usual spoken language.” We constructed three variables based on the information. The first was the percentage of district residents who were South Asians (Indians, Nepalese, or Pakistanis). The figure ranged from 0.1% to 6.2%. The second was the percentage of “other ethnic minorities,” that is, neither Chinese nor South Asians. The figure ranged from 3.1% to 20.1%. The third was the percentage of residents using Mandarin as their usual spoken language. The figure ranged from 0.9% to 4.2%. In addition, district-level median income was used as a control because of its possible relationship with the racial and linguistic characteristics of the district populations.⁸

Table 1 shows the correlations among the district-level variables. Some variables were significantly correlated. The Spearman correlation between the proportion of other ethnic minorities and the proportion of Mandarin speakers, for instance, was 0.82. The performance of the variables may therefore have been influenced by multicollinearity, which needed to be considered in interpreting the findings of this study.

Analysis and results

Main effects of the presence of minorities in residential contexts

We first examined the hypotheses about the main effects of the contextual presence of minority groups. A multilevel regression analysis was conducted. Table 2 summarizes the findings for social tolerance. The first column shows that younger people, males, those who had experiences living abroad, and who trusted strangers had higher levels of social tolerance. None of the district-level factors had a significant regression coefficient.

However, as noted earlier, the various district-level factors were strongly correlated. It could be inappropriate to take away a control variable (e.g., median income) from the model. However, because both South Asians and Mandarin speakers represented “perceived threats,”

⁶While official data about sub-district units are available, telephone survey respondents could have found it difficult to identify the exact sub-districts they were living in, and they might have found the question intrusive if it asked for a precise indication of where they lived.

⁷The findings are available at: <https://www.by-census2016.gov.hk/en/bc-dp.html>

⁸The proportion of South Asians did not relate significantly to district level income, gender ratio, median age, percentage of university degree holders, labor force participation rate, or average household size. The proportion of Mandarin speakers was not related to district-level gender ratio, median age, or average household size. However, it was related significantly to district level income, percentage of degree holders, and labor force participation rate. However, when district level income was controlled, the proportion of Mandarin speakers was no longer significantly related to the percentage of degree holders and labor force participation rate. Therefore, controlling for district level income was deemed adequate in the present study.

Table 2. Regression analysis of social tolerance.

	Models			
	1	2	3	4
Intercept	3.05***	2.97***	2.74***	2.89***
Year 2012	-0.09***	-0.09***	-0.09***	-0.09***
Year 2014	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
Gender	-0.05**	-0.05**	-0.05**	-0.05**
Age	-0.03***	-0.03***	-0.03***	-0.03***
HK born	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03
Lived foreign	0.06*	0.06*	0.06*	0.06*
Education	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
Income	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Society open and fair	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03	-0.03
Pessimism	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Trust strangers	0.09***	0.09***	0.09***	0.09***
District-level:				
Median income	-0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00
% Other minorities	0.00	-0.00	-0.00	0.00
% South Asians	-0.03	-0.03*		
% Mandarin	0.02		-0.05	
% Mandarin + S. Asians				-0.02*
Random effects				
σ^2	0.22	0.22	0.22	0.22
τ_{00}	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Conditional R ²	0.082	0.080	0.082	0.080

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. N = 2407. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

it was meaningful to determine whether better results could be derived when the contextual presence of perceived threats was represented differently in the model. Specifically, we conducted three additional regression models using the following: 1) only the proportion of South Asians and not the proportion of residents speaking Mandarin; 2) only the proportion of residents speaking Mandarin but not the proportion of South Asians; 3) the combined proportions of residents who were South Asians and those who were Mandarin speakers (i.e., the sum of the two percentages).

As shown in the second to fourth columns in Table 2, the proportion of South Asians was related significantly and negatively to social tolerance when the proportion of Mandarin speakers was not included. In the last column, the combined proportions of Mandarin speakers and South Asians also had a significant coefficient. These findings thus support H1. However, the proportion of Mandarin speakers was unrelated to social tolerance. Notably, the proportion of other ethnic minorities did not affect social tolerance in any model. The contrast between the impact of the contextual presence of South Asians and the contextual presence of other ethnic minorities was consistent with H3. However, a further statistical analysis showed that the coefficient of the presence of South Asians and the coefficient of the presence of other minorities differed only at $p < .06$ ($t = 1.89$). Therefore, H3 is not supported.

Table 3 summarizes the results of political tolerance as the dependent variable. Males, younger respondents, respondents born in Hong Kong, and better-educated respondents were more likely to acknowledge the political rights of others. In addition, respondents who trusted strangers exhibited higher levels of political tolerance. Interestingly, people who were more pessimistic about the future were also more tolerant politically.

After controlling all the individual-level variables, none of the district-level variables had a significant main effect on political tolerance. The results were the same when the proportion of South Asians and the proportion Mandarin speakers were included in the model separately or combined into a single variable. Based on these findings (Tables 2 and 3), H1 was partially supported. However, H2 and H3 were not supported.

Table 3. Regression analysis of political tolerance.

	Models			
	1	2	3	4
Intercept	3.60***	3.51***	3.43***	3.48***
Year 2012	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Year 2014	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01	-0.01
Gender	-0.09**	-0.09**	-0.09**	-0.09**
Age	-0.03***	-0.03***	-0.03***	-0.03***
HK born	0.05*	0.05*	0.05*	0.05*
Lived foreign	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02
Education	0.02**	0.02**	0.02**	0.02**
Income	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
Society open and fair	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03
Pessimism	0.09**	0.09***	0.09***	0.09***
Trust strangers	0.09**	0.09***	0.09***	0.09***
District level:				
Median income	-0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00
% Other minorities	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00	-0.00
% South Asians	-0.02	-0.01		
% Mandarin	0.02		-0.01	
% Mandarin + S. Asians				-0.00
Random effects				
σ^2	0.31	0.32	0.32	0.32
τ_{00}	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.00
Conditional R ²	0.114	0.111	0.112	0.111

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. N = 2407. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

Examining the interaction effect hypothesis

We then examined the interaction effect hypothesis. We added interaction terms only to models 2, 3, and 4 because certain contextual effects were discernible only in these models. The first column of the top half of Table 4 shows that the interaction between the proportion of South Asians and the proportion of other ethnic minorities was significantly related to social tolerance. The coefficient was positive, which means that the negative impact of the proportion of South Asians on social tolerance tended to become less negative, i.e., weaker, when the proportion of other ethnic minorities increased, which was consistent with H4.

The interaction between the proportion of Mandarin speakers and the proportion of other ethnic minorities was non-significant. However, the proportion of Mandarin speakers and South Asians combined had a significant interaction effect with the proportion of other minorities. The coefficient was positive in sign and therefore consistent with the hypothesis.

The bottom half of Table 4 shows the results regarding political tolerance. Although Table 2 shows the absence of main effects of the district-level variables, Table 4 shows that there was a significant interaction effect in all three columns. When entered separately, the proportion of South Asians, the proportion of Mandarin speakers, and the combined proportion of the two groups interacted significantly with the proportion of other ethnic minorities in the expected direction. Based on the results shown in Table 4, H4 is supported.

The patterns of all five significant interaction effects were similar. Figures 1 and 2 further illustrate the characteristics of these interaction effects. As Figure 1 shows, when percentage of “other minorities” in a district was 3.9%, the social tolerance score was higher by about 0.4 when percentage of South Asians in the district was higher by about 6%. But However, when the percentage of “other minorities” in a district was about 8.4%, social tolerance was only slightly lower for the same difference in percentage of South Asians in the district. Similarly, Figure 2 shows that when the percentage of “other minorities” in a district was 3.9%, the political tolerance score was lower by about 0.15 when the percentage of Mandarin speakers was higher by 3%. However, when the percentage of “other minorities” in a district grew to 8.4%, political tolerance was virtually at the same level regardless of the size of the Mandarin-speaking group.

Table 4. Interaction effects.

On social tolerance:	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
% Other minorities	-0.02**	-0.01	-0.02*
% South Asians	-0.11***		
% Mandarin		-0.07*	
% Mandarin + S. Asians			-0.05***
% Other minorities × % S. Asians	0.01**		
% Mandarin × % S. Asians		0.00	
% Mandarin + S. Asians			0.01*
On political tolerance:			
% Other minorities	-0.03	-0.04*	-0.04**
% S. Asians	-0.12*		
% Mandarin		-0.10*	
% Mandarin + S. Asians			-0.08**
% Other minorities × % S. Asians	0.01*		
% Mandarin × % S. Asians		0.01**	
% Mandarin + S. Asians			0.01*

Entries are unstandardized regression coefficients. The full model includes all the individual-level factors and district-level median income. N = 2407. *** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$.

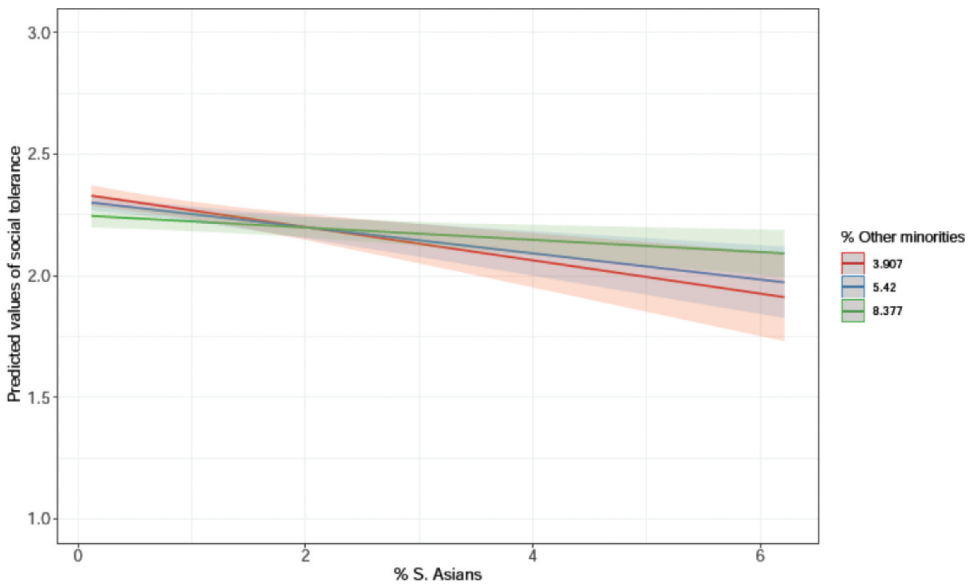


Figure 1. Interaction effect between the presence of South Asians and other minorities on social tolerance.

Tolerance of ethnic minorities vs. tolerance of all groups

In the main analysis, composite indices of social and political tolerance were employed as dependent variables based on the notion of spillover effects. To better understand the findings, the same analysis was repeated by using social tolerance of ethnic minorities and political tolerance of ethnic minorities as the dependent variables. The results showed that the significant findings presented in Tables 2 and 4 were insignificant. That is, there was no evidence that the presence of South Asians would lead directly to decreased social tolerance of ethnic minorities in particular. Moreover, there was no evidence that the presence of “other minorities” moderated the effects of the presence of

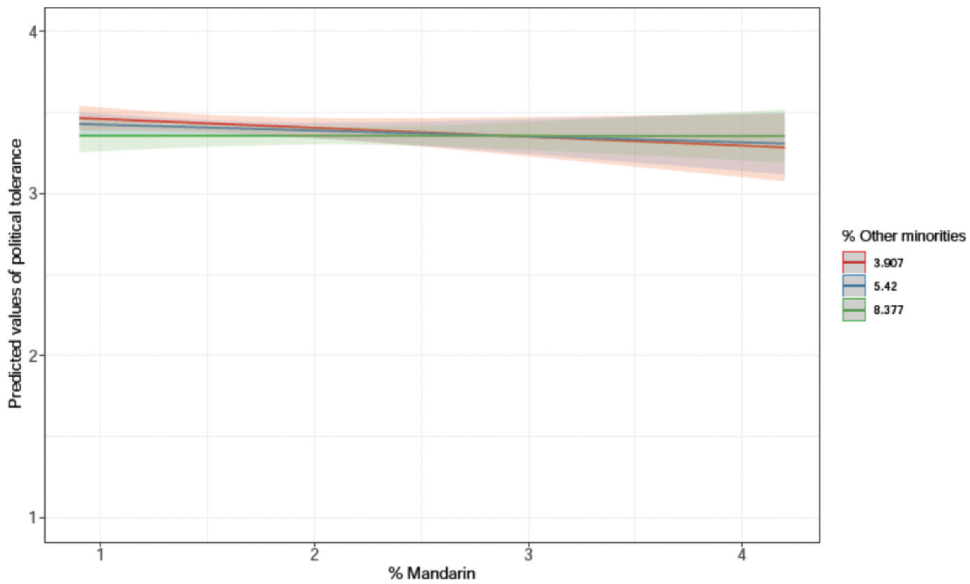


Figure 2. Interaction effect between presence of Mandarin speakers and other minorities on political tolerance.

South Asians or Mandarin speakers on social and political tolerance. In other words, the impact of the contextual presence of the “threatening” minorities was discernible only when the composite index was used.

Discussion and conclusion

This study examined the effects of context on social and political tolerance in Hong Kong. The main effects of the proportion of South Asians and the proportion of residents speaking Mandarin in daily life were not strong or consistent. However, the proportion of the two groups combined or the proportion of South Asians alone was found to be related to lower levels of social tolerance. The finding is consistent with existing knowledge that South Asians and Mandarin speakers have often been the targets of prejudice in Hong Kong (Erni & Leung, 2014; Lee et al., 2017).

It should be noted that in the literature on the effects of context on racial attitudes, some scholars have questioned whether the observed relationships were the result of residents’ locational decisions (Dustmann & Preston, 2001). However, locational decisions should have contributed to a positive relationship between tolerance and proportions of South Asians and Mandarin speakers. That is, if the respondents chose where they lived based on their preferences for having certain groups of people as neighbors, the less tolerant would move to places with fewer South Asians and Mandarin speakers. The opposite relationship was revealed in the present study. Hence, the findings of the present study indicate that the relationship represents a case of context effects.

More importantly, this study showed that the impact of the contextual presence of specific minority groups was conditioned by the presence of other minorities. The results showed a significant interaction effect between the proportions of South Asians/Mandarin speakers and the proportion of “other ethnic minorities.” The results were highly consistent across the two dependent variables and significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Our theoretical contention is that people have relatively weaker threat perceptions or prejudices against a specific minority group when the minority group co-exists with substantial numbers of people belonging to a range of other minorities. This contention is based on several considerations. The presence of a wide range of other (non-threatening) ethnic minorities produces a multiethnic

and multicultural environment in which cultural differences can be normalized. Such contexts provide people with multicultural experiences, which should enhance people's ability to engage in meaningful intercultural communication and interactions (C. Chiu & Hong, 2005). From the perspective of the defended neighborhood thesis (Van Heerden & Ruedin, 2019), the existence of other ethnic groups means that the presence of one or two additional ethnic groups would have a weaker effect on the community. Moreover, when multiple ethnic groups are present, people might be more aware of the inappropriateness of singling out one or two specific minorities as threatening.

Several limitations of the study should be noted. First, the analysis did not directly test the mechanisms of perceived threats and multicultural contact. This limitation should be addressed in future research. Second, significant findings emerged when the composite indices were used but not when the singular items of social tolerance and political tolerance of ethnic minorities were used. Although this finding could be understood in terms of the notion of spillover effects and the methodological limitation of using singular items as dependent variables, whether a better measurement of tolerance of ethnic minorities in particular could generate significant findings remains an open question. Third, the district-level measures were based on the relatively large District Council districts in Hong Kong, which vary in size and scale. This measurement may also have undermined the ability of the analysis to derive significant results. Fourth, South Asians and Mandarin speakers are the two most conspicuous and sizable minorities in Hong Kong. They are perceived by the dominant majority as threatening, but they may not be the only "perceived threats" in society. As noted earlier in this article, local media coverage has reported that Africans have been perceived as threatening by the local public. In any case, a precise distinction between "threatening groups" and "non-threatening groups" could have empowered the analysis.

Finally, the results may have been attributable to other district-level characteristics. However, it should be noted that district-level income has already been controlled, and it is unclear what confounding variable could explain the most important finding in this study: the interaction effect on tolerance between the presence of "threatening minorities" and the presence of "other minorities."

Despite the limitations of the present study, the findings of the significant and consistent interaction effect indicate the potential value of "genuine diversity" in the co-presence of multiple ethnic groups. The present findings could be considered as providing several directions for future research. First, the findings pointed to the significance of a distinction in the presence of specific outgroups vs. the presence of diversity in a local context. In fact, studies that claimed to examine the impact of residential contextual diversity on racial attitudes sometimes measured "diversity" simply in terms of the proportion of residents who were members of an outgroup (e.g., Quillian, 1995). Several other studies measured "diversity" using indices that captured the distribution of people belonging to multiple ethnic groups (e.g., Branton & Jones, 2005; Gijssberts et al., 2011). These two approaches captured differing phenomena. The present study suggests that the diversity of multi-ethnicity could have a distinctive effect.

Second, it would be meaningful for researchers interested in intercultural contact to explore not only the impact of frequencies of contact (as in the literature) but also the experience of contact with a wide range of ethnic groups. It could be argued that the awareness of, respect for, and ability to handle cultural differences would be better cultivated not by interacting intensively with members of a specific outgroup but by interacting with a wide range of outgroups.

Third, it would be meaningful to examine how other individual-level or contextual factors moderate the effects of specific configurations of ethnic minority groups in local contexts. For example, if the presence of specific ethnic minorities contributed to certain findings because of perceived threats, then district-level variables related to the sense of insecurity may moderate the results.

Because this study focused on Hong Kong, the findings might not be generalizable to other social and cultural contexts. Indeed, two special characteristics of Hong Kong can be noted here. As a former British colony and a self-proclaimed international city, Hong Kong has long valued cultural

diversity. While multiculturalism is not necessarily whole-heartedly embraced by the people and/or facilitated by government policies (Law & Lee, 2013), it is an ideal that people know they should respect. This background might be conducive to multi-ethnicity, thus undermining racial prejudice.

Filipinos and Indonesians are among the most prominent “other ethnic minorities” in Hong Kong. Regardless of their country of origin, the important fact is that many of them work as domestic helpers in the city. Many members of these ethnic groups live with members of the dominant majority. In other words, in the Hong Kong context, the high proportion of members of “other ethnic minorities” in a district implies the presence of constant and intensive intercultural contact in everyday life settings. This factor may strengthen the capability of “other ethnic minorities” to undermine the negative effects of the contextual presence of South Asians and Mandarin speakers.

Moreover, while the local dominant majority may have negative perceptions about South Asians and Mandarin speakers, there is no sign that other ethnic minorities in Hong Kong also are similarly prejudiced against the two groups. In other words, relationships among the various ethnic minority groups in Hong Kong should be congenial. In this scenario, minority groups that are not perceived by the local majority as threatening might be in the position to serve as the bridge between the majority and groups that are otherwise the subject of prejudice.

Nevertheless, the potential role of the above factors in shaping the present findings does not mean that they are unique to Hong Kong. It simply leads back to the point that some conditions contribute to findings regarding the effects of the presence of ethnic minorities in neighborhoods. Such conditions are present or absent to varying extents in different societies. Whether they shape the effects of residential contexts could be the subject of a future comparative analysis.

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