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A Malay boy – in his middle or late childhood years – was captured on video attempting to stomp on the gory cow head during the protest against a Hindu temple by Muslims in Shah Alam. The boy displayed a simultaneous attraction and repulsion to the act, and viewers were left with an indelible image of how he tried to step on it but nonetheless quickly withdrew his leg.

One wonders what kind of attitude towards other races and religions the boy will adhere to when he grows up. We may be able to find some clues in general if we start from the question of how a child develops his identity from young.

Children do not have historical baggage like adults. However, this does not mean that they are neutral or passive observers of events happening around them. In fact, studies have shown that in-group favouritism, i.e. positive feelings about the national group to which a person belongs, is common among children and adolescents.

Individuals also hold stereotypes about their own and other national groups.

Our federal constitution marks us out as different from one another. We are categorized as Malays and non-Malays, or the in-groups and the out-groups. This has far-reaching polarising consequences on the psyche and character of Malaysian citizens.

Studies by Henri Tajfel, a British social psychologist, have shown that mere categorisation itself is a potential source of racial prejudice and discrimination. Hence, it is important to explore the meaning of identities so that we can avoid any possible blind spots of the early

framers of the constitution.

Group membership

Racists are not born but made. One of the starting points in understanding in-group affiliation and bigotry is from child development as young people develop a subjective sense of national identity gradually.

For this sense of national identity, children first need an awareness that there are groups or categories of people like Malaysians, Singaporeans, English or French, etc. These different peoples are seen as groups instead of singular individuals. In early childhood, children do not have this idea of grouping nor do they comprehend that they themselves are a member of a particular group.

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