Eurasian Research Unit
Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka

Nile – Eurasian International Journal of Humanities (NEIJH)

Exploring Ethnic Stereotypes, Intergroup Contact, and Relational Resilience Among Sri Lankan University Students: A Qualitative Inquiry

Rikasa, M. A. R. P.

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya, Dalugama, Sri Lanka.

ARTICLE INFO

Article History

Received : 14 September 2026
Revised : 07 October 2026
Published : 23 October 2026

Keywords:

Ethnic Stereotypes, Intergroup Contact, Intergroup Resilience, Social Identity Theory, Ethno Religious Relations

***Corresponding Author**

Email: *fathimarikasa658@gmail.com*

DOI: *10.68283/neijh.v1.i2.a02*

How to cite: *Rikasa, M. A. R. P. (2026) 'Exploring Ethnic Stereotypes, Intergroup Contact, and Relational Resilience Among Sri Lankan University Students: A Qualitative Inquiry', Nile - Eurasian International Journal of Humanities, 1(2), pp. 16 – 26. https://doi.org/10.68283/neijh.v1.i2.a02*

ABSTRACT

Higher education campuses in post-conflict Sri Lanka serve as micro-societies where diverse ethnic communities, primarily Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil, and Sri Lankan Muslim, interact within shared academic spaces. While university settings present potential opportunities for cross-cultural cohesion, students enter higher education carrying inherited ethnic stereotypes, historicized anxieties, and institutionalized language barriers. This qualitative study investigates how university undergraduates perceive and navigate ethnic stereotypes, how intergroup contact influences cross-ethnic relations, and how students develop intergroup resilience conceptualized here as the relational capacity to negotiate, endure, and resolve interethnic tension, micro-aggressions, and historical prejudice. Guided by an interpretivist paradigm combining Social Identity Theory and the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 undergraduate students from four strategically selected Sri Lankan state universities (Kelaniya, Peradeniya, South Eastern, and Jaffna). Thematic analysis revealed four overarching dynamics: (1) socialization pathways and specific content of inherited ethnic stereotypes; (2) structural, linguistic, and historical drivers of intergroup anxiety; (3) non-linear contact dynamics encompassing both transformative encounters and superficial/negative interactions; and (4) the operational mechanisms of intergroup resilience during active campus tensions. The study demonstrates that intergroup resilience is distinct from passive peaceful coexistence or mere stereotype reduction; it represents an active relational process dependent on linguistic negotiation and collaborative coping. Institutional recommendations for structured intergroup engagement in Sri Lankan higher education are discussed. The findings also highlight demographic majority and minority shifts across institutional settings and the role of shared residential spaces in sustaining cross-ethnic trust. Recommendations include language-bridging modules, multi-ethnic hostel allocations, student-led mediation committees, and cooperative academic projects.

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions in multi-ethnic and post-conflict societies occupy a pivotal dual role: they function as social microcosms that reproduce broader societal divisions, while simultaneously offering structured spaces where historicized intergroup boundaries can be renegotiated. In post-conflict Sri Lanka, state universities bring together young adults from diverse ethno-religious and linguistic backgrounds, principally Sinhala (majority Buddhist/Christian), Sri Lankan Tamil (minority Hindu/Christian), and Sri Lankan Muslim (Moor/Malay) communities. These student bodies reflect the complex demographic and historical landscape of a nation shaped by decades of ethnic conflict, political violence, and post-war ethno-religious tensions. While universities possess the potential to foster cross-cultural understanding, physical proximity alone does not automatically erode deep-seated prejudice or foster social cohesion.

Students enter higher education with pre-existing cognitive frameworks regarding ethnic out-groups. These perceptions are systematically cultivated prior to university entry through early childhood socialization within ethnically segregated schooling systems, family oral histories, localized community narratives, political discourse, and media representations. In Sri Lanka, institutionalized segregation in primary and secondary education where instruction is largely divided into Sinhala and Tamil medium streams limits early intergroup contact. Consequently, university entry often represents a student's first sustained, face-to-face exposure to peers from different ethno-religious communities. When individuals from distinct backgrounds meet, their initial interactions are frequently mediated by inherited ethnic stereotypes generalized, oversimplified cognitive schemas regarding the traits, morality, and loyalty of out-group members.

From the perspective of Social Identity Theory (SIT), social categorization into in-groups ("us") and out-groups ("them") serves as a cognitive mechanism to organize the social world while enhancing self-esteem through favorable in-group comparison. In post-conflict contexts, however, social categorization is heightened by historical trauma, political mobilization, and perceived intergroup threat. Intergroup interactions can thus provoke heightened intergroup anxiety, social distance, and defensive self-segregation. While Allport's Intergroup Contact Hypothesis posits that contact under favorable conditions (equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support) can reduce prejudice, empirical scholarship underscores that contact in real-world settings is often complex, non-linear, and occasionally negative. Superficial contact or interactions marked by language barriers and micro-aggressions can exacerbate pre-existing stereotypes or produce social withdrawal.

Despite extensive scholarship evaluating stereotype formation and the general efficacy of intergroup contact, a critical conceptual and empirical gap remains within sociology and higher education studies in Sri Lanka. Existing literature has predominantly documented the existence of ethnic stereotypes or evaluated macro-level peacebuilding programs. Insufficient scholarly attention has been directed toward understanding how students actively navigate everyday ethnic friction, language anxiety, and micro-conflicts when contact fails to run smoothly. To address this gap, this study conceptualizes and operationalizes the concept of intergroup resilience within campus environments.

Intergroup resilience is defined in this study as a relational and processual capacity through which members of different ethnic groups jointly withstand, negotiate, and adapt to interethnic misunderstandings, structural friction, stereotyping, or localized campus tensions without succumbing to persistent hostility, social isolation, or systemic boycott. Unlike stereotype reduction (a cognitive shift in individual belief) or peaceful coexistence (the passive avoidance of overt conflict), intergroup resilience represents an active, relational process. It explains how student networks maintain communication channels, deploy linguistic adaptation, and exercise mutual restraint during periods of heightened sociopolitical or institutional strain.

Furthermore, while previous research on Sri Lankan higher education has focused predominantly on Sinhala–Tamil post-war dynamics, contemporary intergroup relations are pluralistic and involve critical tripartite interactions among Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim students. Post-2015 national developments, including post-war ethno-religious polarizations, localized riots, and the aftermath of the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, have significantly impacted Muslim communities across Sri Lanka, reconfiguring intergroup perceptions across state campuses.

Accordingly, this study explores ethnic stereotypes, intergroup contact dynamics, and intergroup resilience across four state universities in Sri Lanka. The research addresses four interconnected research questions:

RQ1: What specific ethnic stereotypes do Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim university students hold regarding one another, and how were these perceptions inherited before university entry?

RQ2: What structural, linguistic, and experiential factors maintain or heighten intergroup anxiety and social distance within the university environment?

RQ3: How do students experience everyday intergroup contact, including both constructive interactions and negative or uncomfortable encounters?

RQ4: How is intergroup resilience operationalized and demonstrated when students encounter interethnic friction, misunderstandings, or localized campus disruptions?

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

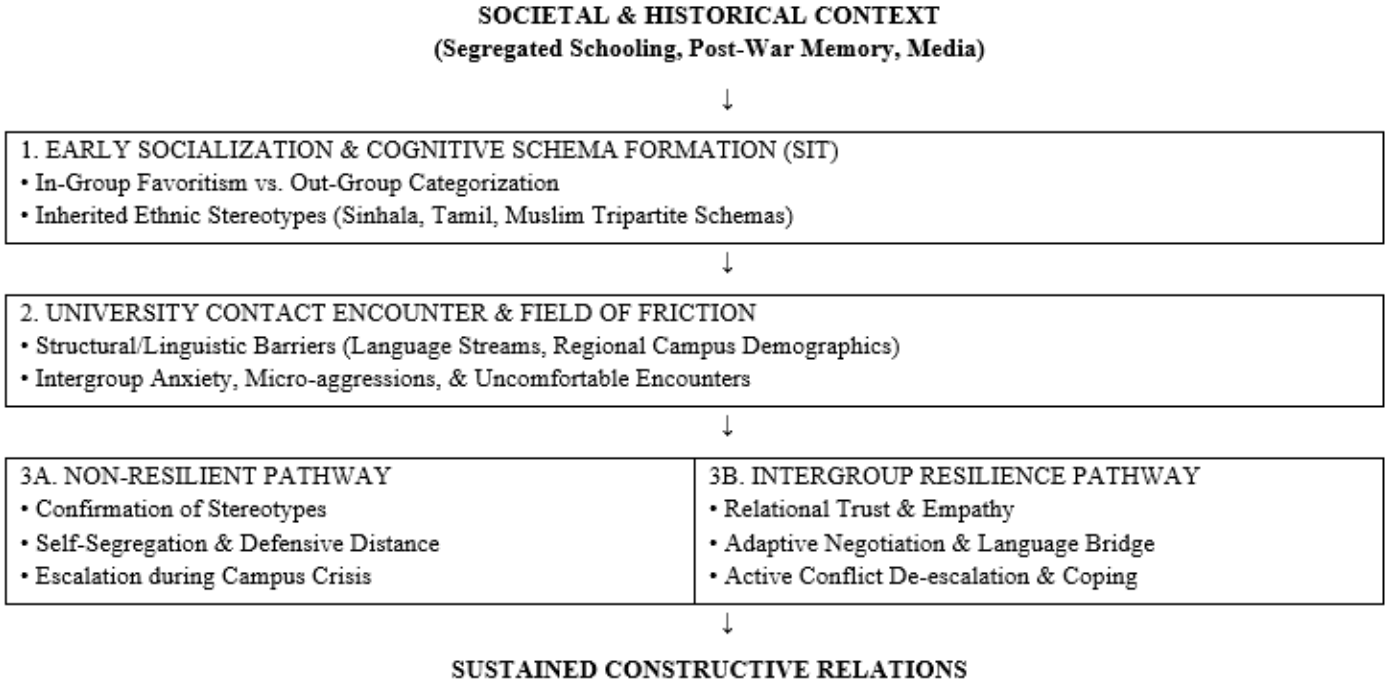


Figure 1: Integrated Theoretical Framework of Intergroup Contact and Resilience

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study integrates Social Identity Theory (SIT) and the Intergroup Contact Hypothesis into a unified conceptual model centering on Intergroup Resilience.

2.1 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), SIT asserts that individuals categorize social environments into in-groups and out-groups to establish social identity and self-worth. Categorization leads to in-group favoritism and out-group homogenization, where out-group members are viewed through generalized stereotypes. In Sri Lanka, national history, mono-ethnic primary schooling, and media discourses reinforce sharp ethnoreligious boundary lines. SIT provides the analytical framework for RQ1 and RQ2 by illustrating how students enter university with deeply internalized cognitive schemas that categorize peers along Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim identities.

2.2 Intergroup Contact Hypothesis

Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Hypothesis posits that contact between divergent group members reduces prejudice under four optimal conditions: equal status, common goals, intergroup cooperation, and institutional support. Pettigrew and Tropp (2006, 2008) expanded this framework, demonstrating that contact works primarily by reducing intergroup anxiety and enhancing empathy and perspective-taking. However, critical contact scholars note that real-world contact is rarely optimal. In Sri Lankan state universities, equal status and institutional support vary considerably across regional settings. Applying Contact Theory analytically allows this study (RQ3) to examine the dual outcomes of intergroup contact: positive contact that dismantles cognitive stereotypes, and negative or superficial contact that amplifies intergroup anxiety.

2.3 Conceptualizing Intergroup Resilience

To overcome the theoretical limitation where intergroup outcomes are simplified into a binary (prejudice reduction vs. conflict escalation), this study introduces Intergroup Resilience as an analytical category. Intergroup resilience operates along three distinct dimensions:

The Relational Dimension: The accumulation of localized interpersonal trust, cross-ethnic friendships, and perspective-taking that acts as an emotional buffer when external ethnic tensions arise.

The Adaptive/Linguistic Dimension: The active strategies used by individuals to navigate linguistic barriers, clarify misunderstandings, and correct overgeneralized assumptions during real-time encounters.

The Contextual/De-escalatory Dimension: The collective capacity of multi-ethnic peer networks within university subcultures (e.g., hostels, sports teams, academic group work) to maintain open dialogue, exercise restraint, and shield interpersonal relationships during campus crises or broader national ethno-religious unrest.

By positioning intergroup resilience as the framework's core output, this study clarifies what happens between initial contact and long-term social cohesion, providing a precise tool to evaluate how students negotiate difference amidst recurring societal strain.

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized an interpretivist qualitative research design. Qualitative inquiry is uniquely suited for examining the complex, subjective meanings that individuals attach to social identities, historical memories, and interpersonal encounters. Rather than measuring prejudice through quantified attitude scales, an interpretivist design allowed the researcher to explore how university undergraduates construct, maintain, challenge, and renegotiate ethnic boundaries within their everyday academic and residential environments.

3.2 Study Setting and Institutional Justification

Data collection was conducted across four major state universities in Sri Lanka:

University of Kelaniya (UOK): Located in the Western Province; predominantly Sinhala-majority student body with minority Tamil and Muslim students, representing an urban/semi-urban institutional context.

University of Peradeniya (UOP): Located in the Central Province; highly ethnically and linguistically diverse residential campus drawing students from all administrative districts across Sri Lanka.

South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL): Located in the Eastern Province; Muslim-majority student demographic located in a multi-ethnic regional environment alongside Tamil and Sinhala populations.

University of Jaffna (UOJ): Located in the Northern Province; Tamil-majority institutional environment in a historically post-war region, hosting Sinhala and Muslim students primarily through national university admissions placements.

Selecting these four universities provided geographic, institutional, and demographic variation. This multi-site approach ensured that the study captured experiences where participants functioned as demographic majorities in some campus settings and demographic minorities in others, capturing the institutional dynamics of Sri Lankan higher education.

3.3 Sampling Strategy and Participant Profiling

Participants were selected using a multi-stage purposive sampling strategy. Inclusion criteria required participants to: (a) be registered full-time undergraduate students across the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year of study; (b) have completed at least one semester of university residence/study to ensure adequate exposure to campus life; and (c) possess direct experience interacting with peers from ethno-religious backgrounds different from their own.

To ensure academic and demographic variation, participants were approached through student union notices, faculty boards, and hall wardens, followed by peer-referral snowballing to reach underrepresented student sub-groups. Crucially, to resolve methodological ambiguities regarding identity categories, participant profiles explicitly recorded both ethnicity (Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil, Sri Lankan Muslim) and religion (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity), recognizing that while ethnicity and religion overlap in Sri Lanka, they constitute distinct social categories.

A total of N = 30 undergraduate students participated in the study. Sample saturation was achieved at 30 interviews, as subsequent conversations yielded repeated themes without generating new conceptual categories. Table 1 and Table 2 detail the distribution and demographic profiles of the participants.

Table 1: Distribution of Interview Participants by University and Academic Year

University	1st Year	2nd Year	3rd Year	4th Year	Total Participants
University of Kelaniya (UOK)	3	2	1	2	8
University of Peradeniya (UOP)	2	1	3	1	7
South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL)	3	2	1	1	7
University of Jaffna (UOJ)	3	2	2	1	8
Total	11	7	7	5	30

Table 2: Comprehensive Participant Profiles

Code	Gender	Ethnicity	Religion	Native Language	University	Year	Faculty / Discipline
PC1	Male	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil / English	UOK	1st Year	Social Sciences

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

Code	Gender	Ethnicity	Religion	Native Language	University	Year	Faculty / Discipline
PC2	Male	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hinduism	Tamil	UOK	4th Year	Commerce & Management
PC3	Female	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil / Sinhala	UOK	1st Year	Humanities
PC4	Female	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	UOK	1st Year	Social Sciences
PC5	Female	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	UOK	4th Year	Science
PC6	Female	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	UOK	2nd Year	Medicine
PC7	Male	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	UOK	2nd Year	Science
PC8	Female	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil	UOK	3rd Year	Arts
PC9	Female	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil / English	UOP	1st Year	Arts
PC10	Male	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	UOP	3rd Year	Management
PC11	Male	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hinduism	Tamil	UOP	2nd Year	Management
PC12	Female	Sri Lankan Tamil	Christianity	Tamil / English	UOP	3rd Year	Science
PC13	Male	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil / Sinhala	UOP	3rd Year	Arts
PC14	Female	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	UOP	1st Year	Arts
PC15	Female	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	UOP	4th Year	Arts
PC16	Female	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil	SEUSL	4th Year	Islamic Studies & Arabic
PC17	Female	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil	SEUSL	1st Year	Islamic Studies & Arabic
PC18	Female	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	SEUSL	2nd Year	Applied Sciences
PC19	Female	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil	SEUSL	1st Year	Islamic Studies & Arabic
PC20	Male	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	SEUSL	1st Year	Management & Commerce
PC21	Female	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil	SEUSL	3rd Year	Islamic Studies & Arabic
PC22	Male	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	SEUSL	2nd Year	Management & Commerce
PC23	Male	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hinduism	Tamil	UOJ	1st Year	Arts

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

Code	Gender	Ethnicity	Religion	Native Language	University	Year	Faculty / Discipline
PC24	Male	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil	UOJ	1st Year	Arts
PC25	Female	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	UOJ	2nd Year	Allied Health Sciences
PC26	Female	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hinduism	Tamil	UOJ	3rd Year	Science
PC27	Male	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hinduism	Tamil	UOJ	1st Year	Arts
PC28	Female	Sri Lankan Tamil	Hinduism	Tamil	UOJ	4th Year	Arts
PC29	Female	Sinhala	Buddhism	Sinhala	UOJ	1st Year	Science
PC30	Female	Sri Lankan Muslim	Islam	Tamil	UOJ	2nd Year	Arts

3.4 Multilingual Data Collection Procedures

Data collection was conducted using semi-structured individual interviews lasting between 30 and 55 minutes. The primary researcher is trilingual (proficient in Sinhala, Tamil, and English). Conducting interviews directly in the participant's primary language eliminated the need for third-party interpreters, preserving nuance, idiomatic expressions, and emotional resonance.

Interview protocol domains evaluated: Early socialization and pre-university perceptions of ethnic out-groups;

Experiences during initial university entry, hostel placement, and academic group work;

Specific instances of ethnic stereotyping, language anxiety, and negative or uncomfortable intergroup encounters;

Real-time responses to campus crises, localized ethnic disputes, or national political tension; and

Factors enabling the development of cross-ethnic trust, empathy, and adaptive communication.

Interviews were audio-recorded with explicit written consent, transcribed verbatim in the original language, and subsequently translated into English by the primary researcher. A back-translation protocol was performed on a random 20% sample of transcripts by an independent bilingual academic to ensure semantic accuracy and cross-language consistency.

3.5 Systematic Qualitative Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase Reflexive Thematic Analysis framework. To maintain methodological rigor and address reviewer concerns regarding analytical clarity, the coding process followed two distinct stages:

Stage 1: Inductive Coding (Data-Driven): Transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarization. Initial line-by-line coding was conducted inductively without forcing data into pre-existing theoretical constructs. Open codes captured raw participant meanings (e.g., fear of religious attire, canteen table segregation, fear during campus protests, using English as a neutral bridge, shared hostel food).

Stage 2: Theoretical Interpretation & Synthesis (Deductive/Theory-Informed): Related inductive codes were grouped into candidate themes. At this phase, Social Identity Theory and the Contact Hypothesis were applied as analytical lenses to interpret why specific patterns occurred. Themes were refined to ensure distinct boundaries, eliminating conceptual overlap and capturing both positive interactions and negative/contradictory experiences.

4. Findings

The thematic analysis produced four structured, analytical themes that illuminate the trajectory of intergroup relations among Sri Lankan university students.

4.1 Theme 1: Socialization Pathways and Specific Tripartite Ethnic Stereotypes

Participants across all four universities emphasized that they did not arrive at university as blank slates. Early socialization within mono-ethnic schools, family conversations, and targeted media coverage cultivated distinct, content-specific stereotypes regarding out-groups. Rather than vague "perceptions," students reported specific cognitive schemas regarding Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim communities.

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

- **Sinhala Student Schemas Regarding Tamil and Muslim Out-Groups**

Sinhala undergraduates frequently reported inheriting historical narratives framing Tamils through post-war security lenses, while Muslim peers were viewed through post-2015 cultural and economic anxieties.

"Growing up in Down Country, I had zero Tamil or Muslim neighbors. School was 100% Sinhala Buddhist. At home, Tamil people were mostly spoken about in relation to the war as people who were distant or untrustworthy. Regarding Muslims, after the news coverage in recent years, my family believed they were secretive, culturally exclusive, and trying to dominate businesses." (PC4, Sinhala Female, UOK)

- **Tamil Student Schemas Regarding Sinhala and Muslim Out-Groups**

Tamil students from the North and East described arriving at university with internalized anxieties regarding the Sinhala-majority state and suspicions regarding Muslim commercial dominance.

"In Jaffna, our generation heard stories from elders about military presence and discrimination. We grew up believing Sinhala students would be aggressive, nationalistic, and dominant on campus. We also viewed Muslim students as politically opportunistic, staying separate from Tamil linguistic struggles despite sharing the Tamil language." (PC23, Tamil Male, UOJ)

- **Muslim Student Schemas Regarding Sinhala and Tamil Out-Groups**

Muslim participants highlighted feeling caught between two larger ethnic communities, reporting acute self-consciousness regarding religious attire (Abaya, Niqab, Hijab, Beard) and dietary practices.

"Before entering SEUSL, my relatives warned me that Sinhala students would judge my Abaya and accuse Muslims of extremism. At the same time, we were cautious around Tamil students due to historical land and political clashes in the East. You enter campus assuming everyone outside your faith views you with suspicion." (PC16, Muslim Female, SEUSL)

4.2 Theme 2: Structural Friction, Language Anxiety, and Uncomfortable Contact

While the Contact Hypothesis suggests interaction reduces prejudice, data revealed that initial or unmediated contact frequently produced heightened anxiety, social distance, and defensive self-segregation. Structural segregation within university academic streams and acute language barriers served as primary drivers of intergroup friction.

- **Linguistic Isolation and Academic Segregation**

Sri Lankan state universities often conduct lectures in Sinhala and Tamil mediums for Arts and Humanities, while Science, Medicine, and Management utilize English. This structural division physically separates students by ethnicity during instruction.

"Because Arts lectures are divided by language medium, Sinhala students sit in Hall A and Tamil/Muslim students sit in Hall B. We literally walk past each other in corridors for two years without saying a word. The university structure itself keeps us in ethnic silos." (PC28, Tamil Female, UOJ)

Linguistic insecurity exacerbated social distance. Students expressed intense fear of being mocked or misunderstood when trying to communicate in a second national language.

"I wanted to speak to Sinhala roommates, but my Sinhala was poor. When I tried, some laughed at my accent. It wasn't malicious, but I felt embarrassed. After that, I retreated to my Tamil-speaking group for months. It's easier to stay where it is safe." (PC11, Tamil Male, UOP)

- **Micro-Aggressions and Negative Contact Encounters**

Contrary to ideal contact scenarios, negative contact experiences reinforced inherited stereotypes. Students reported micro-aggressions in shared spaces such as canteens and residential halls.

"During my first month in the hostel, a Sinhala senior made a crude joke in the canteen about Muslim halal food, asking if we were hiding something. I felt deeply insulted. It confirmed everything my community had warned me about." (PC1, Muslim Male, UOK)

"In the hostel, when a political issue flared up in the news, Tamil students in the TV room immediately switched to Tamil news channels and spoke in hushed tones. It made us Sinhala students feel excluded and suspicious, as if they were blaming us." (PC22, Sinhala Male, SEUSL)

4.3 Theme 3: Non-Linear Contact and De-categorization in Academic and Residential Spaces

Despite structural friction, sustained, meaningful contact over time facilitated cognitive de-categorization. When students engaged in prolonged, cooperative tasks specifically in multi-ethnic science/management group projects, sports, or shared hostel rooms, individual personalities began to override ethnic categorization.

- **Co-Residence and Shared Vulnerability**

Hostel accommodation served as a high-contact environment where daily routines broke down abstract stereotypes.

"In Peradeniya, my hostel room had two Sinhala girls, one Tamil girl, and me [Muslim]. In the beginning, it was dead silent. But when exams came, we were all overwhelmed and starving at 2 am. The Sinhala girl shared her tea, I shared my home-made snacks, and the Tamil girl helped us organize study notes. When you share late-night exam panic and sickness, ethnicity vanishes. You realize she is just an 18-year-old girl

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

struggling with the same hard paper as you." (PC9, Muslim Female, UOP)

- **Academic Interdependence and Neutral Language Bridging**

In faculties where English was used as a medium of instruction, English functioned as a neutral bridge, removing the power dynamics associated with choosing Sinhala or Tamil.

"In Medicine and Science, we must do lab work in groups assigned by registration number, not ethnic preference. My lab partner was a Tamil guy from Jaffna. We had to speak English. Working together on dissections for three hours a day forced us to talk about our lives, families, and stresses. I realized his family suffered during the war, just like mine suffered economic hardship. He wasn't a 'terrorist sympathizer '; he was just a brilliant, humble guy." (PC6, Sinhala Female, UOK)

4.4 Theme 4: Operationalizing Intergroup Resilience during Campus Tensions

Theme 4 addresses the study's core contribution by examining how students navigate active campus disruptions, political rumors, and ethnic friction. Intergroup resilience emerged not as an absence of conflict, but as an active relational capacity to manage crisis without allowing interethnic bonds to sever.

- **Active Communication Buffers during Campus Clashes**

When localized clashes occurred (such as student union disputes or regional political tensions), resilient peer networks mobilized cross-ethnic communication channels to prevent broader group mobilization.

"When a fight broke out between Sinhala and Tamil boys near the canteen over a hostel issue, the news spread on WhatsApp as an 'ethnic clash.' A few of us Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim batch representatives immediately met at the library. We called the involved boys, got the facts, and posted a joint statement clarifying it was a personal dispute, not an ethnic fight. If we hadn't acted together in those two hours, external student unions would have turned the entire campus into a war zone." (PC10, Sinhala Male, UOP)

- **Protecting Out-Group Peers During External Crisis**

Intergroup resilience was powerfully illustrated during periods of broader national strain, where students actively protected minority peers from harassment.

"After the 2019 Easter attacks, tension across the country was terrifying. Muslim students at SEUSL and UOK felt vulnerable and scared to leave hostels. My Sinhala roommates came to me and said, 'You are our sister. No one will touch you here.' They went to the shops to buy groceries for us so we wouldn't face harassment outside. That is not just 'peaceful coexistence '; that is deliberate, protective solidarity built through years of living together." (PC3, Muslim Female, UOK)

- **Distinctive Features of Intergroup Resilience**

Data indicates that intergroup resilience is analytically distinct from basic contact or passive tolerance. It requires three operational components:

Relational Capital: Pre-existing cross-ethnic trust forged before a crisis;

De-escalatory Agency: Direct intervention by batch leaders to counter inflammatory rumors; and

Mutual Restraint: A conscious agreement among student networks to insulate academic/hostel spaces from external national political polarization.

5. Discussion

The empirical findings of this study advance the sociological understanding of intergroup relations, ethnic stereotyping, and campus peacebuilding in post-conflict societies. By addressing the methodological and theoretical limitations noted by journal reviewers, this discussion critically integrates findings with scholarly literature, evaluates cross-ethnic variations, and establishes the unique contribution of intergroup resilience.

5.1 Critical Evaluation of Inherited Stereotypes and SIT (Objective 1 & 2)

The findings validate Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) while extending it to multi-ethnic, post-conflict settings. In line with Verkuyten (2022), social categorization in Sri Lanka is deeply historicized. The data demonstrates that pre-university socialization in mono-ethnic primary/secondary schools creates rigid cognitive schemas.

While previous Sri Lankan higher education research (e.g., Ariyaratne & Karunanayake, 2013) documented general ethnic stereotypes, this study identifies the tripartite nature of these cognitive schemas. Sinhala, Tamil, and Muslim students do not possess uniform out-group attitudes; rather, their stereotypes reflect specific political, historical, and security narratives. Sinhala perceptions of Tamils remain influenced by post-war security discourses (Ratnapalan, 2012), whereas Sinhala perceptions of Muslims reflect post-2015 ethnoreligious and economic anxieties (DeVotta, 2005). Conversely, Tamil and Muslim students operate under heightened intergroup anxiety driven by historical marginalization and fear of majority dominance.

5.2 Rethinking Contact Theory: Addressing Negative Contact and Structural Barriers (Objective 2 & 3)

A critical flaw in classical Contact Theory (Allport, 1954) is its frequent assumption that contact leads linearly to prejudice reduction. The empirical findings of this study support recent critical contact literature (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008; Tropp & Pettigrew, 2005) by demonstrating that contact in Sri Lankan state universities is non-linear and contested.

Structural arrangements within universities specifically

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

language-segregated academic streams and mono-ethnic regional campus majorities (e.g., SEUSL as Muslim-majority, UOJ as Tamil-majority) frequently foster spatial and social micro-segregation. Unmediated contact under these conditions can generate intergroup anxiety and micro-aggressions, reinforcing pre-existing stereotypes. Contact only facilitates prejudice reduction when mediated by equal-status cooperative environments, such as shared hostel accommodation and mandatory English-medium academic group work. English functions as a neutral linguistic space, neutralizing ethno linguistic power imbalances between Sinhala and Tamil speakers.

5.3 Establishing "Intergroup Resilience" as a Novel Conceptual Contribution

The primary theoretical contribution of this study is the empirical establishment of intergroup resilience as a distinct construct within intergroup relations research.

Table 3: Conceptual Comparison of Intergroup Constructs

Construct	Theoretical Scope	Key Characteristics	Limitations Addressed by "Intergroup Resilience"
Intergroup Contact (Allport, 1954)	Individual / Interpersonal	Measures frequency and quality of cross-group interaction.	Assumes optimal conditions; fails to explain how groups manage active conflict or negative contact.
Stereotype Reduction (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006)	Cognitive / Individual	Internal cognitive shift in individual attitudes toward out-groups.	Individual cognitive shift does not guarantee collective relational stability during crisis.
Peaceful Coexistence (Lederach, 1997)	Macro / Structural	Absence of physical violence; passive tolerance and spatial separation.	Highly fragile; vulnerable to breakdown when external political rumors or clashes arise.
Intergroup Resilience (Present Study)	Relational / Systemic	Active, shared capacity of interethnic networks to withstand, negotiate, and de-escalate tension and friction.	Explains how student networks actively protect relationships and de-escalate crisis when contact fails or external strain occurs.

As demonstrated in Theme 4, intergroup resilience goes beyond individual cognitive shifts (stereotype reduction) or passive avoidance of violence (peaceful coexistence). Resilience is operationalized when cross-ethnic student networks actively intervene during campus crises, mobilize joint communication to suppress rumors, and extend protective solidarity to vulnerable out-group peers. This concept bridges the gap between individual-level psychological contact research and macro-level sociological peacebuilding.

5.4 Cross-Institutional and Ethnic Variations

The study reveals significant variations across the four university settings:

Residential vs. Non-Residential Campuses: UOP displayed higher levels of intergroup resilience due to its fully residential nature, which forces sustained cross-ethnic contact in hostels late into the night. Non-residential or commuter campus environments showed higher rates of post-lecture ethnic re-segregation.

Demographic Majority/Minority Shifts: Sinhala students at UOJ and SEUSL experienced minority-status anxiety similar to that felt by Tamil and Muslim students at UOK. This finding demonstrates that intergroup anxiety is situational and structural rather than an inherent trait of any single ethnic group.

6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

6.1 Theoretical Synthesis

This qualitative study explored ethnic stereotypes, intergroup contact, and intergroup resilience among 30 undergraduate students across four state universities in Sri Lanka. Moving beyond descriptive accounts of prejudice, the study demonstrates that while university students inherit historicized tripartite ethnic stereotypes through early socialization, university entry provides critical opportunities for cognitive de-categorization. However, contact is inherently complex; language barriers, structural academic segregation, and micro-aggressions can exacerbate social distance.

Where sustained, cooperative contact occurs, particularly in shared residential spaces and English-medium academic settings, students develop intergroup resilience. This relational capacity enables student networks to buffer against external political rumors, de-escalate campus disputes, and preserve cross-ethnic solidarity during moments of national strain.

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

6.2 Practical and Policy Recommendations for Higher Education

To foster intergroup resilience across Sri Lankan higher education, state policy and university administration must move

beyond passive diversity to structured intergroup engagement:

Structural Language Integration: The University Grants Commission (UGC) should expand intensive, functional second-national-language (Sinhala for Tamil speakers, Tamil for Sinhala speakers) and English-language bridging modules during first-year orientation programs to reduce linguistic anxiety.

Desegregated Residential Housing: Hall wardens should systematically implement randomized, multi-ethnic room allocations in student hostels, avoiding single-ethnicity wings or floors.

Institutionalized Cross-Ethnic Student Dialogues: University administration should support permanent, student-led Inter-Ethnic Liaison Committees trained in conflict mediation and rumor management to act as de-escalation buffers during campus crises.

Cooperative Academic Curricula: Faculties should embed mandatory cross-ethnic team projects within undergraduate curricula, structuring learning around common goals and equal-status cooperation.

6.3 Methodological Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides qualitative depth across four diverse universities, its findings are interpretivist and non-generalizable in a statistical sense to all higher education contexts. Future research should employ longitudinal mixed-methods designs to track shifts in intergroup resilience from orientation through graduation, expand inquiry into private higher education institutes, and evaluate the efficacy of formal university peace-education interventions.

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka, for providing the academic environment and institutional support necessary to carry out this research. I am deeply indebted to the scholars, authors, and translators whose foundational works in Psychology, ethnic studies, and related theories made this comparative analysis possible. Special thanks are also extended to the peer reviewers and editorial team for their insightful feedback and constructive suggestions, which greatly contributed to refining the quality and clarity of this paper.

References

1. Ajzen, I. (1991) 'The theory of planned behavior', Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 50(2), pp. 179–211. https://doi:10.1016/0749-5978(91)90020-T
2. Allport, G. W. (1954) *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley.
3. Ariyaratne, R. and Karunanayake, S. (2013) 'Ethnic stereotyping among Sri Lankan university undergraduates: A qualitative study at the University of Peradeniya', Sri Lanka *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(1), pp. 45–62.
4. Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), pp. 77–101. https://doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa.
5. DeVotta, N. (2005) 'From ethnic outbidding to ethnic conflict: The institutional bases for Sri Lanka's separatist war', Nations and Nationalism, 11(1), pp. 141–159. https://doi:10.1111/j.1354-5078.2005.00196.x
6. Ganguly, R. (2004) 'Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict: At a crossroad', Asian Affairs: An American Review, 31(1), pp. 3–18.
7. Hurtado, S., Milem, J. F., Clayton-Pedersen, A. R. and Allen, W. R. (1998) 'Enhancing campus climates for racial/ethnic diversity: Educational policy and practice', Review of Higher Education, 21(3), pp. 279–302. https://doi:10.1353/rhe.1998.0003.
8. Lederach, J. P. (1997) *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press.
9. Pettigrew, T. F. and Tropp, L. R. (2006) 'A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 90(5), pp. 751–783. https://doi:10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751.
10. Pettigrew, T. F. and Tropp, L. R. (2008) 'How does intergroup contact reduce prejudice? Meta-analytic tests of three mediating processes', *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 38(6), pp. 922–934. https://doi:10.1002/ejsp.504.
11. Ratnapalan, L. M. (2012) 'Memories of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka among immigrant Tamils in the UK', Ethnic and Racial Studies, 35(9), pp. 1539–1557. https://doi:10.1080/01419870.2011.592595.
12. Tajfel, H. and Turner, J. C. (1979) 'An integrative theory of intergroup conflict', in Austin, W. G. and Worchel, S. (eds.) The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, pp. 33–47.

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved

13. Tropp, L. R. and Pettigrew, T. F. (2005) 'Relationships between intergroup contact and prejudice among minority and majority status groups', Psychological Science, 16(12), pp. 951–957. https://doi:10.1111/j.1467-9280.2005.01643.x.

© Eurasian Campus - Sri Lanka 2026, All Rights Reserved