Ethnic Identity Dilemma – A Case Study of the Indian Muslims in Penang, Malaysia

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This paper investigates the ethnic identity dilemma among the Indian Muslims in Penang. Penang is an island located on the northern part of Peninsular Malaysia. It has which has the highest concentration of the Indian Muslims population. A sample of 500 Indian Muslim respondents was interviewed from all over Penang Island using a face-to-face interview. The study found that while almost 90 percent respondents chose Indian Muslim as their self-reported identity, this percentage decreased approximately when respondents were asked to choose their ethnicity in five different situations, in which, on average only 22 percent respondents chose Indian Muslim as their ethnicity. The study used Logit analysis to investigate the underlying factors that determine identity. The study found that age, primary education, identification with majority group, knowledge about ethnic group and sense of belonging to the ethnic group were significant determinants.

Field of Research: Ethnic Identity

1. Introduction

Ethnic identity is commonly defined as the ethnic component of social identity. Ethnic identity is crucial to the self concept and psychological functioning of ethnic group members (Maldonado, 1975). Critical issues include the degree and quality of involvement that is maintained with a person's own culture and heritage; ways of responding to and dealing with the dominant group's often disparaging views of their group; and the impact of these factors on psychological well-being (Phinney, 1990). As explained by Roosens (1989) people change their ethnic identity if they can profit by doing so, which means that ethnicity is something to be played with or to be used for manipulation. Denial of ethnic identity appears to center mainly around prejudice and internal oppression (Semons, 1991). The complexity of ethnic identity leads to the possibility of "ethnic switching" or commonly known as "identity dilemma"; more commonly observed among individuals who are descendents of an ethnic group different from that of the residing country.

Ethnic identities are fluid across time and social contexts, sometimes even to the point of "ethnic switching" (Alba 1990 and Nagel 1995 as cited in Sanders 2002) that could be associated to individual facing an "identity dilemma" or "identity crisis". Accepting one's ethnic identity is a straightforward task for an individual born in a family living in a country carrying the family's ethnicity Ethnic minority individuals, being first-generation immigrants or born in the country considered, need to negotiate their identification with their ethnic group and their identification with the mainstream culture of the society, due to their minority status and often racial or cultural distinctiveness (Gong, 2007).

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Malaysia's multi-ethnic society, comprising the Malays, Chinese and Indians, offer a good laboratory to study and understand ethnic identity dilemma. The Bumiputera ethnic (literally meaning sons of the soil) category was introduced to incorporate Muslim and non-Muslim indigenous population in Sabah and Sarawak when Malaysia was formed as having equal and special position along with the Malays in the country. All Malays are Muslims and an individual born in a Malay family would consider herself (himself) as 'Malay'. Majority of the Indians in Malaysia are either a Hindu or a Muslim. A child born to a Muslim Indian family may choose to be known as a Malay to benefit the special position of the Bumiputera. Other Indian Muslims choose to retain their family roots and prefers to be known as Indian Muslim for what they are or labeled to be.

This paper attempts to explore the socio-economic factors that led to "identity dilemma" and "ethnic switching" among Indian Muslims in Malaysia. Some of the research questions include why an Indian Muslim choose the Malay ethnic identity, why others choose to remain as an Indian Muslim; and whether economic reasoning has an influence on the choice. The Indian Muslims populations in Penang are chosen for the reason that Penang has the biggest Indian Muslims population in the country.

The paper is organised into four sections. After the section on introduction, is the section on literature review. This is followed by the section on methodology and finally, the last section discusses the major findings of the study.

2. Literature Review

There is no specific theoretical framework to studying ethnic identity, but are generally based on three broad perspectives, which are the social identity theory, acculturation and culture conflict, and identity formation. Social identity theory is presented by social psychologists and asserts that simply being a member of a group provides individuals with a sense of belonging that contributes to a positive self-concept. However, as posited by Tajfel (1978), ethnic groups present a special case of group identity. He asserted that members of low-status groups seek to improve their status in various ways. Individuals may seek to leave the group by 'passing' as members of the dominant group; a solution which may have negative psychological consequences to the individual. This solution is however not available to individuals who are racially distinct and are categorized by others as ethnic group members (Phinney, 1990). Social identity theory also addresses the possible problems resulting from participation in two cultures. Individual would then be facing issues on whether to choose between the two cultures, two conflicting identities or establish a bicultural ethnic identity.

Acculturation and culture conflict is presented by social psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists that deals broadly with changes in cultural attitudes, values and behaviors that result from contact between two distinct cultures (Berry, Trimble and Olmedo, 1986). Acculturation and culture conflict is more concern with a group than an individual and focused on how minority groups relate to the dominant group. There are two models present under this perspective to provide explanation to understanding of ethnic identity. The models are linear, bipolar model and two-dimensional models. In linear model, ethnic identity is conceptualized along a

continuum from strong ethnic ties at one extreme to strong mainstream ties at the other (Simic, 1987 and Ullah, 1985). The two-dimensional model posits that the relationship with the ethnic culture and new culture must be considered and these two relationships may be independent (Phinney, 1990).

Many ethnic minorities not only develop their own ethnicity but also assimilate to the ethnicity of the majority ethnic group in the country. The recognition that there are some similarities or shared characteristics with the majority ethnic group led to some overlapping forms of social identity. This was confirmed by Gleason (1981), who found that the ethnic minority of the US not only develop ethnic identities but also assume some form of American identity as well. Judd et.al (1995) further elaborated that those members of ethnic groups who perceive themselves as different from the average American are more likely to develop a greater sense of ethnic identity because of their feelings of being a member of an out-group.

Ethnic identity formation is presented from the psychoanalytic views and development and counseling psychologists. According to Erikson (1968) identity is a result of a period of exploration and experimentation that typically takes place during adolescence and that leads to a decision or a commitment in various areas, such as occupation, religion and political orientation. In short, ethnic identity takes place over time, as people explore and make decisions about the role of ethnicity in their lives.

There are not many literatures which discuss identity dilemma from the economic reasoning. Akerlof and Krantor (2000, p.717) explained that the concept of identity expands economic analysis for various reasons, among others: identity can explain behaviour that appears detrimental, identity underlies new type of externality, identity reveals a new way that preferences can be changed and identity is fundamental to behaviour; choice of identity may be the most important economic decision people make. Sociologists, psychologists, political scientists and anthropologists have commonly agreed to adopt identity as a central concept. Nevertheless, identity, too, can be analysed from the economic perspectives, allowing a new view of many economic problems (Akerlof and Krantor 2000).

Akerlof and Krantor (2000) incorporated identity into general model of behaviour and demonstrated how identity influences economic outcomes. They concluded several examples on identity-related behaviours that are
  i.   people have identity-based payoffs derived from their own actions;
  ii.   people have identify-based payoffs derived from others' actions;
  iii. third parties can generate persistent changes in these payoffs; and
  iv. some people may choose their identity, but choice may be proscribed for others.

In general, ethnic identity could be measured as comprising the components of self-identification as a group member, a sense of belonging to the group, attitudes about a person's group membership, and ethnic involvement (social participation, cultural practices and attitudes) (Phinney, 1990). Those individuals who are members of an ethnic group perceive their status as separate from the larger, dominant culture, and as a result, spend time exploring and developing their ethnic identities (Phinney, 1990). Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997) found that the ethnic minority individuals develop multiple identities, one representing their own ethnic cultures and the other

dominant, national / ethnic ones, as being Americans. Weisskirch (2007) found that Asian Americans and Latinos have the highest levels of ethnic identity and see themselves as not being typical Americans more than other ethnic groups. However, Latinos who reported not being typical Americans have higher levels of ethnic identity. For Asian Americans, perception of being a typical American made no difference in the levels of ethnic identity.

Self-identification refers to the ethnic label that a person uses for oneself. For example, a research with children has been concerned largely with the extent to which children 'correctly' label themselves, whether the label they choose corresponds to the ethnicity of their parents (Abound, 1987). Phinney (1990) stated that adolescents and adults can be assumed to know their ethnicity, whereby they know what label to use for themselves. Although this seems to be quite simple and a straightforward statement, complexity arises when a person's identity as determined by descent may differ from how a person sees oneself ethnically, given the influence of many factors, among others, peers, environment and political system. Ethnic labeling gets more complicated if the parents are from two or more distinct ethnic groups. There is a possibility that a person chooses to have two identities or to be in between of the two identities.

If a person has a sense of belonging to a certain ethnic group, the person has no problem to determine his or her ethnic identity. Sometimes, people may use an ethnic label when specifically asked for and yet may not even have a strong sense of belonging to the group chosen (Phinney, 1990). Sense of belonging is difficult to quantify and evaluation of it must be measured with care through several 'feeling of concern' questions.

Attitudes about a person's group membership affect how a person forms his or her ethnic identity. It is commonly accepted that positive attitudes and contentment with a person's own ethnic group indicates an acceptance of the ethnic identity. Negative attitudes towards a person's own ethnic group could lead to a denial of one's ethnic identity.
Involvement in the social life and cultural practices of one's group is the most widely used indicator of ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). The indicators often used for ethnic involvement are language, friendship, social organizations, religion, cultural traditions and politics.

Akerlof and Krantor (2000) proposed a utility function with identity. Identity is based on social categories (C). Each person j has an assignment of people to these categories, c_j, so that each person has a conception of her (his) own categories and that of all other people. Prescriptions P indicate the behaviour appropriate for people in different social categories in different situations. The utility function with identity is therefore

(1) $$U_j = U_j(a_j, a_{-j}, l_j)$$

where utility depends on j's identity l$_j$, as well as on the usual vectors of j's actions, a_j, and others' actions, a_{-j}. Since a_j and a_{-j} determine j's consumption of goods and services, these argument and $U_j(\cdot)$ are sufficient to capture the standard

economics of own actions and externalities. Hence, the proposed representation of identity is

(2) $$I_j = I_j(a_j, a_{-j}; c_j, \epsilon_j, P)$$

A person j's identity I_j depends on

i. j's assigned social categories c_j

ii. the extend to which j's own given characteristics ϵ_j match the ideal of j's assigned category indicated by the prescription P

iii. the extend to which j's own and others' actions correspond to prescribed behaviour indicated by P.

With this model constructed, Akerlof and Krantor (2000) experimented with a game theory analysis to understand the economic interaction where identity is based on social difference.

3. Methodology

The theoretical framework adopted in this study follows mainly the acculturation and culture conflict perspectives. Following Akerlof and Krantor (2000) the identity function takes the form of equation (2) transformed into Logit model. According to Hair et. al. (1995), one of the advantages of a Logit model is that it allows the estimation of probability estimates of an event occurring. The Logit model is therefore appropriate and can be used in estimating the socio economic elements, which influence identity in this research.

A typical cross-section binary response model with the error term following a logistic distribution is

(3) $$y_i = \mathbf{1}[x'\beta + u_i] > \mathbf{0}$$

x_i is $k \times 1$ regressor vector. $(x_1, ... x_k)$ are the independent variables. These are the socio economic factors that lead to the formation of ethnic identity (including individual's actions, others' actions, own characteristics and common factor in community i.e. appropriate for people in different social categories in different situations).

β is a parameter vector

u_i is an error term independent of x_i

(4) $$P\left(u_i/\sigma \le \lambda\right) = e^\lambda \Big/ (1 + e^\lambda) \quad V\lambda \quad \text{for an unknown positive constant } \sigma$$

(5) $(x_i', \quad y_i)'$, $i = 1, ..., N$ are observed and iid.

Because logistic distribution is symmetric about 0, therefore

(6)
$$P(y_i = 1|x_i) = P(u_i > [-x]_i^{T'} \beta|x_i) = P(u_i/\sigma > [-x]_j^{T'} \beta/\sigma|x_i)$$

$$P(y_i = 1|x_i) = P(y_i = 0|x_i) = \mathbf{1} \Big/ \left\{ 1 + \exp\left(\frac{x_i'\beta}{\sigma}\right) \right\}$$
(7)

3.1 Participants

Respondents of this study were 500 Indian Muslims in Penang. A sample size of 500 was selected due to the fact 500 is an appropriate number to conduct multiple regression, in addition to the fact that the research requires some analysis on descriptive statistics The sample population was selected randomly from residential areas, business vicinities and Indian Muslims organizations. Face-to-face interview with the respondents was carried out to collect the needed data. The survey was completed in three months (August – October 2009).

3.2 Instruments

The instruments used as a proxy to determine the formation of identity are demographic information, identification with majority group, knowledge about ethnic group and belonging to the ethnic group.

3.2.1 Demographic information

Respondents were asked about their age, gender and education attainment. Education attainment is divided into four categories that are no formal education or have never been to school, primary education, secondary education and tertiary education. Additional questions asked about the respondent's self-reported ethnicity and their parents' ethnicity.

3.2.2 Identification with majority group

Respondents were asked to rate their perception on their identification with the majority group. In this case, the majority group in Malaysia is the Malays. There are three questions in this section asking respondents about how much they have in common with the Malays, how much they know about the Malay's culture and how much they feel they are part of the Malay's culture. Each question was scored from 1 (none) to 6 (very much). The identification with majority group scale ranges from 3 to 18; the higher the score, the higher is the identification with majority group.

3.2.3 Knowledge about ethnic group

Respondents are asked to rate questions on their knowledge about their ethnic group. The questions include spending time to know more about their ethnic group, have clear information about their ethnic group, understands well the meaning of ethnicity membership and having conversation with other people in the same ethnic group to know more about their ethnic group. Each question was scored from 1

(strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The knowledge scale ranges from 4 to 20: the higher the score, the higher is the knowledge about respondents ethnic group.

3.2.4 Belonging to ethnic group

In this section, respondents were asked about their sense of belonging to their ethnic group. This section comprised of eight questions asking about respondents' effort to participate in their ethnic organization, being happy to be in the ethnic group, feeling proud of the ethnic group, affect of ethnicity on everyday life, feeling good about cultural and ethnic background, feeling of belonging to the ethnic group, strong attachment to the ethnic group and involvement in ethnicity activity. Each question was scored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The belonging scale ranges from 8 to 40: the higher the score, the higher is the sense of belonging to the ethnic group.

3.3 Variables

The dependent variable of the equation is

$$Y_i = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{respondent does not have an identity dilemma} \\ 0 & \text{(respondent chooses Indian Muslim as his (her) identity)} \end{cases}$$

The categories taken into consideration are based on several questions, in which respondents have to choose their ethnic identity. To be qualified as respondent who does not have identity dilemma, i.e. chooses Indian Muslim as his (her) identity, respondent has to choose Indian Muslim in all questions. The questions are:

Question A5:   My ethnicity is _____

Question C8:   If given an option to choose an identity, I will choose _____

Question D1:   I want to be known as _____

Question D3:   If I were to join the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), I want to be known as _____

Question D4:   If I were to join the Malaysian Indian Muslim Association (KIMMA), I want to be known as _____

Question D5:   If I were to join the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), I want to be known as _____

The independent variables used in the Logit analysis are as shown below:

AGE   =   Age of the respondent

D1EDU   =   }   1   if respondent receives primary school education
        0   if respondent never receives formal education or never been to school

D2EDU   =   }   1   if respondent receives secondary school education
        0   if respondent never receives formal education or never been to school

D3EDU   =   }   1   if respondent receives tertiary school education
        0   if respondent never receives formal education or never been to school

GENDER   =   }   1   if respondent is male
        0   if is female

MAJOR   =   Identification with the majority groups (the higher the value, the more is the identification with the majority groups)

KNOW   =   Knowledge of respondent about his (her) ethnic group (the higher the value, the more is the knowledge about ethnic group)

BELONG   =   Sense of belonging to the ethnic group (the the higher the value, the higher is the sense of belonging to the ethnic group)

4. Discussion of Findings

Table 1 show the sample means and standard deviation of the variables used in the analysis. The average number of respondents not having an identity dilemma was only 22 percent. High number of respondents (88%) having some kind of identity dilemma is probably due to the connotation associated with being Indian Muslims.

The mean age of respondents in this research was 36.2 years with more than half of the respondents being male. The mean score for knowledge of ethnic group, identification with majority group and sense of belonging to the ethnic group was 8.94 points, 8.99 points, and 16.33 points respectively. Only the score of the identification with majority group almost reach half the total score that is 9 points. The average respondents receiving tertiary education was 39 percent, receiving secondary education was 44 percent, receiving primary education was 9 percent and not receiving education or having received informal education was 8 percent.

Table 1 – Summary statistics of variables in the statistical model

Variables	Mean	Std. Dev
Dependent Variable	0.219758	0.414501
Independent variables		
AGE	36.15726	14.34128
GENDER	0.512097	0.500358
D1EDU	0.090726	0.287509
D2EDU	0.437500	0.496579
D3EDU	0.389113	0.488041
KNOW	8.947581	2.696289
MAJOR	8.989919	4.151901
BELONG	16.33065	4.657518

4.1 Descriptive analysis on choice of identity

Hanapi Dollah (n.d.) quoted that " … identity of Indian Muslims changes from Indian Muslim to Indian when they join MIC and becomes Indian Muslim again when they form Malaysian Indian Muslim Association (KIMMA) and finally changes further to Malay when they join UMNO". This statement partly explains the identity dilemma faced by the Indian Muslims as indicated by the finding of this research.

When asked about self-reported ethnicity, 90.6 percent chose Indian Muslim, 4.4 percent chose mix ethnic group, 4.2 percent chose Malay and 0.4 percent chose being Bumiputera and Malaysian. When respondents were asked to choose an identity if given the option, only 50.4 percent of the respondents chose to be Indian Muslim, a drop of 40.2 percent. The remaining 14.2, 13.2 and 17 percent chose to be Malay, Bumiputera and Malaysian, respectively. When respondents were asked about the ethnic identity they want to be known as, 59.8 percent of the respondents chose Indian Muslim; 19 percent chose Malaysian; and 8.4 and 8.2 percent chose Bumiputera   and Malay, respectively.

When asked what identity respondents would want to hold when joining the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) an Indian based political party, only 44 percent wanted to be known as Indian Muslim and the next majority of 39.4 percent wanted just to be known as Malaysian without any attachment of ethnicity. The rest of 5.8 percent, 3.2 percent, 2.6 percent and 0.8 percent wanted to be known as Bumiputera, Malay, mixed ethnic group and Indian respectively.

The percentage of respondents wanted to be known as Indian Muslims increased when asked about their identity when joining the Indian Muslim Association (KIMMA) with 76.8 percent. The others wanted to be known as Malaysian (14.2 percent), Bumiputera (3.2 percent), mixed ethnic group (2.6 percent), Malay (1.0 percent) and Indian (0.2) percent. The percentage choosing Indian Muslim as their ethnic group is lowest (38.6 percent) when asked if they were to join the United Malay National Organization (UMNO), Malay based political party. About 28 percent of the respondent didn't want to be associated with any ethnic group by choosing Malaysian as their identity. The rest chose Malay (18 percent), Bumiputera (9.8 percent), mixed ethnic group (2.6 percent) and Indian (0.4 percent).

This result confirmed the idea of Roosens (1989), in which the perception of ethnicity rises and falls in intensity according to relevant circumstances. Figure 1 shows the graphical analysis of the changes in choosing ethnic identity among the respondents under different situations described in each question. The percentage of the sample choosing Indian Muslim as their identities, in all situations, is shown in the bar line chart below.

Figure 1 – Choice of ethnic identity under several situations
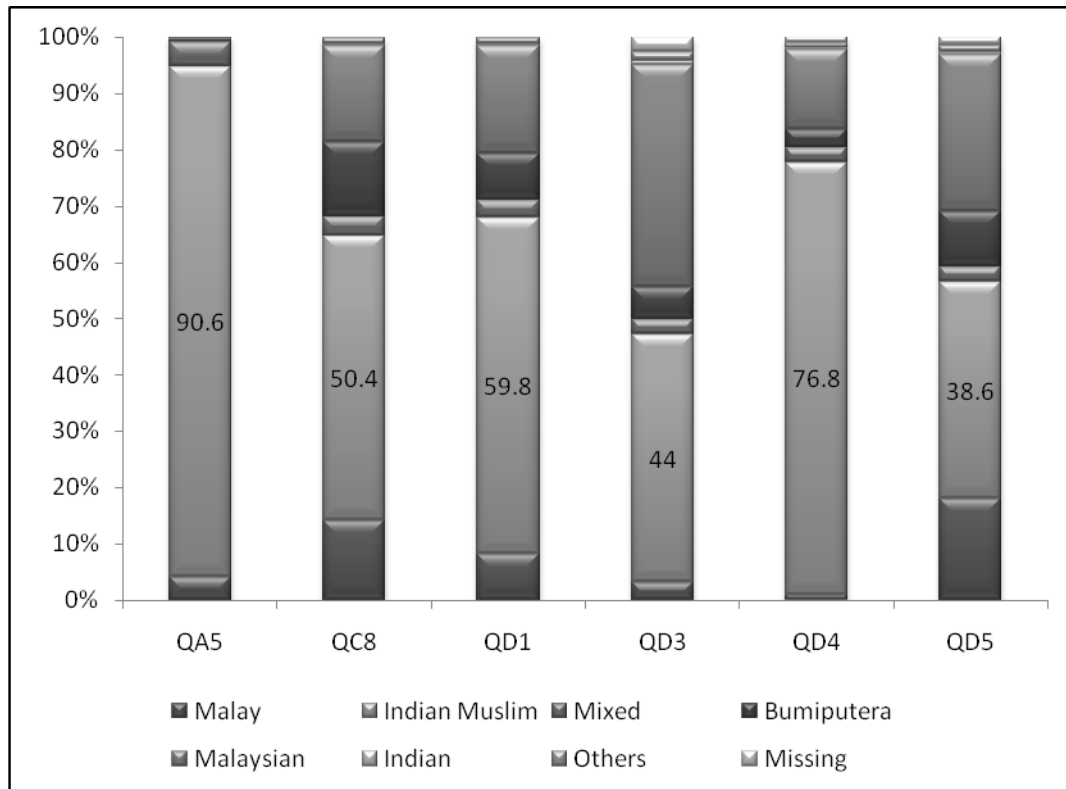
4.2 Logit Analysis

4.2.1 Testing for Goodness-of-Fit

To check whether the model fits the data well, tests of Likelihood Ratio (LR) Statistics, Expected Prediction Table and the Hosmer-Lemeshow (H-L) were performed. The results of the tests are as sumarised in Table 2 below. The LR and H-L tests show that the data fits the model well. As shown by the expected prediction statistics, the model currently predicts 76.81 percent of the outcome of the sample. Based on the tests, it can be concluded that this model is a good fit.

Table 2 – Summary of Goodness-of-Fit Tests

Test	Statistic and Probability
Likelihood Ratio (LR) Statistics	61.10555 P = [0.000000]
Expected Prediction Table	76.81%
Hosmer-Lemeshow (H-L)	21.3800 χ^2(8) = 0.0062

Table 3 – Regression results (odds ratios)

Variables	Coefficient (β)	z-Statistic	Odds Ratio ($[e]^\beta$)	Marginal Effect
Constant	0.417659	0.406803	1.518403	
AGE	-0.037674	-3.057215**	0.963027	-0.006
GENDER	0.248005	1.050976	1.281466	0.037
D1EDU	1.345380	2.289635**	3.839645	0.201
D3EDU	0.205347	0.355748	1.227951	0.031
D4EDU	-0.637212	-0.995511	0.528765	-0.095
KNOW	0.159947	2.584408**	1.173449	0.024
MAJOR	0.079689	2.647469**	1.08295	0.012
BELONG	-0.170993	-3.956992**	0.842827	-0.026

** significantly different from zero at the 5 percent level

Table 3 presents the results of the logit analysis of having or not having identity dilemma. The coefficients should be interpreted as the effects of the variables on the log odds of not having identity dilemma versus not (logarithm of the probability of having identity dilemma). The Odds Ratio column is the antilog value of the β coefficient. The Marginal Effect column provides the marginal effect of a change in β on the probability of not having identity dilemma.

Being male has a positive effect on the odds ratio, but the effect is not statistically significant. Age has a statistically significant effect on the odds ratio; that is being older results in a lower probability of not having an identity dilemma. This result is related to the assimilation process. The older generation has assimilated the ethnicity of the majority ethnic group of the country having realized the many similarities and shared characteristics of the majority.

Having received secondary and tertiary education has no effect on the odds ratio of not having an identity dilemma. However, primary education has a positive significant effect on the odds ratio of not having an identity dilemma.

Knowledge of ethnic group has a significant positive effect, where the more knowledge an individual has on his (her) ethnic group; the higher is the probability of not having an identity dilemma. A one point increase in the knowledge score would increase the probability of not having an identity dilemma by 2.4 percent.

Identification with the majority group has a significant positive effect, where the more an individual feel identified with the majority group, the higher is the probability of not having an identity dilemma. A one point increase in the identification with the majority group score would increase the probability of not having an identity dilemma by 1.2 percent.

Sense of belonging to the ethnic group has a significant negative effect on the log of the odds ratio of not having an identity dilemma. The higher is the sense of belonging to the ethnic group, the lower is the probability of not having an identity dilemma. A one point increase in the sense of belonging to the ethnic group would decrease the probability of not having an identity dilemma by 2.6 percent. Although individuals feel proud, love and admiration of their ethnic group, they also feel that they should be known by other ethnic group. This contradicts the result of Phinney and Devich-Navarro (1997) and Weisskirch (2007).

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the identity choice among the Indian Muslims population in a multi-ethnic Malaysia. The location Penang island was chosen for its biggest concentration of Indian Muslim population in the country. The study found that more than 80 percent of the respondents have some kind of identity dilemma and did not choose Indian Muslim as their identity. Respondents were also asked to choose their preferred ethnic identity to be affiliated under six (6) different situations, which included choosing self-reported identity, option to choose an identity, identity want to be known as, identity when joining the Malaysian Indian Congress, identity when joining the Malaysian Indian Muslim Association and identity when joining the United Malay National Organization. Responses to these questions vary for various reasons. Using Logit analysis, the factors determining the choice of identity were investigated. It was found that age, primary education, knowledge about ethnic group, identification with majority group and sense of belonging to ethnic group are important determinants to the choice of identity. However, the findings cannot be generalized as typical response of the Indian Muslim population in Malaysia as the sample concentrated only in on the Penang Island. Other parts of the country has different socio-economic environment, which could have a different influence on the "ethnic dilemma" of the country's Indian Muslim Malaysians.

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