The Effect of Religion on Ethnic Tolerance in Malaysia: The Application of Rational Choice Theory (RCT) and the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB)

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Abstract

There has been little research done on explaining the ethnic tolerance behavior from the perspective of sociological theories. The authors chose rational choice theory and the theory of planned behavior as they are widely used in explaining the human social behaviour. In this article, the theories are used to explain the effects of religion on ethnic tolerance in Malaysia. The authors also reviewed a number of literatures to study how religion is associated with ethnic tolerance. From the rational choice theory perspective, it was found that ethnic tolerance can be influenced by one's religious belief if those who practice it are reciprocated with the promise of retributions from God. The theory of planned behavior on the other hand suggests that religion can affect behavior, subjective norms and perception on how one deal with ethnic tolerance. It is recommended that the theories are used by future studies in order to further expand knowledge base on the subject of ethnic tolerance. This study provides ways and means to inculcate ethnic integration in Malaysia and helps to diffuse religious and ethnic prejudices.

Keywords: ethnic tolerance, religious belief, theory of planned behavior, rational choice theory, ethnic integration in Malaysia

1. Introduction

The effects of religion on behavior such as tolerance are generally viewed as positive in various studies (Ting, 2011). However, the picture is not always rosy, as in the case of Malaysia. Students in Malaysia are generally seen as ethnically segregated where their social relationships and communication are compartmentalized according to ethnic lines (Ahmad & Saibeh, 2011). A 2000 survey by the Straits Times shows not much has changed. The survey found that not all respondents had friends from other ethnic background, as 21%, 10% and 7% of respondents of Chinese, Malay and Indian ethnic background admitted that they do not have friends from other ethnics (Rahim, 2003).

Throughout Malaysian history, there have been many studies done to understand why ethnic segregation still exist despite the fact that it is not endorsed by religion. Seeking understanding of the phenomenon is not an easy task as it involves a host of other issues, for example the perceived ineffectiveness of religion in inculcating ethnic integration. Education has also been cited as one of the factors contributing to the existence of ethnic segregation (H. Babacan & A. Babacan, 2007, p. 9). Despite the popular slogan which claims that education inculcates ethnic integration, the Malaysian education system has not been very successful in achieving positive outcomes.

Malaysia is a peaceful multi-ethnic society with the exceptions of one or two examples of ethnic violence. For instance, in May 1969, a major ethnic violence occurred for three days between the Malays and Chinese (Regan, 1976) and resulted in the loss of over two thousand lives (Ahmed, 2006). The government viewed that the conflict was the result of economic imbalance between the politically powerful Malays and the economically prosperous Chinese. As a consequence of that, the government formulated the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1970–1990) which aims at improving their socio-economic status of the Malays at that time. The imbalance is clearly evident in the corporate sector where the Malays only held 2.4% of the share in corporate sector

compared to the Chinese with 22.8% (Rahim, 2003). Despite the socio-economic arrangement, Malaysian society has not been able to escape from the issue of inter-ethnic conflicts. With the advance of globalization and the importance of science and technology, the government has consistently intensified effort to inculcate ethnic tolerance in education system (Jamil & Raman, 2011).

Despite the allocation of more than 20% of the annual budget for education, the quality of education to promote ethnic integration in Malaysia has not achieved the desired result. Ethnocentrism among students is very much alive despite the fact the effort to make the existing education system as a system that reflects the concept of a multi-ethnic society (Ahmed, 2006). There are also those who think that education was the cause of ethnic intolerance as it is the education system that makes students segregated (Handelman, 2006). The implementation of multiethnic education policy is relatively new for Malaysia, therefore it is impossible to undo the ethnic prejudice that has been residing in their minds for many years. Despite the many challenges faced, education is still regarded as important in overcoming the prejudices as students from different ethnics have the opportunity to meet and know each other at schools and university campuses (Harun, 2007).

As both religion and ethnicity are closely interrelated in the Malaysian society, one of the most relevant education objectives to improve ethnic tolerance is through the teaching of religion. Religion has long been regarded as an 'associate' to promote ethnic tolerance although it is not mentioned in the religious principles (Noon, 2007; Tokunaga, 2007; Kohara, 2007). Various ethnic groups use religion as their ethnic symbol and strive to include it whenever they have opportunities (Guan, 2000). It is important to instill the awareness that religion alone without society effort cannot ensure the sustenance of ethnic tolerance. Another important thing is the role of intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is better than extrinsic motivation in terms of promoting racial tolerance (Navaratnam, 2009).

Sociology offers two theories: the rational choice theory and the theory of planned behavior in order to address the issue. The rational choice theory is originated from the field of economic sociology (Donahue and Nielsen, 2005) but also used in the field of religion (O'Toole, 2003). The theory of planned behavior aims to explain and predict human behavior in various aspects (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Driver, 1992; Davis et al., 2002). More recently, the theories have been used in studies on ethnic relations (Munniksma, 2011; Kurian, 2008).

2. Method

A review of literature was conducted using Google Scholar, ISI Web of Knowledge, Scopus and other databases and the keywords 'religion', 'ethnicity', 'Rational Choice Theory' and 'Theory of Planned Behavior'. The review was done using systematic review which examine through the lenses of related theories. The review conducted was based on the following guides: (1) identification of relevant theories, (2) identification of relevant literature, (3) organizing the review using tables and mind maps, and (4) Discussion of salient features for each the theories and how it relates to the notions of religion and ethnicity in Malaysia.

3. Rational Choice Theory (RCT)

The rational choice theory indicates that human behavior is motivated by rational judgment. Rational judgment is the perceived benefits of exchanges and interactions between autonomous players who are assumed to select specific production strategies in order to achieve their objectives (Lynn & Hill, 2001). For example, the benefits from such exchange include profit and loss resulting from the performed action (Smith, Simpson, and Huang, 2006). In terms of ethnic conflict, the rational choice theory suggests that ethnic conflict is resulted from rational activities where the conflicting authorities have specific interests in the forms of wealth, power and security (Sobandi, 2009).

3.1 Transaction Cost Economy

The transaction cost economy states that human behavior is based on profit and loss in the transaction between individuals or groups (Kramer, 1999; Uzzi, 1997; Chiles & McMackin, 1996; Granovetter, 1985). Every player has the tendency and opportunity to overcome their competitors in the increasing competitive market and finally able to overcome their own abilities for competitiveness (Ghoshal & Moran, 1996). Each player survives through the effective use of resources (Jones, 1995). These players will only cooperate when there are trust, reputation and continuous interaction that mutually benefit them (Lynn & Hill, 2001).

3.2 Agent Principal Theory

The agent-principal theory indicates that there are two parties: the principal and the agent. The principal is the investor while the agent is the investment manager. Both parties perform social contract that holds rights and responsibilities of both parties (Pitluck, 2008). However, since the agent has to face the situation directly, the agent has more knowledge on the real situation than the principal (Tian, 2011). With this asymmetry information,

agent can exploit the principal for his own personal gain. Both the principal and agent can only cooperate if there are similarities in information and purpose between those them (Lynn & Hill, 2001).

3.3 Team Theory

The team theory explains the behavior of human teamwork. The team theory states that each individual has the access to different information and accomplishment strategies. If they share the same purpose, they can share their information and cooperate. In other words, the bond for cooperation is similarity in purpose (Lynn & Hill, 2001; Groves, 1973).

3.4 Game Theory

The game theory states that an individual chooses various strategies, each with its consequences (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2006). A behavior is seen as a strategic move in a big game where every party tries to predict their opponent's next move (Tian, 2011). Both parties will corporately truthfully if one is sincere in the cooperation. The other party would cooperate truthfully according to the principle of reciprocity. However, if one party is forced to cooperate, the result would be devastating as the forced party is not sincere and others would return the favour with insincerity (Camerer & Loewenstein, 2003).

3.5 Collective Behavior Theory

Collective behavior theory is a rational choice theory which states that the capacity of influential organizations is important for the behavior of individuals within the organization (Olson, 2003, p. 19). Only when the organization is small that the individuals would act according to the group's interest whole-heartedly. A large-sized organization would cause the individuals in the organization to face difficulty in fulfilling the organization as they are demotivated to act according to the group's interest (Nga & King, 2006). Motivation is generated with the presence of selective incentives acquired by individuals (Wright, 2005). Thus, the larger the organization is, the bigger is the incentives that should be given to their various members in order to prevent the organization from disintegrating into small groups (Lynn & Hill, 2001).

4. Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The theory of planned behavior suggests that behavior is "a decision determined by the attitude towards the behavior or the perception on its surrounding factors such as the profit and loss caused by the behavior, social pressures that either support or against it, and the accessibility or difficulty experienced in performing the behavior" (Marcati, Guido, & Peluso, 2008, p. 1580). This theory reviewed the theory of reasoned action by adding the perception of behavior management variable as its background (antecedents) for intention and behavior (Hassad, 2007). The theory of planned behavior believes that other factors such as culture and work environment are not able to independently explain a person's behavior (Rimer & Glanz, 2005). Figure 1 shows how the theory of planned behavior is structured
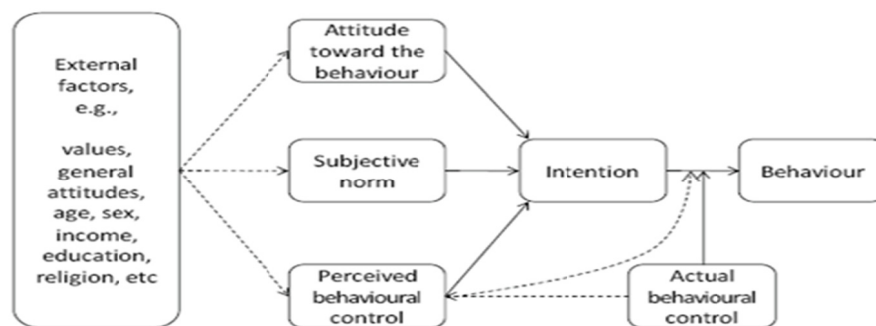

Figure 1. The theory of planned behavior (Source: Sobótka, 2011, p. 124)

Figure 1 shows that behavior is influenced by intention directly. Intention, in turn is influenced by attitude, social norm, and the perception towards control on behavior. Attitude is a global evaluation that consists of cognitive and affective aspects on behavior. Attitude is influenced by behavioral confidence on the upcoming result should it is done. This confidence is a consideration on the possibility of one thing to happen based on the evaluation on anything that can possibly happen (Kobbeltvedt & Wolff, 2009). In conclusion, if the risk involving an individual

decreases, the intention to perform the act increases since the increment of one or all three variables that influence intention increase (Pavlou, 2003). Culture is a background factor that influences behavioral confidence, normative confidence, and control confidence (Munniksma et al., 2011). Thus, if there is a difference in behavior based on culture (such as religion or nation), then the matter is related based on behavior, the perception on control behavior, and social norms. Table 1 explains the definition for each variable in the theory of planned behavior

Table 1. Concepts, definition and approach for the theory of planned behavior

Concept	Definition	Measuring approach
Behavior intention	Perception on behavior possibility	Should you do or do not perform the behavior?
Attitude	Personal evaluation on behavior	Is your behavior good, neutral or bad?
Subjective norm	Confidence that certain people may agree or disagree on behavior; motivation for behavior is to obtain their agreement	Do you agree or disagree that majority of people agree/disagree with the behavior?
Perception on control behavior	Confidence that one has and uses control in performing behavior	Do you believe in carrying out behavior is depended on you or not?

Source: Rimer and Glanz (2005, p. 17).

5. Relationship between RCT and TPB

RCT and TPB are the two theories that attempt to explain the factors affecting one's behavior (Smith, 2006). Both theories agree that there are many factors affecting various behavior and this depends on cases (Smith, 2006), but differ on the the constructs that explain the factors. Scholars such as Aarts, Paulussen, and Schaalma (1997) and Heath and Gifford (2002) are of the view that TPB is a variant of the RCT. All constructs of TPB are a rational choice construct whereby an individual would evaluate the profit and loss on specific aspects of behavior intentions.

6. Ethnic Tolerance in RCT Perspective

RCT sees ethnic tolerance as a behavior driven by rational choices from those involved (Wimmer, 2008; Kuran, 1998). These rational considerations form the dynamic interactions and negotiations among the parties in developing the ethnic boundaries (Wimmer, 2008). These justifications can be materialistic, social, emotional or spiritual (Nagel, 1994; Gans, 1979). This motivation can encourage behavior such as forming ethnic boundaries or the creation of new ethnic group (Nagel, 1994; Roediger, 1991). If the reasons for ethnic tolerance supersede those for intolerance, the society will choose the former. This happens as consistent result of the social influence of group members which encourage cooperation through development of interpersonal relationships, awareness about nature of plural society and coordination of those involved (Penner, 2005).

7. Ethnic Tolerance in TPB Perspective

Ethnic tolerance from TPB perspective is behavior and choices that are influenced by group norms and the perceived pressure to identify oneself with the group (Munniksma et al., 2012). Background factors such as cognitive readiness, personality, and religion are the factors that contribute to the development of ethnic tolerance (Fazilah Idris, 2008). Out of the three main TPB factors, attitude is identified as the most influential factor towards ethnic tolerance, followed by the perception on the ability to influence behavior, and lastly the social norms (Kurian, 2008).

8. Faith in Malaysia

Malaysians in 2010 consist of 67.4% *bumiputera* (Malaysian term to describe the Malay race and other indigenous peoples of Malaysia. The term comes from the Sanskrit word *bhumiputra*, which can be translated literally as "son of the land" or "son of the soil"), 24.6% Chinese, 7.3% Indians, and 0.7% others (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011:5). Religions that form the population are Islam (61.3%), Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), Hinduism (6.3%), traditional religions (1.3%), other religions (0.4%), and no religion (0.7%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2011). Table 2 shows the ethnic's faith.

Table 2. Ethnics and their religious affiliations in Malaysia

Ethnicity	Islam	Christian	Buddhism	Hinduism	Traditional religion	Others	No religion	Unknown
Malay	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Other Bumiputera	40%	46%	1%	0%	4%	2%	4%	3%
Chinese	1%	11%	84%	0%	3%	0%	1%	0%
Indian	4%	6%	2%	86%	0%	2%	0%	0%
Others	54%	12%	27%	2%	0%	0%	1%	3%

Source: Adapted from Department of Statistics Malaysia (2011, p. 82).

It can be seen that ethnic identity is identified with specific religions. 100% of the Malays are Muslim as officially defined by the government (Fee, 2001). Other *bumiputeras* are divided between Muslims and Christians and they are generally the natives of Kalimantan (Sarawak and Sabah). The Chinese are predominantly Buddhist while the Indians are mainly Hindus. Other ethnics are predominantly Muslim and origination from neighboring countries such as Indonesia.

The features for each religion practiced by Malaysians are as in Table 3.

Table 3. The features of the religions in Malaysia

Aspects	Islam	Buddhism	Hinduism	Christianity
Time of origin	610	530 BC	2000 BC	AD 1
Religious text	Quran	None	Veda	Bible
Mono/polytheism	Monotheism	Polytheism	Polytheism	Monotheism
Locus of control	God's will	Individual	Individual	Church hierarchy (Roman Catholic), individual (Protestant)
Dependence to supernatural	Moderate	Weak	Weak	Strong (Catholic), moderate (Protestant)
Eternal life	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Post-death retribution and compensation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Ideal life	Devotion to God's will at all time	Emphasis on tolerance, appreciation towards individuals, not selfish	Self-management, donation, devoid from worldly attachment, non-violence, and love	Following examples taught by Jesus

Other assurance/ primary practice	Muhammad as Prophet, praying for 5 times per day, fasting, performing the haj to Mecca, prohibit pigs and alcohol	Reincarnation, lust management, following the Middle Way	Reincarnation, caste system, prohibit meat	Jesus as God the Son (reincarnation of God), Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Catholic: sin confession and redemption, the Pope's virtue. Protestant: individuals can approach God directly, strong work ethics
Consumer behavior	Application based on emotions, more open to new matters, less effort in obtaining market information	Less materialistic, excellent product selection, less service demand, less desire to use materials	Behaviour is based on caste, less effort to obtain market information, more prepared to receive reasonable product, service and price	Roman Catholic: tend to choose products that are popular, famous or advertised, responsive to advertisements, less effort in obtaining market information. Protestant: more effort in buying, seek more market information, believe less to advertisements, choose trade relationships

Source: Adapted from Mokhlis (2006, p. 168).

9. The Influence of Religion on Ethnic Tolerance in RCT Perspective

Ethnic tolerance behavior is a rational choice from the perspective of RCT (Law, 2008). The behavior is based on individual's view of profit and loss which is influenced by religion. For those who are religious, their choice of how to behave is determined by the retributions that their religion has to offer. Therefore, in the context of ethnic tolerance, there are expectations by individuals to be rewarded according to his or her belief system.

Few scholars such as Hechter and Banton (Buendia, 2007) believe that the main motivation in ethnic tolerance from the RCT is public interest. According to Hechter (Buendia, 2007), the main motivation for ethnic tolerance is material pursuit, status and power. The main motivation is the position of the individual, either as a player or an observer. For the player, the main motivation is rational consideration while for the observer; ethnic tolerance is built by information, knowledge and conception. Shamsul (2008) views that majority of the academicians in Malaysia generally play the role as observers since ethnic separation is a reality and not something that is based on rational choices.

In situations such as this, religion's role is to provide rewards in the form of wealth, status and power in return for ethnic tolerance. Religions such as Buddhism inherently states that an ideal life is the one based on tolerance (Mokhlis, 2006). Hinduism meanwhile emphasizes the importance of non-violence and love (Mokhlis, 2006). Both Islam and Christianity have verses in their holy books that support tolerance and offer retributions in the form of Heaven (Quran's Al-Hujurat verse 13, Al-Baqarah verse 62; Injil Matius 18, pp. 21-22, Galatea 5, pp. 22-23, Filipi 4, pp. 6-8, and Matius 5, pp. 1-13). The role of religions is therefore to encourage ethnic integration as they are not to be identified with specific ethnicities. For example, although Islam began in the Arab world, it also became the religion of non-Arabs such as the Malays. Christianity which begun in Israel has non Malay bumiputera as followers. Buddhism, although started in India is the faith of many Chinese. Hinduism is the only one that is identified with its Indian birthplace as majority of Indians is Hindus.

10. The Influence of Religion on Ethnic Tolerance in TPB Perspective

From TPB perspective, religion is regarded as a part of culture. Religion serves as a potent source of influence in terms of attitude formation, social norms or perception on how to deal with the situation. A 2008 study on ethnic tolerance in Malaysia shows that religion is one of the important factors in attitude formation (Idris, 2008: iii). Kurian (2008) found that attitude is the most important factor that influences behavior intention in ethnic

tolerance. This implies that religion plays a major role in ethnic tolerance behavior development. This is reinforced by the important role of religion in the development of social norms. A study by Lee and Cardinal (2011) shows that religion has a significant role on social norm that affects recreation behavior. This is supported by statements that religions have a number of normative rules that can be adapted as social norms in many areas including relationships with others such as the context of ethnic tolerance.

A number of studies however found that religious affiliation affects ethnic tolerance negatively (Munniksma et al., 2012; Telsma, 2008). The problem exists not because of the religious teachings but more on the perception on inter-ethnic social relations. For example, ethnic tolerance acceptance behaviors differ between religions and it also depends on individual members of the ethnic group on whom they want to build friendship with (Munniksma et al, 2012). The elders are concerned about the result of inter-ethnic interactions which can influence their children to convert to other religions (Munniksma et al., 2012). This factor is more emotional in nature (Kurian, 2008; Pettigrew, 1998; Finchilescu, 2007; Ickes, 1984; Plant & Devine, 2003) as one's religious needs to be strengthened so that choices made are based on rational thinking.

11. RCT Application

Rational choice theory suggests that religion serves as an agent that provides principles for individuals in choosing ethnic tolerance behavior in the form of retributions (Engler, 2003). In sociology, rational choice theory on religion is developed to empirically test theories on religion (Smith, 2009). Retributions given by religion are eternal in nature and unfinished as they are transferable after death, although the concepts such as "rahmat" (blessing) and "azab" (curse) refer to retributions that happen during one's life in this world (Ellway, 2005).

The problem is that there is a significant difference between Abrahamic religions with eastern religions (Smith, 2009). Abrahamic religions such as Islam and Christianity have the concept of retributions in the form of rewards and sins which further determines whether one can enter heaven or end up in hell. In relation to ethnic tolerance, such concept of retributions are able to encourage individuals to behave tolerantly towards people of other ethnics as a religion does not belong to certain ethnic only (a religion with multiethnic followers). Multiethnic interaction is seen as a pathway to gain great reward by Eastern religions, however do not share this concept. The concept of tolerance is emphasised as polytheism itself reflects the worshipping of multiple gods. For instance, Buddhism emphasizes tolerance as one of its basic teachings (Mokhlis, 2006).

TPB predicts that nations with one religion have a low level of faith. Nations with multiple religions have a high level of faith in their respective religions (Ellway, 2005). Nations such as Malaysia which are known as nations with multiple religions are predicted to become a fertile ground for religious revivalist and even fundamentalist movements. These religions compete with each other and inter religious tolerance is difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, tolerance among different ethnics can only emerge under the protection of one religion.

In applying RCT in Malaysian multi-religion and multi-ethnic community, the government cannot favor one religion at the expense of others as reality shows that there will be more competitions and it is impossible for the government to 'outlaw' other religions. As an alternative, the concept of religious retribution needs to be emphasised as a way to encourage religious tolerance. This concept should be taught in schools and the campaign to propagate this value should be done through media and religious institutions. By adapting this approach, the government can encourage one religion ethnic tolerance and in turn, it encourages multi-religion ethnic tolerance.

12. TPB Application

Theory of planned behavior offers application with instrumentation from various theories. Figure 2 below shows how religion influences TPB constructs.
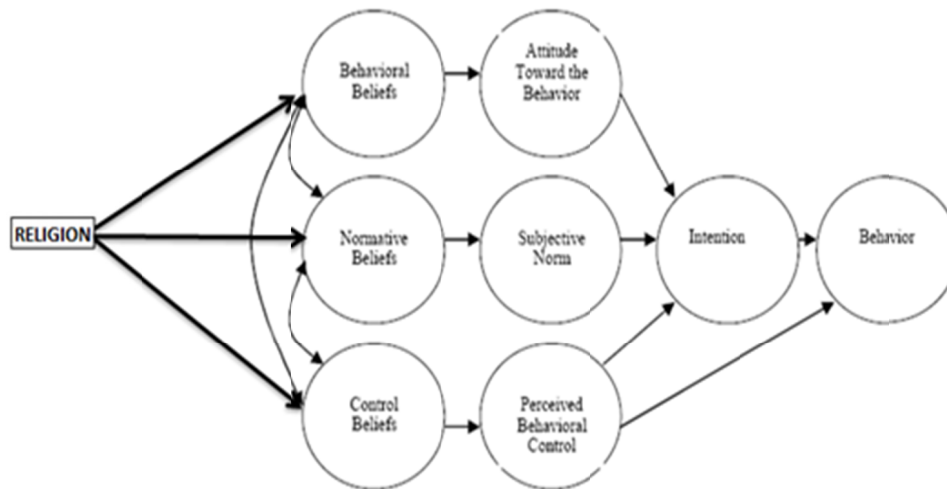
Figure 2. Influence of Religion towards TPB constructs (source: Adapted from Burley, Butner, & Harris, 2005)

To examine the influence of religion on ethnic tolerance behavior, one needs to understand how knowledge on how religion is influential to the life of the individual as a whole. Religious Orientation Scale (Sliwinski, 2011) is an instrument that can be adapted with eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. By identifying an individual's orientation towards religion, we can study the orientation's influence towards the variables such as behavioral confidence, normative confidence, and individual control confidence in ethnic tolerance behavior, either directly or correlationally. Questions on how religion influence these constructs can be asked using statements such as "ethnic tolerance gives me the opportunity to practice religion" (attitude), "my religion will agree with my tolerance towards other ethnics" (subjective norm), and "my religion gives me freedom to be tolerance towards other ethnics" (control perspective). Correlationally, a study can be done by measuring each TPB variables independently and regress them with variable measured using Religious Orientation Scale.

By conducting the above study, we can identify the strength of religion in developing individual ethnic tolerance. Components with significant influence are identified as ones that need to be maintained and reinforced through education if the existing ethnic tolerance is high. If the level of ethnic tolerance is found to be low, it will be more accurate if the components with no significant influence are given attention by reinforcing them through education and other means.

13. Conclusion

Views that religion supports ethnic segregation should be taken with caution. Firstly, a number of studies found that religions have positive effect on social behavior (Ting, 2011). Religions in Malaysia serve to reinforce ethnicity and as popularly portrayed in media, often accused of bringing about ethnic segregation. To examine this, we need to study the perception that an individual has on their religion.

Secondly, the rational choice theory stated that individual behavior is influenced by economic considerations. As we do not know what consideration is used by individuals in choosing ethnic tolerance behavior, we cannot remove the possibility that religion plays a part in it. Thus, a study on profit and loss consideration is needed not only to apply rational choice theory in Malaysian context but also to prove the theory's validity as criticized by some researchers (such as Norris & Inglehart, 2006; Lynn & Hill, 2001; Stockley, 2011).

Lastly, the theory of planned behavior suggests that individual behavior is influenced not only by the individual own attitude, but also by the perception on situation management and social norms. In a collective community such as Malaysia (Atran, 2007; Minah, 2007), the influence of social norms like religion can be great. If the social norm can be developed positively towards ethnic tolerance, religion can play a bigger role in building ethnic tolerance.

By having a variety between research findings in other places in Malaysia and the support of the theory of planned behavior and the rational choice theory, conducting studies as well as implementing the theories of the studies becomes important. The study will provide input for Malaysia's effort in developing a "One Malaysia" concept which calls for inculcation of inter-ethnic tolerance. The authors hope that the study can be carried out

and contribute to the tolerance development of Malaysian society.

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