

## 17<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Podcast Series (Tackling the Grand Challenge in Individual and Social well-being)

**Episode 2:** Enacting sensible inclusion amidst widespread attention to diversity

**Speaker:** Dr Mathew Mathews, Principal Research Fellow and Head, Social Lab, Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

**Moderator:** Assoc Prof Suzaina Kadir, Vice Dean (Academic Affairs) and Associate Professor, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy

---

**Suzaina Kadir:** Welcome to the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy's 17th Anniversary Podcast series. To celebrate our anniversary, we are speaking with some of the school's experts on the overall theme of tackling the grand challenge in individual and social well-being. My name is Suzaina Kadir. I'm currently the Vice Dean of Academic Affairs and Associate Professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and I'll be your host today. Joining me is Dr Mathew Mathews. Dr Mathews is Head of IPS Social Lab, the Center for Social Indicator Research and a Principal Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies. Today we will be discussing diversity and inclusion in light of the rising awareness of the disadvantages and difficulties faced by minorities.

I've known Mathew for a very long time and I'm really glad to be moderating this session because he is really the expert on these issues. The work that he does at IPS includes research using both quantitative and qualitative methods on race, religion, immigrant integration, family, aging and poverty.

Mathew also studies the impact of social programmes on various issues and has been involved in a number of evaluations on the usefulness of various government initiatives. He has taught courses on social policy and published in a range of academic and media outlets. He currently serves on the board of OnePeople.sg and the national volunteer and philanthropy center. He is a research advisor to the Ministry of Social and Family Development. And he's part of the VWO charities capability fund panel, and families for life council. Can I now hand it over to Dr Mathews to take us through a short presentation on the issues.

**Mathew Mathews:** Thank you, Professor Suzaina, you are also very much an expert in this area, so I'm hoping to hear some of your thoughts in today's session. Really glad that we'll be able to be a part of the school's 17th Anniversary and provide some perspectives from the field to diversity and inclusion. There's a lot more talk about diversity and inclusion today.

You could have seen a ramp up of that interest, even in Singapore in the last few years. With the reserved presidential election a few years ago, there was quite a bit of interest in (diversity and inclusion matters). I think there was more conversation about this at both the official state level and the people level.

And of course, last year there's been increased discussion about this; global discussion since the protests globally triggered by the unfortunate death of George Floyd and I think a lot of people have been talking about these issues in the last year or so. I've had a lot more inquiries from companies, MNCs, businesses to weigh in on some of these issues.

So aside from the social justice cause which I think is important and especially for younger demographics, who are very passionate about that, there's also the potential positive impact on the bottom line which should get people to sit up when we think about inclusion issues. Many know the McKinsey report, which the data strongly shows a correlation between ethnic diversity in, especially in executive teams (and business success). They looked at a thousand companies across 15 countries. And you do see that there is some kind of gain for these companies which have greater diversity, they tend to outperform (others).

In Singapore, about 71% of employers recognise that there is an impact when you have diversity policies on the company's culture.

So this is something that's recognised, internationally, in terms of how it benefits, ultimately it benefits the bottom line and allows companies to serve the bigger mission of meeting the needs of larger communities. Even in Singapore, I think there is a recognition. But what I want to steer people to think about and highlight is that we need to be reasonable in implementing inclusion initiatives, because there are consequences, and real ones, if you don't do it properly. There's at least some opinion that's coming out more recently that diversity initiatives are often implemented without people actually investigating whether they are effective. And people sometimes are blind to the fact that sometimes there are unintended consequences. In fact, I think there's quite a bit of discussion coming up from the US, that quite a bit of diversity, equality and inclusion policies, the implementation comes with quite a bit of pressure.

Because companies feel that you just have to implement certain DEI (Diversity, Equity & Inclusion) policies, because if you don't do it, you'll be cancelled.

On one hand there is this need to quickly appease a population, especially those who might be very upset about the lack of inclusion and buy into this idea of inclusion at all costs approach.

So really you've got 25% of minorities in the population. So let's just make sure that every organisation, like it or not, if you're more than 50 people, we just have to have that proportion; that there will be that 25% of that 50 who will be racial minorities.

Diversity policies like that, and affirmative action particularly, can have an impact.

Sometimes it can render the ethnic minority as an inferior. It can signal that underrepresented groups are really less competent and they need a leg up. They need help to succeed. And sometimes when they finally get into a company as glamorous as the company might be, they (minorities) end up in a very subordinate position. That's been the reality in quite a few places.

There's also an effect on the individual - the minority person's own perception of his racial, ethnic identity when he is hired on these diversity initiatives. So one, in the very identity management that the individual goes through, there's quite a bit of pressure.

For instance, the person may only weakly identify with his or her ethnic heritage, but because he or she was hired under this diversity initiative then he or she feels to play up ethnicity. And the reality is many of our ethnicities, identities are actually very, very fluid and situational.

Sometimes they are akin to how the majority might view many issues and for many reasons, disagree with how it might be seen from a more ethnic lens.

And of course, when that happens, you feel a sense of anxiety because you can't really represent a community you're supposed to represent and sometimes you feel inauthentic.

There is also an inadvertent signaling effect of diversity initiatives.

Companies sometimes put it out. They go with the easy way of just having quotas for instance because it seems to be very fair, but underlining this, what

happens is that underrepresented groups will find it much harder to prove, for instance, instances of discrimination.

Because, you know, the company can sit back and say, "Hey, no we have taken care of the quotas, racial representation has been met, so what's the issue?" But then in the actual organisation, the lived experience of the minority may be very far from being properly accepted. There could be all kinds of inequalities and it could be invisible, they could be marginalised, they could be completely ignored.

In addition, there's also an impact on the majority community, which is part of that society. That it could be in the sense that They feel that they have (also) been disadvantaged and people then start looking at, you know, who has the most disadvantages.

I mean, "I'm Chinese. I come from a poorer family, so I should be more deserving for instance, than a minority person who actually has it good all his life?" So, everybody's trying to assert the fact that "I can show where I've been disadvantaged even greater". So we need to remember that the effort for trying to have some kind of universal inclusion is really a pipe dream.

This is especially (true) as you consider that there are many groups that would feel that they need to be included. And sometimes what works for one group may not work for another. If you take an idea from the field of disability studies - if you build a toilet try to make it inclusive, so people have tried to make it larger for the wheelchair user's convenience. But for someone who is visually impaired, then it can be quite disorienting because a much larger space makes it very hard to figure where the fixtures are.

So not all attempts to make inclusion will work for every single group.

Then there's an issue of which groups should be included. It seems to be easier to include some groups and not other groups. So, I mean, over the years in Singapore, there's been a strong push for gender inclusion, which is very, very important. But then, there are many other areas of inclusion, whether they are issues to do with age, which I think that's been a lot more interest about. There's been some tackling of issues to do with nationality. Certainly in areas like race, it has been something that is being tackled at some level. But there'll be quite a few gaps that people have talked about.

There are also issues to do with disability.

People are (also) calling increasingly for the need for inclusion based on sexual orientation, (also) some are asking for (inclusion based on) political ideology, the list goes on. And then if you add on the idea about all kinds of other disadvantages, especially when you look at it from a more intersectional level - So an individual can be a minority, can be female, can be a person with a disability etc.

I mean, all that together compounds the kinds of disadvantages and furthers the need for inclusion.

So it can be quite complicated from a very practical aspect. I think businesses should really continue to hire based on the business case. The government has used incentives especially when it comes to issues to do with persons with disabilities, seniors, so the government tries to push the industry to hire people of a particular category. The state then bears some of the cost.

That makes it more possible for you to increase particular groups of people within the organisation.

Then I think it's important for us to mainstream and push harder for people - senior managers and leaders of many corporations to receive diversity training. Perhaps there should be rules that if you have a company of a certain size, then, some of the senior staff, especially those who look at HR matters should have some kind of training in diversity.

They should be familiar with why diversity can be very beneficial to the organisation and they can consider how they can accommodate that. So maybe once they confront themselves with broader considerations which we deal with, and some of their biases and have a good sense of how to navigate in a space where diversity is necessary, then they might become more open to hiring minorities.

And you might finally see a flourishing, even in their own businesses, because they will be able to accept diversity. We have to accept the fact that sometimes businesses, if they're going to be successful and competitive, and especially if you think about the Singapore space, there will be some reasons that you might have to have cultural competencies as part of the requirement. And sometimes this might be seen as discriminatory.

So for instance, Singapore being a hub and needing to post people to different places in the region, you need to send someone in a senior sales role to China,

and the person is not a fluent Mandarin speaker. It might be a major challenge. It's a practical challenge.

You could of course get a minority who doesn't speak Mandarin to be a representative in China and have a translator always go with him/her, but it really does impede the progress and success of the company. We do need to have some reasonableness as we think about this matter.

But then there are racist trends within society. There has been quite a bit of discussion about how tuition agencies sometimes tell minority tutors, "Sorry families just don't want your services; they want a Chinese person to teach English".

I understand if it's a language issue, but, if school students who are exposed to English as the main language, then why shouldn't a minority person be considered as well? Now, of course, people have preferences in terms of their hiring. We do our surveys at the Institute and we ask people in terms of hiring preferences. It's very clear that race is a consideration, especially when there are more intimate roles associated or closer roles, caregiving roles, for instance. It's understandable.

But I think that there should be attempts to either, through legislation or other means to be able to make for instance, companies or agencies, try to at that stage when someone raises some of those issues, "that I don't want someone because of their race", for the agency to do due diligence, to be able to explain, to share, to explain how this can actually be beneficial; the child is not going to lose out.

There could be various ways that we can reduce the gaps, which we currently see.

I think there's a stronger case for some employers to ensure that there is bigger representation of minorities. I think this should be the case when it comes to public services and those who take public roles. It is because the constituency of the public service should somehow approximate the society at large - The society it's serving.

So it's important to be able to have greater representation there. I say representation - at all levels, including more senior levels. So if you go to the Singapore SGDI (Singapore Government Directory), and you look at, you know, all the name lists (staffing) different policy units. And you will see that we generally have a shortfall when it comes to minority representation in quite a

few policy making and implementation divisions in the civil service. I'm not saying that there's been no attempt to try to work towards that (i.e greater minority representation), I do know that in the last few years you've got more PSC (Public Service Commission) winners or scholars who are ethnic minorities, President's scholars who are ethnic minority. So certainly there's been a shift towards this.

I think that is a very very important shift; there needs to be an acceptance that within the public service there should be a greater representation of minorities. Because the public service does make policy for all of Singapore. And you do need a sufficient number of people with different ethnic backgrounds to be able to help with that. I do know that it's possible for advisors to come in to provide that additional help. But there's nothing like the actual implementers or policy designers having that, cultural competence and influence and their personal self being involved in (designing and implementing policies).

Let me just take a few moments to talk about accommodation. How does diversity look like when people do come into organisations.

At one hand, I think there's this call for people to be colorblind when it comes to organisations. So when you are actually in an organisation, then everybody should just be the same. There's also the other school of thought calling for good appreciation about the fact that people need to be multicultural, people should be made aware of people's ethnic differences.

And I think this comes front and centre, especially more recently in Singapore, when we think about Muslim nurses wearing the tudung, for instance. One argument has been for a long time to make sure that the space does not have any kind of identifier which accentuates one's ethnic or religious background. And I do recognise there are sensitivities, there's law enforcement and other areas that this might be very important. But the whole discussion has reminded us that there needs to be some acceptance that maybe the colorblind approach, where we say everybody should just completely de-emphasise any kind of difference, is just not realistic.

To begin with, that's not how individuals navigate their world. Research has been showing that we notice people's differences in milliseconds.

Our brains are programmed like that, we can tell when there are physical differences. And the fact is that it is just very normal and very human to categorise people based on their appearances. So it is just impossible to have this notion that we just forget about the differences, just be completely

colorblind. It doesn't seem to be biological for us to do that. And I think for people who are of diverse ethnic background or who might be minorities, that aspect of their unique cultural identity and traditions are a very important aspect of them.

In Singapore, when it comes to issues of race, we also celebrate those differences. We need to be able to increasingly to look at these differences to recognise these and recognise them as positive differences.

Some of the arguments against a multicultural approach is that once you recognise differences, then people tend to stereotype; put people into different boxes. That's not good. But the reality is that we can also have positive constructs for these differences. Then it's possible to accept that there are differences within the organisation and celebrate those differences, live with those and see them in very positive terms.

I'm glad for the move towards allowing the *tudung* in the nursing field. This gives me confidence that our approach will ultimately be very much more of a multicultural approach.

**Suzaina Kadir:** Thank you. Mathew, that was really fascinating, but if you'll indulge me, Mathew, I wanted to go to a specific issue that you raised, and I really liked your pointing out about the public sector. For those of us that study ethnicity and race the focus is always on what, what is it that the public sector represents, right? And so you mentioned hiring, you also mentioned at the organisational level how we approach celebrating differences and how we accept it. And they are actually quite linked.

And I just wanted maybe to push you to address just one point for many of these questions that we have had on the public sector. I'm just curious whether in your view, right? One of the struggles that we have, has been about the inconsistencies in the approach. So on the one hand we try to promote the idea of being race blind or ethnicity blind because the realm of the public sector is supposed to be completely neutral.

So when we are dealing with the question of inclusion and celebrating differences, we struggle with that because ultimately that's the overall perspective. But the reality is that's one particular perspective because in many parts of the world differences are celebrated within the public sector in very real ways.



You've got more extreme ways where you've got quotas for example, an affirmative action, which place people from different ethnicities in various positions. And that's worked into legislation or more informal ways where people are brought in. And there is clearly a recognised positioning of different, for example, ethnic groups.

You see this in some cultures where there are linguistic groups that are very firmly established within the society and they need to be represented whether formally or informally.

So I'm just wondering whether you would talk a little bit about one of the problems perhaps that we have here is our previous approach of trying to insist on neutrality, ethnic blindness within the public sector.

**Mathew Mathews:** If you think about how the public service has served people of all backgrounds fairly, that's actually a very important characteristic of our Singapore public service. One part of our surveys that we've been doing consistently, we've been asking people in terms of differential experiences, and we have asked people in terms of differential experiences, dealing with the public services, whether it's the courts, the school, health care. We notice that very few Singaporeans, including minorities, less than 10% of minorities say that they generally feel treated worse by the public services. That's the hospital, police and court systems. That's fascinating because you don't see that in many other societies. In many societies if you ask the question about police, you will find a substantial number of minorities who would feel that the police pick out minorities; that the court system is not fair and imposes harsh sentencing on minorities.

So in Singapore, I think the formula that has existed has helped us to ensure that there is enough sensitivity; very few people feel that because they are of a minority race they are treated worse by the public service. We need to celebrate this part of what we have achieved.

Now I think the other issue is really, it's got to do with whether we allow in the public services, the opportunity for people to stand up and speak up for different communities.

Singapore has been a little bit more careful when it comes to the championing of issues of race, and there's been a lot more sensitivity about that and there are good reasons for that. But at the same time you need in policy making to have enough sensitivity to know that there are different needs of different communities.

I do feel that at an earliest stage, minority leaders would be in that position because there are so few of them, maybe one in a whole division. They are very unlikely to speak up about perhaps what they do know about the needs of minority communities, any kind of area of policy, for instance, they were just generally just kind of quiet.

Today, I notice, because I do some training, where there are few minorities who might be part of a programme, there'll be a little bit more willingness to stand up and speak up about some of the considerations. It's a little different from what it was before. So I do notice that you do need to have a bit of numbers for that to happen. You need space for minorities to be able to represent community needs, not feel that if they stand up, they speak for the considerations of particular groups, people will just classify them as agitators who are just pushing for a communal kind of consideration. I think we should recognise the fact that, all of us come to any kind of thinking process with a particular set of lenses, experience, cultural background, we should be allowed to bring that into our thinking process. Yet after understanding the needs of one community, we finally have to be thinking about all communities in Singapore and their well being. That broader framing, which I think we've all learned very well and in accordance to our national identity, and how we stand for that. But yet we have to allow minority leaders to also think from that minority community's perspective and bring that out. That should be seen as very legitimate.

**Suzaina Kadir:** Absolutely. Okay. Let me just go to the questions which have been raised to us. So let me begin with this one. It's a question from Narayanan. In light of digitalisation and globalisation, what are the new avatars of diversity and resulting changes to inclusivity? I think this is really a key part in terms of the definition of what we mean by inclusion and how that has evolved, right?

Because we are in fact sort of operating with quite a different terrain these days.

**Mathew Mathews:** It's very important for us to note that the conceptualisation of inclusion has become a lot broader today. We are a lot more aware about the fact that there are different groups of people we need to have included. And if we think about digitalisation globally, we clearly would think about people who have been left out in terms of digital access.

And you hear this in Singapore that the older people, not all, but there's a proportion who have a lot of difficulty with new technology uptake. And so workplaces are sometimes not very inclusive to them. There's a lot of digital

transformation that is happening at work and during COVID, we notice a lot of that transformation has accelerated in many more jobs.

And of course you do notice that for some who are very savvy with the internet, this has been easy. But for others, especially those, not necessarily always older but maybe sometimes people who don't have access to high quality broadband services or good computing software, good cameras and all different gadgets, it's harder for them to do as well when it comes to work from home arrangements.

Digitalisation and globalisation, of course allowed us to deal with issues to do with inclusivity in different ways as well. When we think about globalisation, for instance, just think about issues to do with black lives matter and how the whole vocabulary, the whole discourse, the narrative has reached Singapore. People feel energised now to deal with the questions of race and the differences that come because of race.

So the whole notion about vocabulary has changed. We have added notions, like privilege into the conversation. There are various schools of thought in terms of privilege. I personally don't buy into the notion about Chinese privilege, but there are notions about majority privilege, which I subscribe to. But there has been more discussions, more vocabulary, more ideas that come with globalisation and digitalisation.

So with digitalisation, globalisation, the use of the internet, you are able to connect people to notions of diversity and inclusion, which are international. So I think this has affected how people self-perceived, self identify.

**Suzaina Kadir:** Let me just shift the questions now to be a little bit more specific around policy.

We've got a few questions of that nature and what's been submitted so Nara raised the question around quota-based inclusive practices and systems and the potential downside which may entrench deep rootedness divisiveness. How can policies be developed specifically focused on inclusion, that that can be more, you know, he writes it as “nurtured to become more sustainable”. How can we do that now? It's related to a question by Blady. So Blady talks about essentially trying to move beyond tokenism, right?

So he writes, how can we ensure the focus on diversity also goes beyond tokenism to social categories and includes goals to bring about substantive social changes. So both of these questions are related to specific

policies that are meant to be sustainable in terms of bringing about greater inclusion in a society.

So, Mathew how would you address this?

**Mathew Mathews:** Thanks Suzaina. We want policies, which would I think if you would use the word, “be sustainable”, in the longer term they actually work for the good of society.

Let’s think about tokenism based on different social categories. Tokenism itself, it’s really this notion that we want to satisfy a particular kind of moral requirement to include people who have been structurally disadvantaged and to some way or another to give them an idea that social mobility is still available, where in many places, it seems to be kind of stopped.

For a substantial change to happen, we need to continue to stress the importance of diversity education and sensitivity training. I think in all fields we need to examine ourselves, look at our biases.

They also have to be able to hear the voices of those who are minorities of different kinds and be able to appreciate where people come from. So I think that’s a big aspect of how we probably would need to deal with it if we’re going to be more sustainable. So that needs to be that challenging of people’s biases and prejudices and stereotypes.

Then it also needs to be this push for greater interethnic interaction. I think this is important because you do need to make diversity a part of one’s everyday life. The more we do that, this becomes more sustainable to be able to bring about change, to be able to have people say, “well, you know what, I have minorities within my, my close group and so I do care about their needs. And I do want to make sure that I stand up in case there are people who are particularly racist within my communities.”

Now, back to some of the questions that Nara was mentioning - that particular question about the deep rooted divisiveness that comes from some kind of quota base, inclusive practice.

Think about some policies in Singapore, for instance, the EIP, the Ethnic Integration Policy, this is something that the government initiated a few decades ago and it’s a broad based inclusive practice to ensure that Singaporeans live with people of other ethnicities, and multi-racialism becomes just part of their neighborhood because you do have a certain number of people who are

minorities, living in your HDB block, at your precinct. And therefore by default, you would need to have, within your food courts or your coffee shops, some minority shop or places in the market, you've got minority goods sold. You normally would have a place of worship in the community, which might represent a minority religion. So then that's been an attempt.

Will that entrench deep rooted divisiveness? Now more recently, you've got discussion that because you've got ethnic quotas, it reinforces the fact that we are different. We are CMIO (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others), we are not all the same. But yet you also see the fact that there are benefits with that. SM Tharman a few years ago, when asked, I think it was at St. Gallen Symposium or some major international symposium, where he talked about some of the greatest policies in Singapore. He spoke about the EIP as one of the greatest ones, because it did allow a very large proportion of Singaporeans to live in a multicultural setting. You are forced to embrace diversity especially in a public housing system, you just lived with that.

You do see the fact that there are major benefits from some of these policies. There are definitely, of course the downside of these, that people have talked about. How sometimes some minorities get the short end of the stick and they don't do as well because of how it's sold. Some of the finer points of the policy do affect some people.

I hope over time that there will be a greater resolution for some of these difficulties for particular groups. And I think that needs to be worked on, but I do believe that at some time, some of these broader inclusive practices do have a way of fostering inclusivity.

And if you look at it, you can either see it as bringing about deep rooted divisiveness, but look at it squarely - There are a lot of upsides to these policies which I think we need to be aware about.

**Suzaina Kadir:** Thanks Mathew, as always, it's great to discuss these things with you. Obviously this is a pet topic, for yourself and for me and the debates and the complexities around it continue to rage on, so thank you very much.

To everyone, thank you for joining us. Please do subscribe to hear more of our 17th Anniversary Podcast series. Next episode will feature Mr Christopher Gee, Senior Research Fellow and Head of Governance and Economy, Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, and he'll be delving into the future of work welfare and the social compact in aging societies.

Thank you everyone.

---

*This podcast was recorded on 18 November 2021.*