iPS Institute of
Policy Studies

Key Findings from the Channel NewsAsia – Institute of Policy Studies Survey on Race Relations

Mathew Mathews
Senior Research Fellow
Institute of Policy Studies
Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy
National University of Singapore

Background to Survey

The current survey builds on previous studies on race relations in Singapore and focuses on several areas which have not been comprehensively investigated in the past. These include: understanding what the population deems as racist behaviour; how prevalent Singaporeans believe racism is present in the community; the extent to which parents should educate their children on matters of race; and the perceived value of discussing and clarifying racial issues.

Methodology

The sample for this study was obtained through stratified random sampling of dwelling types. Malay and Indian respondents were oversampled to ensure sufficient minority representation in the final sample.

The main survey fieldwork was conducted between June and July 2016 by market research company, Blackbox. A "drop-off pick up" method was employed where the surveyor approached a predetermined prospective household, identified the eligible person using a set criteria and invited him or her to complete a survey questionnaire on their own. The questionnaire was available in all four official languages.

Participants were also given an envelope for their completed questionnaire, and were asked to seal it before giving it to the surveyor, who collected it from the participant's home at a stipulated time. The self-administered questionnaire method reduced the possibility of interviewer bias, where the presence of an interviewer would affect the level of honesty of participants.

Only Singaporean residents (either citizens or PRs) who were 21 years and above were eligible to participate in the survey. A good response rate was achieved with 72% of the households identified for this study finally completing the survey. In all, 2,000 respondents completed the survey.

The results were statistically weighted to ensure that the final sample better resembled the national population in terms of racial composition, dwelling type and gender.

Summary of Findings

Overall the survey findings highlight that Singaporeans espouse the values of multiracialism and try to live out these multiracial ideals. There was also a high level

of interaction between the different races. There are norms of what constitutes racist behaviour with many finding such behaviour unacceptable.

Singaporeans endeavour to socialise their children to understand and be sensitive of cultural differences. They also do not want to highlight the negative aspects of racial differences in the media.

The survey findings, however, remind us that we need to continue to nurture positive race relations. Singaporeans are self-aware, acknowledging that there is some racism in the community. There is still in-group preference with a substantial proportion of respondents preferring those who are racially similar to themselves for many roles. Minorities were more likely to view the negative experiences they encountered as a product of racial differences although fewer reported that they had experienced racial discrimination.

While most respondents had broached sensitive issues with those of other races, there was still substantial reservation about such discussion. This stems from the belief that such conversation has the potential to cause tension. As such, a small portion of respondents continued to have unanswered questions about the cultural practices of other races.

Detailed Findings

Attitudes towards Race & Society

Overall, there was strong endorsement that success in Singapore is meritocratic. Nearly 90% of respondents agreed that every one who works hard has an equal opportunity to become rich. Nearly three-quarters (73%) disagreed that race is very important in determining who is successful. Among Malays, 66% disagreed with this compared to 75% of Indians and Chinese.

About half of the respondents (53%) believed that being of the majority race was advantageous. This perception was more acute among minorities.

Only a third of respondents, even among the Chinese, believed that the interests of the majority race should be looked after before those of the minorities.

In terms of cultural rights, about 30% of respondents felt that the races were getting too demanding about their cultural rights.

Attitudes towards Race & Policy

More than 70% of respondents viewed the various policies meant to safeguard racial and religious harmony such as the Maintanence of Religious Harmony Act and the CMIO racial categorisation as helpful in building trust between the races and safeguarding minority rights. Among the different measures that have been put in place, 85% of respondents acknowledged that Racial Harmony Day celebrations fostered inter-racial trust.

About two-thirds of respondents did not favour race-based public information when it came to crime (70%), educational performance (65%) or social problems (62%). More were supportive of information that portrayed the successes of different races or which differentiated health issues based on race.

Multiculturalism

More than 90% of respondents endorsed features of multiculturalism such as according respect, equality and value for people of other races.

Respondents also indicated that they lived out a multicultural ethos with over 90% stating that they liked talking to people of all races and lived in peace with everyone.

Most respondents report interacting with those of other races in a variety of settings such as attending an ethnic celebration, taking an interest in understanding the culture of those around them and making friends from other races. However it is impossible to judge the depth of these interactions.

While many Singaporeans espoused multicultural values and had interacted with those of other races, this did not mean that they rejected all stereotypes. In fact nearly half of respondents agreed with statements that associated people of different races with negative characteristics (e.g. 44% of respondents agreed to the statement, "People from some races are more violent than others" and 46% of respondents agreed to the statement, "People from some races are not friendly") Both Chinese and non-Chinese respondents engaged in such stereotyping.

Racism

Just over half (53%) of respondents viewed racism as a problem of the past, with many across age groups disagreeing. While 74% of respondents viewed themselves as hardly or not racist, they were more likely to notice racism in others. About 40% of respondents reported that their close friends were at least mildly racist. When asked about generalised groups (e.g. most Singaporean Chinese; most Singaporean Malays; most new immigrants from China) the majority of respondents judged them to be more racist than those in their close circles. New immigrants were often judged to be more racist than Singaporeans.

About 70% of respondents found that outright discrimination such as not hiring someone because of their race or religion, or insulting others because of race was never acceptable. They also viewed such acts as racist. There was more divergence in views in other instances. For example, 48% of respondents felt that not having friends of other races was racist.

Respondents did not believe that race affected their ability to police bad behaviour or problematic situations. Only about a quarter of respondents felt that they would be accused of being a racist if they intervened in a situation involving someone from another race.

Racial Preferences

The survey results show a high level of in-group preference. The great majority of Chinese, Malays and Indians find those of their own race as preferable partners to marry into their family, to help them run their businesses or to share personal problems with. Even the choice of Prime Minister and President was subject to race-based preferences. Respondents of all races were agreeable to a Singaporean Chinese President compared to a smaller number of respondents accepting a Singaporean Malay President or Singaporean Indian President.

More Singaporeans were amenable to social interaction across racial boundaries, where for instance close to 70% of the Chinese were amenable to inviting Indians

and Malays to their house for a meal. Most Chinese were also amenable to Indians and Malays playing with their children or grandchildren.

More minority respondents were accepting of the Chinese compared to the Chinese accepting minority respondents for various roles and relationships. For instance, 94% of Malays said they would accept a Malay President, while 84% of Malays would accept a Singaporean Chinese President. On the other hand, among the Chinese, while 96% accepted a Singaporean Chinese President, only 59% said they would accept a Singaporean Malay President. Many respondents were the least accepting of new citizens being in these roles and relationships.

Differential Treatment & Experiences

Racial minorities tend to perceive more instances of negative treatment with over half of them agreeing with statements such as "people have acted as if they are better than you". Two-thirds of Malay and Indian respondents who had experienced negative treatment claimed that race was the basis of such treatment. Among Malays, a substantial proportion indicated that they felt treated negatively also on the basis of religion and income/education (44%), while about 62% of Indians felt treated negatively because of skin colour as well as race.

A higher proportion of ethnic minorities responded to perceived differential treatment by talking to someone or working harder.

While many minority respondents attributed the negative experiences they had encountered to race, comparatively fewer felt that they had experienced racial discrimination. Possibly, the notion of "racial discrimination" connotes a much more negative experience which surpasses the types of differential treatment they perceived.

About 60% of respondents across races had heard racist comments. Under half of the respondents noted that such comments were made by workplace colleagues and friends. The primary way of dealing with such information was to ignore these comments, which 63% did. Comparatively fewer (29%) respondents reported that they had argued with the person who had made the statement in order to question the truth of their assertion.

Discussing Race

While racial or religious matters are at least sometimes broached, there was significant sensitivity about such discussion.

About two-thirds of respondents had asked someone of another race about an issue related to their race or religion. Despite this, about two thirds of respondents also noted that discussions of race were disconcerting in that they could be offensive and lead to tension. About half of respondents (including minorities) cited that minorities are being over-sensitive about racial issues.

A quarter of respondents had wanted to ask someone about issues related to their race but did not. The issues that people were concerned about had to do largely with religious beliefs and cultural practices associated with the different races.

Racial Socialisation

Racial socialisation continues to be an important aspect in child-rearing. The median age when most respondents realised that there were differences between races was about 10. Many respondents also believed that children should be educated about issues related to race — particularly why racism is bad for society and about what those of other races find offensive. About 60% of parents claimed that they had informed their children about some of these race-based issues. Few respondents (19%) however had experiences of their parents encouraging them to not to mix too much with people of other races.

Findings from the CNA–IPS Survey on Race Relations are available [here](.).

####