

# Commentary: Steps to a society of compassion and solidarity we can be proud of

**Gillian Koh**

*Channel NewsAsia*, 05 August 2018

"人在江湖，身不由己". This is a commonly used mandarin expression which states that as one steps out into the world, one cannot expect to live as one wishes to.

Some may choose, heroically, to pay the price of living by their lofty ideals, but this statement justifies the need to set those ideals aside.

What happens if one's personal values and beliefs or ideal vision of society differ vastly from what is playing out in society? How can one live with that? How can the gaps be narrowed?

The findings from a survey series called the National Values Assessment conducted by a Singapore business consulting firm, aAdvantage and a British group, the Barrett Values Centre, provide a quick indicator of first, the gap between Singaporeans' avowed personal values and their perception of society today, and second, the gap between that perception and their ideal model of it.

The findings are based on the views of 2,000 Singaporeans drawn using quota samples collected in 2012, 2015, and March to May 2018.

## **Positive personal values**

First, the good news. The surveys indicate that, in defining themselves, Singaporeans consistently place great value on being caring, compassionate, family-oriented, responsible and fair.

In defining their model society, Singaporeans say they espouse ideals of respect, and care for the elderly, the disadvantaged, the future generation and the environment across all three surveys.

Affordable housing, effective healthcare and this year's additions of educational opportunities and dependable public services, were among the other top ten descriptors of what respondents also want in their ideal society.

Why is this good news? These suggest that issues of social inclusion and support are important to us.

Such concerns were present across the board. Concern for seniors was among the top three values chosen across all age segments including the youngest, aged 15 to 30. Affordable housing was also among the top three values cited by respondents of all housing backgrounds, including those living in private apartments and landed property.

## **Gap between personal ideals and reality**

Now, to the bad news – whether there is coherence between personal ideals, Singaporeans' notions of their model society, and the reality they find themselves in, and why.

The main values, attitudes and behaviours respondents said define their reality over the three surveys were selfish competitiveness (kiasu), the fear of failure (kiasi), self-centredness, materialism and a blaming culture.

None of the top ten values on this list coincided with those that described personal values over the years.

But who makes up society? Clearly, many of us are compromising on our ideal set of values when we step out of our homes every morning.

### **Gap between ideal society and reality**

There was at least some resemblance between the top ten values and needs cited to describe current society with that of the ideal society - care for the elderly, effective healthcare and educational opportunities.

But the survey indicates that many of these needs are under-served today. How do we know?

The survey compares the number of mentions made to the values respondents chose in describing current society and ideal society. The largest difference in the 2015 and 2018 surveys were in the areas of affordable housing, care for the elderly, the disadvantaged and the environment, as well as in the manifestation of virtues like compassion, respect and integrity.

What are the choices we must make and the cost we must bear to transform society into one that mirrors our declared personal values and ideals more closely? Let us explore how we can grapple with that in a few of those areas.

### **Choices and cost to closing the gaps**

First, on affordable housing, in recent years, the Government has introduced cooling measures to tame the demand for property and raise the supply of new public housing units.

The rationale is to ensure prices do not outstrip the economic performance of the country and that buyers are not over-leveraged in their property loans in an uncertain financial market. These measures keep housing affordable.

This is done at a cost to sellers of property. Within the “buy low, sell high” dictum where everyone wants to win in the property lottery of land-scarce Singapore, politically, this policy stance is controversial among segments of citizens and certain interest groups.

Hence, the conundrum of governance – the calculus of what is good at the personal level can be different at the societal one. What is fair and inclusive policy for one group seems draconian and stifling for another.

Second, on care for the elderly, we want senior family members to enjoy dignified and supported golden years. However, for most, it is simply too costly to achieve this on an individual household basis.

On the other hand, we can all manage it better when we pool our resources as individuals, communities and employers by paying taxes, by becoming contributors to national social

risk-pooling schemes like Medishield Life and the proposed CareShield Life, or by building and running shared, community facilities in the heart of our neighbourhoods.

Again, individual, private solutions will lead to different outcomes from collective ones.

Deciding who will carry which burden, who should benefit more are the choices we have to make for a welfare outcome that is superior all round. Reframing issues like these – from transactions to acts of solidarity will help us achieve that.

Third, on nurturing compassion, care and respect, it is difficult to find an antidote to the corrosive selfish competitiveness that arise from widespread systems that appraise workplace performance or academic achievements on a bell curve.

Active citizens wait for highly-regulated public agencies to provide permission and funding for local community projects at the cost of a diminished sense of ownership, authenticity and innovation. The balance between accountability and empowerment between state and people has to be part of the difficult conversation about developing the livelier civic space we want.

We need to nourish the collective and community far more if we are to live up to our nobler ideals that the survey series suggests are in us.

Narratives like “no one owes you a living”, “don’t be weak or someone will take advantage of you”, “the small guy always gets swallowed up”, and “the good guy never wins” need similarly powerful counterpoints to allow notions of the common good to flourish.

National Day will be a good time to discuss how we can become a society we will always be proud of.

Dr Gillian Koh is Deputy Director (Research) at the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore. The National Values Assessment 2018 survey referred to in the essay was conducted by aAdvantage Consulting Group Pte Ltd (Singapore) and Barrett Values Centre (United Kingdom).