

Singaporeans see virtues like compassion in themselves but view society as complaining: Survey

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Singapore society is kiasu (Hokkien for afraid to lose), kiasi (Hokkien for overly afraid or timid) and complaining, according to respondents of a survey, but they see themselves as having virtues like humour, compassion and honesty.

The disconnect between personal descriptions and their perceptions of society was one of the findings of the 2018 Singapore National Values Assessment revealed on Monday (Jul 30) by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and consulting firm Aadvantage.

Public policy researcher Dr Gillian Koh, who facilitated a roundtable discussion on the survey findings on Monday, questioned what it is about stepping out of the door that creates the disconnect.

“Some of the rules, some of the Government policies, some of how life is structured make it difficult for you to take your personal values, which you love, which you exercise at home out into society,” she said.

She asked if there are purposes to the societal norm or Government policies that create such attributes in the society, and whether these could be tweaked.

The survey, which was also conducted in 2012 and 2015, sought to find out what Singaporeans consider to be the values, beliefs and behaviours that best describe them at a personal level, their perceptions of Singapore society and their vision of the ideal society.

While the view of society as being kiasu, kiasi and materialistic was also brought up by respondents in the previous surveys, “complaining”, which was a new word included in this year's survey, also featured among the top 10 qualities seen in today's society.

Positive values such as educational opportunities and effective healthcare also feature in what people see in the current society.

What the people want

The respondents defined their ideal society as one where there are educational opportunities, care for the elderly as well as the disadvantaged and effective healthcare. Other attributes of an ideal society included caring for the environment, respect and dependable public services.

Quality of life and employment opportunities which were picked in 2012 and 2015, fell off the list this year.

“While basic needs will always be important, it is heartening the survey provides evidence that Singaporeans do want our society to be defined by higher order values like compassion and respect,” said Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser from the department of sociology at the National University of Singapore.

Affordable housing emerged the most frequently mentioned quality in an ideal society, and remained a constant in the three survey findings.

It was also viewed as an attribute that had the biggest lag between the current situation and what is desired in the future.

Almost half of the 2,000 respondents were also polled on values they desired of their workplaces. Employee recognition came up as the attribute that required the most work. There were 360 votes on employee recognition as a desired value. Employee recognition had also been flagged in the previous two surveys.

The national values assessment survey was mainly conducted face-to-face between March and May this year using a sample that represents Singapore society according to gender, age, ethnicity and housing type.

The survey was conducted jointly by aAdvantage Consulting Group and Barrett Values Centre.