

**DELAYED MARRIAGE AND ULTRA-LOW FERTILITY IN SINGAPORE — THE
CONFOUNDING CHALLENGES TO SOCIAL STABILITY**

by Paulin Tay Straughan

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
National University of Singapore

Report prepared for the [CSC-IPS The Population Conundrum - Roundtable on
Singapore's Demographic Challenges, 3 May 2012](#)

*The contents are not to be cited or reproduced in any form without prior permission
of the author(s) and the Institute of Policy Studies.*

Views expressed herein are entirely those of the author(s).

Abstract

Much of Singapore's recent problems with social acceptance and integration of foreigners is attributed to the city-state's sustained ultra-low fertility. To augment labour shortage, state policies on immigrant were eased to facilitate an inflow of guest workers. The backlash on rapid globalisation of the workforce was felt acutely when the non-resident segment rose to account for over 20% of the almost 5.2 million population. To ease social tension between locals and foreigners, the city-state has to curb reliance on foreign labour through ensuring a steady growth of the local population. This paper discusses the social, cultural and structural barriers to fertility growth. The discourse highlights limitations of poor work-life integration as well as over-demands on parenting. Radical transformations that target macro structures are proposed to return to centre the social institution of the family. The proposals hope to affect a better work-life balance and reconceptualise responsible parenting so that singles have sufficient resources to invest in marriage, and family formation becomes a more achievable life goal for Singaporeans.

Delayed Marriage and Ultra-Low Fertility — the Confounding Challenges to Social Stability

Introduction

This paper focuses on the challenges a modern city-state faces in managing contesting ideals and the dissonance between individual aspirations and national concerns. The discourse on Singapore's sustained ultra-low fertility woes resonates with challenges experienced in other first-world developed capitalist economies in Asia, particularly Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Using Singapore as a case study, I will discuss how rapid economic development, keen competition in the capitalist economy and strong work ethics all run contradictory to the call for growing families.

Singapore has had below-replacement total fertility rate (TFR) since the mid-1970s, and the city-state has invoked immigration to augment population growth. Foreign labour constitutes a significant portion of the work force and they contribute to growth in the non-resident proportion of the population, which rose from 9% in 1990 to 19% in 2008 (Singapore Department of Statistics, *Population Trends 2011*). However, recent incidents that dominated Singapore news headlines suggest a growing divide between Singaporeans and our foreign guests. There has also been much debate over the implications of foreign labour on dampening wages of low-income earners, which resulted in the government announcing new policies to limit the number of these workers in Singapore. As the nation is forced to relook immigration policies, a parallel debate arises: can a small nation like Singapore afford to close its doors to immigration? Given our sustained ultra-low fertility where total fertility rate (TFR) has been way below the replacement rate since the latter part of the 1970s, if not for robust immigration, the population would have shrunk.

This paper focuses on recent demographic shifts, which throws light on the baby puzzle. While analyses on fertility issues tend to focus on the adequacy of pro-family public policies, an important dimension is the discourse on delayed marriage. Given that procreation in more conservative Asian societies like Singapore is sanctioned within a legally recognised marital union, it is critical that we address the root cause of the problem — what draws young Singaporeans away from marriage.

Through sociological lens, I will highlight the social, cultural and structural barriers to family formation. The first section discusses marriage patterns and illuminates the dynamics that hinder spouse selection. The second section places the converts in centre stage and revisits the adequacy and gaps in pro-family policies.

Overview of Singapore Demographic Trends and Population Policies

Singapore's short 47-year post-independence history saw impressive transformation in both social and economic indicators. Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation propelled the small city from third world to first. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) grew from \$5 billion to \$55 billion between 1960 and 1990. In the same period, per capita indigenous

GDP rose from S\$3,455 to S\$13,150 (Soon and Tan 1997). By 2009, the GDP was registered at US\$182,233 million (Singapore Department of Statistics, “Time Series on Annual GDP at Current Market Prices”). The government, led by then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew embarked on an intensive industrialisation programme based on an export-oriented strategy (Ministry of Trade and Industry 2010). With limited geographical space and natural resources, Singapore depended primarily on manpower to facilitate the economic make-over.

The growth strategy adopted by the government had significant implications on the Singapore family. With rapid industrialisation, there was an acute demand for skilled labour, which facilitated access to paid work as well as formal training for all Singaporeans, including women. For the first time, marriage and parenthood were not the only life goals for women. Instead, they could choose to pursue formal education and skills training, and enter the workforce to gain economic independence. Inevitably, these opportunities began to transform the meaning of marriage in women’s lives. As Singaporeans delayed marriage, the TFR began to spiral downward, resulting in demographic trends that have significant impact on social stability in the nation state (see Table 1).

Table 1. Marriage and Fertility Indicators

Indicators	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2011
Median age at first marriage:						
Brides	23.1	23.6	25.3	26.2	27.7	n.a.
Grooms	26.9	26.7	28.0	28.7	30.0	n.a.
General divorce rate						
Males (per 1,000 married resident males)	n.a.	3.7	6.1	6.5	7.6	n.a.
Females (per 1,000 married resident females)	n.a.	3.8	6.1	6.5	7.3	n.a.
Total fertility rate (per female)	3.07	1.82	1.83	1.60	1.15	n.a.
Proportion single among residents aged 35–39 years:						
Males	10.8	10.5	18.1	19.7	20.4	n.a.
Females	5.1	8.5	14.8	15.1	17.1	n.a.
Median age	19.5	24.4	29.8	34.0	37.4	38.0
% in population 65 years & over	3.4	4.9	6.0	7.2	9.0	9.3
Old-age support ratio (No. aged 15–64 years per elderly aged 65 years & older)	17.0	13.8	11.8	9.9	8.2	7.9
Average household size	5.4	4.9	4.2	3.7	3.5	n.a.
% 1-person households	n.a.	n.a.	5.2	8.2	12.2	n.a.

Source: Singapore Department of Statistics, *Population Trends 2011*, v–vii.

Noteworthy is the increase in the proportion of singles in the 25–29 and 30–39 age range (see Table 2, Singapore Department of Statistics’ “Census of Population 2010 Statistical Release 1”). In the former, we see implications on fertility trends as chances of growing larger families decrease especially when women marry after 30 years of age. In the latter, the likelihood of singles in this age group who eventually get married is very low. Despite rapid modernisation, traditional norms governing marriage patterns persist as men continue to seek younger women for matrimonial desires. This impacts the proportion of single women above 30 years old, which is likely to continue to increase.

Table 2: Singlehood Indicators

Age Group	Gender	Proportion of Singles	
		2000	2010
25–29 years	Male	66%	78%
	Female	46%	62%
30–34 years	Male	33%	43%
	Female	22%	31%
35–39 years	Male	21%	24%
	Female	16%	20%

Source: “Census of Population 2010 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion.” Singapore Department of Statistics, Ministry of Trade & Industry, Singapore.

Taken together, the implications of delayed marriage, smaller family size and increased proportion of singles in the population is a fast greying society where median age has inched up annually. Of concern is the fall in the old-age support ratio, which reflects stress on the economically-able to sustain economic productivity. Also significant is the shrinking of household size and the rise in proportion of 1-person households. For an anti-welfare state such as Singapore where the family is expected to provide for its vulnerable members, this emerging trend threatens the viability of the family as a social safety net.

Policy makers have tried to mitigate the fall in TFR with a string of pro-family policies to promote marriage and procreation (see Straughan 2008a and 2008b for detailed discussion on implications of family policies). These policies are broad-ranged in approach, and incentives cover housing grants, tax breaks, and cash incentives as well as co-savings schemes. While these incentives are definitely attractive and much welcomed by those who are already planning to grow families, it seems to do little to move the unconverted. The TFR continues to remain in the dismal zone, and many scholars continue to lament on the adequacy of the current measures (for example, see Yap 2009; Jones 2012).

I argue that the current set of policies fail to address the root cause of the problem. For effective community intervention, policies will have to be directed to the social, cultural and structural barriers to marriage and procreation. In short, simply levelling up on incentives to entice individuals to get married and grow families is not sufficient to

counter aspirations that distract young adults from investment in family. This paper will attempt to address the gap through a focused and targeted approach.

Two fundamental questions are often raised in the research on marriage and procreation. First, because procreation is only sanctioned within the legally recognised marital union in most Asian societies, we will address the key factors that contribute to a delay in marriage. Second, many in Singapore rationalise that they could not afford to grow large families because of the high costs involved in raising children. I will attempt to deconstruct the perceived costs involved in childrearing and address these in the proposed interventions.

A Targeted Approach to Baby Puzzle — Where is Cupid?

That over 60% of the population between 25–29 years of age are still single suggests that marriage patterns have shifted significantly since the 1970s when population concerns were of a completely different nature. Various studies continue to validate the importance of marriage among Singaporeans (for example, see Chan 2001). While marriage remains a life goal for most young Singaporeans, clearly, there are contesting concerns. In the discourse of fertility issues, marital status of women between the ages of 25–29 is an important consideration. Women who marry after 30 years of age are less likely to have large families as the chances of natural conception goes down for women above 30. Thus, a discourse on fertility concerns would inadvertently query the factors that lead to delayed marriages. With rapid modernisation and urbanisation, norms and expectations governing marriage and family have also shifted. Following this argument, I posit that there are three key reasons for the delay in marriage: change in expectations of marriage, contesting life goals and normalisation of singlehood. In the discussion that follows, my focus is on singles between 25–29 years old.

Expectation of Marriage: Searching for Mr/Ms Right

Much has been written about the social transformation of marriage. Coontz (2004) detailed the shift in expectation of the social institution of marriage from the traditional to contemporary. With the rise of industrialisation, urbanisation and modernisation, marriage has been de-institutionalised (Cherlin 2004; Coontz 2004). Young adults in contemporary societies now have raised individualised expectations of marriage, and many hope to fulfill personal needs of happiness and satisfaction. In place of traditional spouse selection mechanisms, modern courtship is participant-run, with a strong emphasis on personal choice.

Singaporeans living in this cosmopolitan global city-state have also been imbued with these modern ideals of marriage. In a recent qualitative study on singles in Singapore, notions of commitment, trust, fidelity, self-fulfillment and love were highlighted by the respondents as being important aspects of a good marriage (Straughan 2011a). Clearly, the transformation of marriage has centred individual needs in a social institution that traditionally favoured family demands. However, the ideation of

contemporary marriage may have placed it on a pedestal such that it seems out of reach for those searching for self-fulfillment.

Such a utopian construct of marital union requires the partnership of the perfect spouse. It is this search for the soul mate that has caused many to delay marriage — sometimes, indefinitely. The ideal partner must meet the traditional requirements of good physical appearance and desired social class, and they must also possess additional requisites of compatible character attributes and shared values (Straughan 2011). This only serves to make courtship and spouse selection more challenging and time-intensive. However, time is a scarce resource for the singles in cosmopolitan Singapore.

Contesting Life Goals: Work-Life Balance

The Singapore workforce has persistently registered one of the highest hours worked in the world, beating even the industrious South Koreans (Ministry of Manpower 2012b). As Singaporeans spend more time in formal education and skills training, career aspirations have become the top concern for those venturing into adulthood, more important than marriage and family formation. That career achievements take priority over marriage is reinforced by the expectations of family formation, which emphasises responsible parenting. In the past, marriage was the expected linear trajectory for young women who enter adulthood. Now, with the advantage of formal education, the life goals of both men and women are fairly homogeneous. Because of the rewards from investment in paid work, women have become like men in their aspirations. Regardless of gender, success in paid work is valued as rewards from investment in formal education as well as overt affirmation of one's station in life. It is, thus, natural that young Singaporeans expect to enter full-time paid work when they complete formal education. All these then render work-life balance a critical factor as we tease out the barriers to early marriage and family formation.

Just as the expectations of marriage have transformed, so has the expectations of paid work. In a compact city-state like Singapore, the keen competition to get ahead in one's career is most acutely felt, even by those who are not overtly contesting for scarce rewards. Unlike other nations endowed with geographical spread, Singaporeans who do not covet the rewards of a competitive work life cannot retreat to the less hectic pace of the suburbs. As social distance between the top income bracket and the median earners grow, the spending power of the privileged inadvertently transforms the lifestyle markers of this capitalist economy. As the population expands through immigration efforts and the city-state becomes more densely populated, the geographical space between the haves and have-nots shrink. Commodification of lifestyle renders visible the achievements of those who enjoy upward social mobility, with private home ownership and car ownership as the most coveted prizes. In a period where car prices hit an all-time high, the most popular car in the city-state was the BMW (Ee 2012).

All these set achievement parameters for young professionals who are starting their careers, where most strive towards a higher standard of living and ownership of status

markers like cars, private homes and overseas vacations. They are also quite willing to put other life goals such as courtship and marriage on hold while they focus on amassing disposable income. The presence of a significant group with higher disposable income will also inevitably drive prices of luxury items up and sustain a higher cost of living in general. However, the meritocratic ideal has been ingrained in all Singaporeans — that as long as we work hard, we will have a fair chance at achieving the top rewards. This is the backdrop against which the Singapore work ethics is set — a visible lifestyle that we strive towards, and a strong belief that hard work is the means to attaining our goals. Unfortunately, towards success in the work place is more opaque.

Traditional work valued commitment, which was measured through tenure. Before we revolutionised the way we evaluated work output, employees who stayed with an organisation for extended periods were rewarded for their loyalty. However, with the increase in emphasis on efficiency and productivity as global economies engage in keen competition, contemporary work practices reward output and performance. This shift in ideological expectations at work has transformed the management practices and organisational culture at the work place. The Performance Based Evaluation System (PBES) and the Performance Bonus Scheme (PBS) are institutionalised to encourage employees to realise their potential. However, in the absence of clear indicators of what “good” performance is, it only serves to create tense competition at the work place.

Levy and Williams (2004) conducted a meta study on 300 published articles on performance evaluations, which showed that the research on performance appraisal has become more aware of the importance of the social context in performance evaluation. In short, performance appraisal systems do not necessarily detail employee productivity objectively. For example, Bretz, Milkovich and Read (1992) highlighted how the various performance appraisal practices differ, and the implications of these different assessment criteria on evaluation of employee performance. This ambiguity accentuates the anxiety employees feel in the presence of strong competition for scarce rewards, and results in over-investment in paid work and the management of face-time.

The expectation that an output-based reward system would reduce ambiguity of annual appraisal was also challenged as management failed to remove the subjectivity introduced by the assessor. Spence and Keeping (2011) noted in their paper the significant role of the assessor in performance appraisals. Longenecker, Sims and Gioia (1987) argued that accuracy may not be the primary concern of the assessors when they appraise subordinates. Rather, they may be more focused on using the appraisal proceeds to motivate and reward subordinates. The lack of a systematic means of accounting for output leaves employees feeling vulnerable and uncertain about their job prospects.

Ironically, when the PBES replaced the traditional tenure-based reward system, it was anticipated that as the PBES focused on output, it therefore freed employees from traditional notions of managing face-time. However, as most white-collared professionals’ work responsibilities involve projects with long gestation and portfolios that are integral parts of a larger framework, it is difficult for these employees to

demonstrate clear and distinct output. So in the absence of quantifiable indicators, many resort to the traditional demonstrations of commitment — clocking hours and managing face-time. This confusion is reflected in our poor performance indicators, which show that Singapore's productivity growth has averaged just 1 percent in the last decade (Ministry of Manpower 2012c; Teo 2010).

As rewards from career achievements are tangible and released on an annual basis, the opportunity costs from taking time out to pursue non-work interests are acutely felt. This encourages young employees to delay courtship and marriage, as they seize opportunities to amass more savings and entrench themselves in the organisational hierarchical structure. For a young single, the opportunity cost for delaying matters of the heart seems less painful than that of lagging behind the competition at work — and this is especially so when the norm in the workplace is singlehood.

Singlehood as Norm

As more young Singaporeans remain single, the social pressure to get married before a certain age also decreases. When age at first marriage was in the mid-20s, singles who were not yet married by the time they were in their late 20s would feel significant social pressure from family and friends to consider marriage. Now, singles in their 20s continue to believe that they have plenty of time to find the right partner as most of their peers in their age band share the same marital status — Not Yet Married.

This is affirmed in a recent study of singles in Singapore (see Straughan 2011a). Many of the singles reiterated that they did not perceive any pressure to get married as there were many singles in their friendship networks, and that they were not prepared to get married unless they found the right person to share their lives with.

This creates a Catch-22 scenario at the workplace. As singles are the dominant group among younger employees, they tend to set the norms for engagement. Because these employees tend to have fewer commitments outside of work, they are able to spend long hours at the office and have less constraints with overseas assignments. This has implications on married employees as the entire unit competes for promotions and bonuses. As a result, work-life balance is a privilege enjoyed by those who have made a conscientious decision to accept the opportunity cost for limiting investment in work hours.

The situation is unlikely to improve. To ease the congestion on the island, the Singapore Government recently announced that they will restrict dependent privileges for employment pass holders (Ministry of Manpower 2012a; Cai 2012). Only guest workers who earn at least S\$4,000 will be eligible to sponsor the stay of their dependent children and spouses in Singapore (the previous income bar was S\$2,800). While this proposal may ease the number of non-residents in the already crowded city-state, it will likely result in increasing the competition at the workplaces where these employment pass workers are concentrated. Guest workers who come on their own to work tend to clock longer hours and capitalise on overtime pay so that they can maximise savings in the

short term that they are in the host economy. As they have no family obligations while in Singapore, they tend to raise the bar higher for tolerance for overwork. By restricting the dependent privileges, we may inadvertently transform the work culture in organisations with a high concentration of guest works, thus making it even harder for young employees to maintain a balance between work and family.

For both singles and married employees alike, work-life balance has become a key factor that has serious implications on marriage and family.

Addressing the Needs of the Converts

While this discourse has focused primarily on the singlehood dilemma, a discourse on fertility will not be complete if we do not look at barriers to growing a family among the converts, that is, those who are already married. Very broadly, the married segment can be divided into two subgroups with varying yet similar constraints.

The first group consists of those who are already committed to having children. For this group, pro-family policies are the “icing” on the cake that is much welcomed. The couples in this category are prepared to sacrifice opportunity costs that come with having children. Tax incentives and cash incentives to offset the high cost of having children, the availability of affordable and reliable childcare, and a generally conducive environment to raise children are all important factors that serve to encourage them to have more children.

The second group is a smaller cohort that is commonly labelled “DINKS” (double income, no kids). For this group, the most significant factors that deter them from taking the plunge are the perceived cost of children — both in terms of financial costs as well as opportunity costs from taking a step back in their careers.

Broadly, these married couples share some similar concerns. The main constraint is time. Young married couples embrace three sets of ideologies that independently demand their undivided attention — that of paid work, of marriage, and of children.

As discussed earlier, the transformation of marriage from the traditional, institutionalised form to the deinstitutionalised model has made self-fulfillment a cornerstone of contemporary marriages. This translates to couples expecting emotional support and companionship from each other, which requires investment in time to nurture marital relations.

Contemporary parenthood is guided by an ideation of child, which prescribes intensive parenting commitment that the vulnerable, precious and precocious child deserves (see Zelizer 1984 for details on ideology of the child in contemporary society). With fewer children, parents are now able to invest more in each child. The cumulative effective is felt acutely through the commodification of childhood and the escalated growth of the child enrichment capitalist enterprise. While provision of basic needs for childcare is

managed quite easily by dual-income middle-class families, the “extra-curricular” costs are beyond the reach of ordinary parents.

Perhaps the one singular concern shared by all parents is the educational achievement of their children. In Singapore, as in many Asian countries, formal education is a much-revered achievement. The young nation has transformed from third world to first in a short span of some 40 years, with many adults having witnessed and experienced upward social mobility of those who have invested in formal education. The ideology of meritocracy promoted by the strongly anti-welfare government is very much internalised by Singaporeans — and the competition starts at pre-school and accentuates at each level of national examination.

To give their children a head-start, parents in Singapore have developed an obsession with enrichment programmes, with some even sending their preschoolers to “prep schools” to prepare for Primary 1, the start of formal education for seven-year-old children (Ng 2012). The tuition industry is booming in Singapore, so much so that we have been labelled “tuition nation” (Davie 2011; Toh 2008). This obsession with tuition has little to do with the quality of formal education in Singapore, but everything to do with parents’ determination to push their young charges to the very front of the starting line as they prepare for the race for a lifetime.

The provision of enrichment programmes, both academic and non-academic, is expensive and time-intensive. Each parent is determined to ensure that their child receives a head-start in life, and the loading-up begins even before the child is in pre-school. By the time the child enters formal education, the competition is intensified with heavy investment in educational resources, tuition, enrichment classes and whatever else is touted effectively as being essential for the child’s success. It is reported that when married couples plan for childcare costs, the total sum for raising a child successfully may balloon to a six-figure sum as they see the child through tertiary education — potentially at an overseas university, in case they cannot secure a place in the highly competitive local institutions (Tan 2009). With such grandiose expectations for the child, it is no wonder that many couples believe they cannot afford to have more children, or to even consider having a child at all. And if they choose parenthood, a dual-income model is essential to ensure sufficient assets are amassed for childcare.

We have already discussed the demands at the work place. Work and family have become tightly intertwined as we need a steady source of income to support our lifestyle and family commitments. A delicate balance is essential in order for married employees to be able to do both work and family well.

Moving Ahead – Progressive Policies to Promote Family

As we deliberate on how to reverse marriage and fertility trends, we are mindful that Singapore already has a very comprehensive slate of pro-family policies that have addressed fiscal support, living arrangements and childcare arrangements. Without these, I believe the TFR would have declined even further. Therefore, to encourage and

support the converts in their parenthood, we must continue to enhance the existing pro-family incentives to reduce the opportunity costs of raising children. Perhaps a more effective approach would be to arrest the cost of parenthood, rather than level-up on existing pro-natalistic schemes.

However, focusing on the married segment will not transform the TFR drastically. Our main concern is the delay in marriage. A more effective approach to addressing the decline in TFR is to encourage early marriage. Over the past 40 years, the median age at first marriage has risen from 26.9 to 30.0 years for men, and from 23.1 to 27.7 for women (Singapore Department of Statistics, *Population Trends 2011*). To arrest this trend, we will have to address the root cause of the delay. We have to radically transform how we live our everyday life.

I posit that the key lies in transforming how we do work, and how we undertake parenting.

Strategy 1: Establish Work-life Balance

The singles interviewed in a recent study (see Straughan 2011) cited a lack of time for leisure as they were all working full-time. They attributed their woes to a poor work-life balance, which restricted their ability to expand their social network of eligible singles.

One primary reason why Singapore employees continue to clock long hours and invest in managing face-time is because the current evaluation system encourages them to do so. When the Performance Based Evaluation System (PBES) was institutionalised, it created an uncomfortable ambiguity on how work should be done. In principle, the system measures employee's worth by looking at his output. However, in practice, output for many jobs involving long gestation and sustained processes is extremely hard to measure objectively. How do you measure the output of a special needs teacher? Or an administrative assistant who is tasked to ensure institutionalised administrative procedures are sustained? This ambiguity is shared by both supervisee and supervisor. As a result, many continue to rely on face-time to demonstrate loyalty and commitment. The more opaque the evaluation process, the less confident the supervisee is in his measurable output.

The Performance Bonus Scheme (PBS) is another feature of the remuneration equation that has tilted the focus of Singaporeans towards investment in work. It has created an annual competition within work units, with each member striving towards the much coveted "A" grade that comes with financial rewards. That the performance bonus is governed by a quota system is common knowledge. As rise in base income are modest, many employees have come to depend on the performance bonus as part of their regular income. To strive towards the coveted "A" grade, colleagues are entangled in a fierce annual competition with each other as each strives to out-perform the rest. This keeps employees focused on work performance, and for many, at a tremendous cost to personal and family affairs.

Delayed Marriage and Ultra-Low Fertility in Singapore — the Confounding Challenges to Social Stability

One compounded effect of the current remuneration system is the marginalisation of flexiwork. Flexiwork arrangements have the endorsement of the government as well as the Singapore National Employers Federation (SNEF). Yet, translation into practice is slow. Elsewhere, I have written about the implementation gap for flexiwork (see Straughan 2011b). I argue that the failure of organisations to mainstream flexiwork arrangements is one major barrier to marriage and procreation.

Traditional formal work structure tends to be rigid and locks the employee into a non-negotiable temporal and spatial bind. This is especially testing for those with family responsibilities like child and/or eldercare. A common concern articulated by those considering growing families is the lack of time and childcare considerations. With a rigid work schedule, it is very difficult for dual-income couples to consider having children unless they have strong family support or if one partner (usually the wife) is able to consider a retreat from work. With the extension of the retirement age, the pool of available grandparents as caregiver will inevitably shrink. With the high cost of raising children and the attractive rewards of paid work, few are willing to replace a career with full-time homemaking.

As it is the transformation of paid work that has shaped social relations, which resulted in the marriage patterns we see today, we will have to transform how work is managed if we want to re-centre the social significance of marriage and family in our society. Critical to this is an urgent attention to work-life balance.

Specifically, I have two recommendations. First, we have to mainstream flexiwork options. This will allow employees to commit to full-time employment and at the same time, allow those who need to attend to family commitments a flexible work arrangement which will include flexi-schedule, work-from-home as well as part-time work.

Second, we have to relook the performance-based evaluation system as well as the performance bonus system. Until there are clear guidelines on what constitutes good performance, flexiwork will only be attractive to those who can afford to stay out of the competition for advancements in the workplace. The reliance on subjective and vague performance indicators will only push both supervisees and supervisors to continue to rely on face time, driving many to clock overtime to reflect commitment. A restructure of how performance is measured will also improve productivity indicators and will result in a win-win for both employers and the family.

One stressor that keeps employees focused on the office is the performance bonus. While this may be an effective tool for employers to keep their staff engaged, the social cost to society is too high. An annual competition to stay ahead at the workplace encourages employees to prioritise work commitments at the expense of personal relationships. This is especially pertinent to young singles who are eager to establish themselves in their careers.

Taken together, the competition in paid work is like a race which rewards entrants who ran faster and longer. Unless we are able to re-establish the norms of the competition, we will only see greater decline in both marriage and fertility as paid work continues its dominion as top priority for young Singaporeans. With a reprieve from work demands, singles will have more time to invest in social relations and expand their social circles. More important is the alleviation of opportunity cost for investing in marriage and parenthood, which will serve to return to central the important social institution of the family. Specifically, this is a call for human resource specialists to relook the remuneration system and to derive clear markers of how output can be measured — and for employers to return profits to improving base salary rather than annual bonuses.

Strategy 2: Alleviate Demands on Parenting

One of the most frequently articulated concerns about parenthood is the perceived stress of the education system in Singapore. Those who choose to have children would of course want to provide the very best for their offspring. Having children has become a very expensive investment for contemporary parents — both in term of time and money. The state has successfully positioned education achievements as the means to upward mobility in a society that upholds meritocracy. Responsible parenting now involves securing the child with a comfortable head-start to stake his or her place in the much-coveted elite schools. It is not uncommon to hear of toddlers attending pre-school enrichment activities to prepare them for kindergarten. Parents do whatever they can to secure a place for their children in primary schools that are perceived to be elite, so that their children can grow in the company of children from similar backgrounds (and therefore, have parents who are also driven). The stress of getting into a good primary school is so acute that the government has to position new allocation policies to appease Singaporean voters. That we have a thriving tuition and enrichment industry is testimony to the overload parents impose on their young charges, all in the name of responsible parenting.

In this race to position their children, parents feel tremendous pressure to keep up with the latest tactics to stay ahead of the competition as the future of their children is at stake. And indeed, it is a high cost to bear if one should fall out because the current education system fails to recognise multiple hallmarks of excellence. Academic achievements continue to dominate, and the demands on good grades are acute as more are competing for limited tertiary education places. Competition is most visible at national examinations where all the students at the same level sit for the same examination. The supposed level-playing field at these national examination platforms then allows for a relative ranking of performance of the entire cohort. And the prize for top scorers? Securing a place in the top schools at the next level.

To ease the pressure, we need to develop a system where cultural capital should not have such a strong effect on outcomes. The tension is highest at the primary school level where parents get into a frenzy when they prepare their children for the first national streaming examination at Primary 6. The competition is real since the outcome of the examination determines if the child is able to secure a place in a good secondary

school, especially one that offers special programmes like the International Baccalaureate (Davie 2011). To ease the pressure on parents, we should develop a school system where they need not be so directly involved in their children's educational achievements. And this is possible if we remove the highly competitive Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE), which is taken by all primary school students when they complete the first six years of formal education. If we restructure the school system such that there is a seamless flow from a six-year primary-level learning to a six-year secondary-level education, I believe we will have a more productive system where young students can focus on learning, nurturing curiosity and acquiring knowledge instead of 'mugging' to master examinations. Parents can then partner their children more meaningfully to create a safe and nurturing environment at home to ensure holistic development. This will facilitate the transformation of parenthood, and will bring the joy of parenting back to the equation.

Critics argue that without screening at end of primary school, there will be no way to segregate capabilities such that differentiated programmes can be matched to demonstrated talent. I argue that given the much smaller cohort of children we now have because of sustained ultra-low fertility, we need to question the need for elite programmes. Instead, we should invest the resources in developing every school into an excellent school with a complete slate of programmes that can cater to the differential needs of its students. Schools can continue to have internal assessments to place their students and slower students would be beneficiaries of school-based remedial classes.

Conclusion — Act Before it is Too Late

The marriage and fertility trends that we observe in Singapore are reflected globally, in all developed economies. Does this mean that the draw towards singlehood is inevitable? Sociologists and social historians have argued to the contrary. Though young adults are delaying marriage, it remains an important life goal and the symbolic importance of marriage remains high. As Coontz noted, "Marriage as a relationship between two individuals is taken more seriously and comes with higher emotional expectations than ever before" (2004, 15). With the transformation of meanings of marriage, it now stands as a marker of prestige as oppose to a marker of conformity.

Why does marriage continue to hold its appeal for young adults? Much has to do with the social construction of romantic love, which is tagged as a precondition for marriage. Popular culture, through romantic novels, movie magic and translation on television reinforces the irresistibility of couplehood and togetherness. Such manifestations of the potential of love speak specifically to women, at a time when there are more options besides marriage for the fairer sex. Clearly, the target audience is hooked, as demonstrated by box-office indicators of success.

In his discussion on the draw of marriage, Amato (2007) explained why the notion of love appeals and how it promotes the relevance of marriage. Love encompasses commitment, sacrifice and forgiveness. Therefore, to be in love would require us to

invest in a long-term relationship where we learn to overcome and accept our partner's shortcomings. Cherlin (2004) argued that cohabitation pales in appeal to marriage because marriage brings the promise of enforceable trust. Marriage is a legal contract that is socially recognised and the union is publicly announced. This public validation of couplehood lowers the risk that the partner will renege on the contractual agreements made ("till death do us part"). The promise of life-long commitment facilitates long-term investments of homeownership and growing children. Cohabitation, on the other hand, is a private agreement between two individuals where the informal promise of commitment is not enforceable.

However, as with all normative expectations, if there is too much distance between the glorification of marriage and the actual practice of having a family, the ideal will inevitably be rendered unachievable. If the ideal of a happy marriage becomes too elusive, young singles will stop trying hard to strive towards this life goal.

I believe we are close to pushing the parameters. If we continue to allow opportunity costs for choosing family to escalate, and singlehood becomes the norm for how we conduct our social lives, then we arrive at a stage where getting married is an option only for minority who have sufficient resources. For a small city-state like Singapore where population concerns are the cornerstone for the nation's long-term stability and viability, it is critical that we address the gaps that make it difficult for young singles to choose marriage and family.

This paper has argued that to transform marriage and procreation patterns, we must take bold radical steps to transform the way we live our everyday life. Taking a sociological and structural-environmental approach, I identified two macro factors that have significant influence on our everyday life: paid work, which governs our priorities in time allocation, and formal education, which determines our priorities as parents. I believe that unless we change the social environment we live in, we will not be able to vary from how we do family.

While we have always appreciated that matters of the heart are not always rational and that the rational choice framework may not illumine decisions to get married and raise families, in capitalist enterprises where competition is acute and coveted rewards seem plentiful and achievable — as long as you play by the rules, the opportunity cost for investment in family becomes too high for young adults to bear. Yet, if we do not arrest this enigma, it will threaten the long-term social stability of young nation states like Singapore.

Engaging a purely economic approach does not work, simply because it is precisely economics-driven goods and rewards that contest investment in the family. Under the current context, each hour spent away from paid work is calibrated as potential loss of income. Which government can afford to pay its citizens to get married and have children? The problems of overwork and over-parenting are not unique to Singapore. They are merely accentuated here because of our small geographic expanse. Because we are a small nation state, ideation of how we should live escalate very quickly to

Delayed Marriage and Ultra-Low Fertility in Singapore — the Confounding Challenges to Social Stability

become dominant ideologies. This is especially so when the perceived rewards are highly valued. Now, those who are guilty of perpetuating the overdrive — be it in work or in parenting — do so with a perverse sense of pride. Thus, it cannot be left to individuals to choose family, for the pro-natalist policies designed to entice individuals will not be as attractive as the rewards for straying the course. To arrest the decline in fertility, we have to take a critical look at how we have structured our society and to re-conceptualise a framework that will re-centre the social institution of the family.

References

- Amato, Paul R. 2007. "Transformative processes in marriage: some thoughts from a sociologist," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 69: 305–9.
- Bretz, Robert D., George T. Milkovich, and Walter Read. 1992. "The current state of performance appraisal research and practice: Concerns, directions, and implications," *Journal of Management* 18: 321.
- Cai, Hoaxing. "Bars raised for foreigners' families keen to stay." July 11, 2012. *The Business Times*.
- Chan, David. 2001. *Attitudes on Family: Survey of Social Attitudes of Singaporeans*. Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. Accessed April 15, 2012.
<http://app1.mcys.gov.sg/portals/0/summary/research/publications-survey-sas2001.pdf>.
- Cherlin, Andrew J. 2004. "The deinstitutionalization of American marriage." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66: 848–61.
- Coontz, Stephanie. 2004. "The world historical transformation of marriage." *Journal of Marriage and Family* 66 (4): 974–9.
- Davie, Sandra. "Tuition boom as kids prep for Integrated Programme." December 2, 2011. *The Straits Times*.
- Ee, Samuel. "Best-selling car in Singapore." January 4, 2012. *The Business Times*. Accessed July 16, 2012.
<http://www.asiaone.com/Motoring/News/Story/A1Story20120103-319644.html>
- Jones, Gavin W. 2012. "Population policy in a prosperous city-state: Dilemmas for Singapore." *Population and Development Review* 38 (2): 311–36.
- Levy, Paul E. and Jane R. Williams. 2004. "The Social Context of Performance Appraisal: A Review and Framework for the Future." *Journal of Management* 30: 881–905.
- Longenecker, Clinton O., Henry P. Sims, Jr, and Dennis A. Gioia. 1987. "Behind the mask: The politics of employee appraisal." *The Academy of Management Executive* (1987–1989): 183–93.
- Ministry of Manpower, Singapore. "Changes to Dependent Privileges for Employment Pass Holders." Accessed April 19, 2012. <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/employment-pass/before-you-apply/Pages/default.aspx>.

Delayed Marriage and Ultra-Low Fertility in Singapore — the Confounding Challenges to Social Stability

_____. “National labour market information: hours worked.” Accessed April 19, 2012. <http://www.mom.gov.sg/statistics-publications/national-labour-market-information/statistics/Pages/hours-worked.aspx>.

_____. “Productivity Indicators.” Accessed April 19, 2012. <http://www.mom.gov.sg/skills-training-and-development/productivity/Pages/productivity.aspx>.

Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore. “Growing our Economy.” Accessed October 17, 2010. <http://app.mti.gov.sg/default.asp?id=545>

Ng, Jane. “1st to prep classes, then to Primary 1.” April 29, 2012. *The Straits Times*.

Singapore Department of Statistics. Population Trends 2011. Ministry of Trade and Industry, Singapore. Accessed September 10, 2012. <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/population2011.pdf>

_____. “Time Series on Annual GDP at Current Market Prices.” Accessed October 17, 2010. <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/stats/themes/economy/hist/gdp2.html>.

_____. “Census of Population 2010 Statistical Release 1: Demographic Characteristics, Education, Language and Religion.” Accessed April 19, 2012. <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/pubn/popn/C2010sr1/cop2010sr1.pdf>.

Soon, Teck Wong and Tan Choo Suan. 1997. “Singapore: Public Policy and Economic Development.” In *Lessons from East Asia*, edited by Danny M. Leipziger. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Spence, Jeffery R. and Lisa Keeping. 2011. “Conscious rating distortion in performance appraisal: A review, commentary, and proposed framework for research.” *Human Resource Management Review* 21 (2): 85–95

Straughan, Paulin Tay. 2011a. “Not yet married — the implications of meanings of marriage on youths in Singapore.” *Hong Kong Journal of Youth Studies* 14 (1): 113–29.

_____. 2011b. *Evolving with the Times — the Changing Landscape of Work-Life Integration in Singapore*. Singapore: Employer Alliance.

_____. 2008a. “Contesting ideologies and the roles of government family policies in arresting ultra-low fertility: the Singapore experience.” *Population and Society* 4 (2): 29–58.

_____. 2008b. “Family Policies: Interface of Gender, Work, and the Sacredization of Child.” In *Social Policy in Post Industrial Singapore*, edited by Lian Kwen Fee and Tong Chee Kiong. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.

Tan, Lorna. "Time to redo your sums." October 4, 2009. *The Straits Times*.

Teo, Anna. "Singapore sweats away the hours — and productivity." January 31, 2010. *The Business Times*.

Toh, Mavis. "Tuition nation." June 15, 2008. *The Straits Times*.

Yap, Mui Teng. 2009. "Ultra-low fertility in Singapore: some observations." In *Ultra-low Fertility in Pacific Asia: Trends, Causes and Policy Issues*, edited by G.W. Jones, P.T. Straughan and A. Chan. London: Routledge.

Zelizer, Viviana A. 1994. *Pricing the Priceless Child: the Changing Social Value of Children*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.