IPS **Institute of Policy Studies**

**IPS Conference on
Managing Diversity in Singapore**

Wong Fung Shing and Zhang Jiayi
IPS Research Assistants

IPS Senior Research Fellow Dr Mathew Mathews and former IPS Research Fellow Dr Chiang Wai Fong recently published a book, *Managing Diversity in Singapore: Policies and Prospects*. To discuss some themes from the book, IPS organised a conference on "Managing Diversity in Singapore" on 5 August 2016. Around 200 people from academia and the public and private sectors attended the conference.

In his opening remarks, Dr Mathew Mathews said that it is no longer enough to look at the conventional aspects of diversity (such as race, gender and citizenship status) as there are identities, preferences, cultures and social outcomes that are increasingly being discussed on a myriad of platforms. He cited disability, socioeconomic status as well as cultural and personal perspectives as examples. Singapore "manages" diversity because people aspire to include groups of people who are usually excluded, he added, for instance ethnic minorities and those of lower socioeconomic status.

IPS Conference on Managing Diversity in Singapore, Wong Fung Shing and Zhang Jiayi, *IPS Update*, August 2016

Panel 1: Manifestations and Management of Multicultural Singapore		
	Titles of Speeches and Speakers:	
Chairperson: Dr Mathew Mathews Senior Research Fellow IPS	**Navigating Disconnects and Divides in Singapore's Cultural Diversity** Dr Lai Ah Eng Adjunct Senior Fellow University Scholars Programme NUS	**Managing Multilingualism** Associate Professor Tan Ying Ying Head Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies School of Humanities and Social Sciences College of Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences NTU
	Panellist: Dr Janil Puthucheary Minister of State Ministry of Communications and Information and Ministry of Education	

Summary

The first panel explored how society has navigated the complexities in Singapore's diverse landscape over the years. Dr Lai Ah Eng contextualised the diversity discourse in Singapore through history and migrant routes. She also discussed the complexities of colonial legacy, current state mechanisms and social norms, and the various contestations on social media and public spaces. Dr Lai went on to share the findings of a study that she and Dr Mathew co-published in 2012, which explored intercultural tensions within Singapore's ethno-cultural diversity. Through the use of six case studies, she illustrated how such tensions were negotiated, managed or resolved by the various stakeholders. The case studies showed that tensions were often along the lines of ethnicity, religion, culture, majority-minority, and local-foreign divides, revealing both the "old" and "new" challenges in cultural diversity. She offered some suggestions on the principles of conflict management. This included negotiations, mediation and resolution as necessary skills. Dr Lai argued that it was important to adopt positive principles and values, so as to strive towards meaningful

and lasting peace, cultural understanding and exchange.

Associate Professor Tan Ying Ying approached the management of diversity from a linguistic point of view, highlighting her qualms with using the term "management", as it suggests that there are problems with the status quo that require "fixing" through policy. She acknowledged the real challenges that many societies struggle with in language diversity and talked about the linguistic ecology in pre-independent Singapore. The term "ecology" was used in particular to highlight the linguist point of view that language, like any other organism in an ecosystem, would emerge and die. Assoc. Prof Tan then discussed the perceived linguistic challenges that pre-independent Singapore faced and the challenges that English posed as the working language in our post-independent history. In particular, it is a contradiction that mother tongues are no longer linguistic, but based on ethnic grouping. The creation of communities based on an ideal or abstracts instead of the idea of a shared language is problematic.

Assoc. Prof Tan raised several changes in Singapore's linguistic ecology. Today, society is edging towards English monolingualism and is no longer as multilingual as before. Also, with new migrants, there are new language players and a new generation of English-dominant speakers. These raise questions on the effects on the Singaporean identity or ethnic identities. Assoc. Prof Tan suggested a new model of multilingualism; that the way forward is to *not* "manage" language. Instead, she recommended that there should be an organic evolution. She said it was important to approach diversity from a linguistic and cultural point of view, so that there would be a better appreciation of society's differences. She also felt that the country was comfortable enough to engage international discourses on language rights. While Singapore is often recognised internationally for its language management, it is not yet known for its ability to both manage language and demonstrate a recognition of language rights.

Q&A Session

Minister of State Dr Janil Puthucheary opened the question and answer session by sharing some of his thoughts on diversity in Singapore. He said that diversity, in all its forms, was a strength. He also argued that the active management of diversity (as compared to leaving it to its "passive form" as an aspiration) to achieve functional outcomes was a bedrock in Singapore's policymaking and its success. He acknowledged that people might disagree, and welcomed the difference in opinion. Dr Puthucheary also believed in our current approach of finding common space through sacrifice and negotiation, rather than looking for gains. He later lamented the lack of understanding of the success that we have achieved in Singapore and that the institutional memory of our struggles and success was reducing over time; the younger generations no longer relate to the duress felt by the pioneer generations in our early struggle to build a national identity and the narrative that followed. He claimed that the way forward was to have open dialogue in a moderate and moderated way, where one had to be careful not to offend but also not to take offence.

A member of the audience asked how we could encourage individual citizens to build understanding and manage diversity in an organic manner without necessarily requiring prominent interventions by the state. Dr Puthucheary said that having a ground-up approach – with community groups promoting understanding between people of different ethnicities – was the right position to adopt, but he also cautioned against the dismantling of the current system. Dr Lai responded that on a personal

level, the micro-politics of everyday life was very important. She said that it is necessary to have relationships that cut across various lives. The conditions in which we work or live might not permit us to do so, and hence organisations and schools need to create opportunities for people to come together. In using social media, the individual has to be responsible. Dr Lai said that while many people express themselves negatively online, many others who disagree tend not to say enough. She urged the audience to speak up when they see something that they disagree with.

Another member of the audience asked for the thoughts of the panellists on adopting an approach where people emphasised commonalities and values that bind. Dr Puthucheary felt that there was no shortage of highlighting commonalities in policy; the question to ask is how society sees diversity in this commonality. In a similar line of inquiry, a member of the audience suggested looking at diversity as a vulnerability. Dr Lai responded that Singaporean society is always vulnerable in some way. However, she was of the opinion that community or national values could guide the nation and there was a need to need to emphasise the positive narratives. Assoc. Prof Tan said mutual learning of thoughts and attitudes is what comes to mind when we think about diversity, and that should be the way forward. Dr Puthucheary added that there were two ways of looking at it — pragmatic and philosophical. Traditionally, diversity has been positioned as a form of vulnerability, from colonial times to the social narratives around independence. However, in every other domain — scientific and mathematic, for instance — diversity increases system strength. If society were to look at it as a vulnerability, it leads to victimhood. It is hence pragmatic to see this diversity as a strength.

A member of audience also asked to further the discussion on "Chinese majority privilege", which Dr Lai briefly mentioned during her presentation. Dr Lai responded that in certain contexts, and for historical and structural reasons, the Chinese have had some advantages. However, it does not mean that all Chinese enjoy that privilege. To view it entirely in racial terms ignores the intersectionalities involved. More often than not, the real issue is social class, and this is a lot more complicated than just race, she added. According to Dr Lai, the "privilege argument" is simplistic, taken from the White Privilege discourse in America. While having similarities, she said that it was necessary to contextualise it.

Another question that surfaced was on managing intra-religious differences instead of solely inter-religious ones. Dr Puthucheary said it was necessary to let the community discuss this among themselves. The state can enable and empower them to do so, but the community needs to have the confidence to deal such issues independently. Dr Lai acknowledged that there were diverse intra-group differences. Muslims for instance can share very different viewpoints on LGBT issues, etc. Similarly, Chinese communities are heterogeneous and could potentially face issues regarding faith and culture, which in her observations could be quite divisive in a

familial level. This is especially so when people subscribe to different faiths and encounter conflict when cultural rites of passages or religious celebrations take place.

A member of the audience also asked Assoc. Prof Tan if Singlish should be the nation's lingua franca. Assoc. Prof Tan replied that there is little doubt that Singaporeans speak Singlish, and said that it was already arguably our lingua franca, even in work settings. However, there are differences between a colloquial language and a working language. She also expressed concerns of Singlish being seen in a negative light.

Panel 2: New Tensions when Global Meets Local		
	Titles of Speeches and Speakers:	
Chairperson: Associate Professor Elaine Ho Department of Geography Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences NUS	**Two Stories on Class in Singapore: Diversity or Division?** Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser Department of Sociology Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences NUS	**Negotiating Singapore's New Pluralism** Dr Johannis Auri Bin Abdul Aziz Independent Scholar

Summary

This panel examined how we might manage differences that result from global trends and forces, for instance, growing income inequality and diverging views on social issues. Assoc. Prof Tan Ern Ser spoke about how income inequality creates inequality of opportunities and outcomes in our education system, and how Singapore has taken the path of providing help to the disadvantaged instead of trying to stunt the performance of those with more resources to do well. To make Singapore more meritocratic, he suggested that those currently in school be equipped with both technical skills and professional knowledge so as to weaken the current mindset that professional knowledge is superior to technical skills.

Dr Johannis pointed out some points of contention in Singapore regarding issues like abortion, euthanasia and LGBT rights. For people to discuss such issues with civility, there are rules of engagements that could be considered. Citing various focus-group discussions conducted by IPS, Dr Johannis observed that people are more willing to engage in a civil manner when conversations happen face-to-face and in the presence of a neutral moderator, and when participants know that these discussions could influence policy decisions — even if the impact is not immediate. The government also has a role to play to make sure that people understand that decisions made are provisional and can change with evolving social context.

Q&A Session

Participants in this session were interested in strategies to make Singapore's education system more meritocratic. A member of the audience and Dr Puthucheary engaged in extensive discussion on whether introducing Malay and Tamil would make SAP (Special Assisted Plan) schools more racially diverse. The participant was concerned about how SAP schools, which cater to academically strong students who excel in English and Chinese — exclude ethnic minorities. Dr Puthucheary said that disproportionate attention is put on SAP schools because of their academic success; madrasahs and single-sex schools also exclude segments of the population. He questioned if teaching Malay and Tamil in SAP schools would be beneficial for both the Chinese and ethnic minority students in SAP schools. For one, would ethnic minority students now get a better education because they were learning Malay in a SAP school? Also, it would be tokenistic and undesirable to "make use" of the Malay and Indian students to enhance the cultural knowledge of the Chinese students in SAP schools. Dr Puthucheary went on to clarify that ethnic minorities are not excluded from SAP schools; as long as they study Higher Chinese, they can enter SAP schools.

Following that, the participant questioned if such strict linguistic criterion was necessary and relevant in Singapore, since English is our administrative language. Dr Puthucheary answered that these schools produce Chinese language teachers and journalists for the Mandarin newspapers. SAP schools began in 1979 to provide opportunities for the Chinese majority to keep their cultural heritage alive.

A member of the audience asked how to maintain cohesiveness in diverse

Singapore. Assoc. Prof Tan suggested that we could look beyond ourselves and rally towards larger social goals. We could also promote national identity. Dr Ho added to the question by asking what our national identity could be. Assoc. Prof Tan answered that it could encompass values such as meritocracy, excellence and multiculturalism that define us as Singaporeans. Explaining that dialogues could enhance social cohesion, Dr Johannis said that clarifying that decisions are provisional could encourage people to negotiate and converse with one another on divisive issues, reducing feelings of hurt and exclusion when decisions perceived as unfavourable to a group are made.

Panel 3: Making Inclusion Possible		
	Titles of Speeches and Speakers:	
Chairperson: Associate Professor Reuben Wong Director of Studies College of Alice and Peter Tan NUS	**What Counts as Inclusion for People with Disabilities at Work?** Dr Justin Lee Research Fellow IPS	**Giving Voice through YouTube** Dr Liew Kai Khiun Assistant Professor Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information College of Humanities, Arts, & Social Sciences NTU

Summary

During the third panel, Dr Justin Lee talked about enabling people with disabilities in employment. These were findings from a study commissioned by SGEnable last year. Its aim was to look at what counted as inclusion for people with disabilities at work and was hence intended to be a value-inquiry exercise. According to Dr Lee, understanding ideals are important, as without establishing, for instance, what a good death is, there is no way of judging whether palliative care is done well. In the case of the study, inclusion, according to Dr Lee, can be patronising and oppressing at times. Jobs can sometimes be simplified and "dumbed down" for people with disabilities. People with disabilities are sometimes also chaperoned into public spaces simply to demonstrate that services are inclusive. Dr Lee maintained that it is too simplistic to say that more inclusion is better than less, and the study explored what counted as reasonable inclusion. He argued for a system where "all can contribute", instead of having dominant market players who "take all". From the study, it is evident that there are different models of inclusion and one is not necessarily better than the other. There are also many contesting values when looking at inclusion. These values include choice, autonomy, knowledge, equity, social justice, and respect. Laying out such values allows for clearer guiding principles for what counts as reasonable inclusion.

In the second presentation of the panel, Dr Liew Khai Khiun talked about managing media diversity. He started by discussing the differences between traditional film and television and new media, and provided a timeline — from 1963 when television was formally announced, to today where there is Netflix, etc. — to bring attention to the changing milieu over the years. He discussed how social media has become an alternative space for dialogue and politics; it is one that is less reliant on editors as compared to traditional media. Such mediums provide a platform for a wider variety of backgrounds to have their views aired. He also discussed how YouTube has increasingly been used for archival and documentation purposes, and how there is a democratisation and globalisation of archival materials.

Q&A Session

A member of the audience commented that people with disabilities do not just have one identity (that of disability) and questioned what could be done to move beyond that paradigm. Citing the participants of the study, Dr Lee concurred that many participants had said that "disability is a part of who we are, but not all of who we are." With regard to how to move beyond such paradigms, he said it really depends on whether the discussion is about public policy or community attitudes. Policymakers would have to ensure that policies to help the disabled are targeted — for instance, whether or not there should be parking lots exclusively for those with physical disabilities. But society should be conscious of the multiple identities that people with disabilities have.

Dr Reuben Wong, the moderator of the session, drew a distinction between visible disabilities and those that are less so. He wondered if asking people with disabilities to declare these before employment would be considered discrimination, and asked if there should be legislation against this practice. Dr Lee said that many respondents who participated in the study suggested that they would prefer to be upfront about their disability but the transparent approach often does not get them through the door. Also, invisibility of a disability is often a double-edged sword. While one might not be at the receiving end of stigma, there is also less likelihood of getting support.

Another member of the audience asked if governments have to lead by example in terms of inclusivity and ventured further to ask if it then impacts both public and private sectors in terms of "value for money". Dr Lee argued that the government, like other big organisations, should take the lead in hiring people with disabilities. He opined that a uniform "stick" approach to discourage non-compliance in hiring people with disabilities might be counter-productive. Instead, it might be advisable to have "small sticks at the right places". For instance, having the civil service or bigger organisations to have at least 3% of their employees as people with disabilities is an example of such a "sticks-at-the-right-place" approach. The carrots approach — that is, incentivising behaviour — is already well known and attractive enough for those who want to take it up. Having "small sticks in the right places" might still come across as tokenism but it would still be a "game-changing" move in a larger plan to make society a more inclusive one.

Another member of audience directed a question to Dr Liew, asking for his thoughts on the strict media control in Singapore and its impact on social media platforms in addressing sensitive topics. Dr Liew replied that it is less necessary to go through the official platforms like the Media Development Authority (MDA) to upload or publish content. In extreme cases, for instance, the decision to ban a video offensive to Muslims in many countries seem to follow a certain "universal standard" or guideline. In the case of Amos Yee, however, it was not MDA that forced him to remove his videos, but other mechanisms. The control mechanism for YouTube is not "heavy-handed" as it is generally impossible for the state to keep a close eye on everything.

A question was also asked about how we could use social media to create inclusion. Dr Lee responded that social media in itself is more democratic, and that clients can utilise it for public awareness campaigns. But there are also different community assets with different skill sets. For instance, mass communication students can more effectively tell the stories of various vulnerable populations. Dr Liew concurred, claiming that such productions could only be done by the professionals in the past. Today, there are a lot more avenues available and such media can become viral very easily. Madam Ho Ching, for instance, recently brought a purse designed by a student from Pathlight School to the State Dinner at the White House in Washington,

DC. People spotted it, and the picture went viral. In the process, many more purses were sold and some value was brought to artist, who would otherwise have only been known as "an autistic kid".

Dr Lee added that when people with disabilities try to get a job, they could use technology to create visual representations of CVs demonstrating their abilities. Companies could also use videos demonstrate different job scopes or how their work premises are like. Dr Wong asked if this was similar to the purpose of the "See the True Me" campaign by the National Council of Social Services, which shows the aspirations, hopes and dreams of people with disabilities, with a name and a face to place, making them more relatable to the public. Dr Lee acknowledged the purpose of the campaign but disagreed with it, as it could suggest that the "true me" was a person without disabilities. He did not agree in being disability-blind; instead it is important to acknowledge disability to better cater to different needs, but at the same time not to disrespect it. It is also important to understand that disability is part of, and not all of, a person's identity.

A member of audience asked Dr Liew if selfies, YouTube and blogging are turning society narcissistic. Dr Liew replied that social media remains a useful tool to express oneself. If people do not like the content, they are not obliged to follow the personality. However, the danger is when this narcissim, or post, becomes overly public. He cited a case of a 16-year-old student whose post about terrorism drew over 16,000 "shares". The sudden public attention unnerved him. In a highly networked society, one can never be too sure what happens when a post is made.

Panel 4: Strategies for Diversity Management in the Next Decade		
	Panellists:	
Moderator: Dr Norman Vasu Senior Fellow & Deputy Head Centre of Excellence for National Security S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies NTU	Professor David Chan Lee Kuan Yew Fellow & Director Behavioural Sciences Institute SMU	Associate Professor Paulin Straughan Vice Dean International Relations and Special Duties Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences NUS
	Dr Gillian Koh Deputy Director (Research) IPS	Dr Sharon Siddique Visiting Professorial Fellow Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities SUTD

Summary

This panel brought together panellists who spoke about diversity in various fronts — cultural, social, political and cognitive — that Singapore has to manage to harness the strength of its diversity. Dr Siddique spoke about cultural diversity. She acknowledged that the CMIO categorisation would evolve; lines demarcating each racial category would blur and racial categories would become more complex. She also urged the audience to believe that achieving "pure multiracial meritocracy" is possible.

To allow Singapore to better manage social diversity, Assoc. Prof Straughan said we have to be more aware of various subgroups (e.g., sexuality, people with disabilities families with foreign spouses) within our population. She also warned that Singapore could not afford to be fragmented, as we are a small and young nation.

Dr Koh pointed out that there was greater demand for diversity in parliament; more people thought that it was important to have elected opposition members in parliament. She explained how the NMP (Nominated Member of Parliament) and NCMP (Non-Constituent Member of Parliament) schemes have helped to enhance diversity of views in parliament. She also highlighted recent developments in civil society; they have been engaging more with the government to influence public policy. Dr Koh also noted that there was a rise in intra-civil society conflict.

As diversity could also arise from differences in how people understand things, Prof Chan shed some light on cognitive diversity — how people could think about things differently. A few examples he gave: (1) some people think in the long term while others think in the short term, (2) some people prefer adapting existing solutions to problems while others prefer coming up with radical solutions and (3) some people take a bird's eye view on situations while others focus on minute details.

Q&A Session

A member of the audience asked if it was too divisive to talk about sensitive topics regarding diversity and if there was a safe space to talk about such issues. Dr Chan said that IPS provides such a space through organising conferences like this. Assoc. Prof Straughan suggested that there are ample safe spaces, but the average Singaporean is not interested in having such dialogues.

Another participant asked the panel how Singapore could manage diversity after Mr Lee Kuan Yew passed on, as the latter usually had the last word. Dr Siddique said that the problems that exist now are different and hence the leadership required to resolve these problems should also be different; we cannot have another Lee Kuan Yew calling the final shots. Dr Koh suggested that by affirming values that brings Singaporeans together, there is no need for a strong hand in mediation. Since the younger generation grew up in a more diverse Singapore, Assoc. Prof Straughan is confident that the young would be able to navigate the diverse social fabric of Singapore. She suggested that the older generation could help in mentoring the younger generation on how to build consensus. Dr Chan reminded the audience that Mr Lee Kuan Yew had not been active in politics for some time before he passed away, therefore there will probably be no significant difference in how Singapore should go about managing diversity.

A member of the audience questioned how the civil service should evolve to better manage diversity. As issues are complex due to the diversity in Singapore, Dr Chan suggested that civil servants would need to communicate with other ministries. To encourage such a culture, rewards systems could take into account inter-agency

communication and co-ordination. Assoc. Prof Straughan called for more pathways for civil servants to raise concerns so that the civil service can react more nimbly to issues. Dr Koh said that the civil service should recognise that there is no one-size-fits-all solution and expect citizens to be more involved in making policy decisions. Suggesting that social policies and social goals should be weaved into key performance indicators of the civil service. Dr Siddique acknowledged that these social outcomes are less easy to define but will nonetheless encourage the civil service to be more conscious of tailoring policies to the diversity present in Singapore.

Wong Fung Shing and Zhang Jiayi are Research Assistants in the Society and Identity research cluster at IPS.

*****

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.enews@nus.edu.sg