



IPS 30th Anniversary: Diversities — New and Old Panel II: Emerging Forms of Social Identities and Social Formation

By Yvonne Yap Ying Ying

“To evoke change, you don’t go fight it head on unless you have a very bad regime. That’s revolution. Learn to identify where the nexus of influence is, and situate yourself in that nexus. Learn to identify where the pain points are, and see if you can resolve them so it becomes a win-win situation. Because no change is going to come about, especially when you’re challenging the status quo, if you’re expecting that the other side concedes.”

– Professor Paulin Straughan

The second session of the IPS 30th Anniversary Conference featured a discussion between Mr. Desmond Lee, Minister for Social and Family Development and Second Minister for National Development, and Professor Paulin Straughan, the Dean of Students and Professor of Sociology at the Singapore Management University. The session was moderated by Associate Professor Eleanor Wong, Vice Dean of Student Life and Global Relations and Director of the Legal Skills Programme at the National University of Singapore. The panel explored how notions of sociability and social structures has changed because the conditions under which people live and love has also changed. Both speakers also discussed attitudes which the people of Singapore should display towards new social identities and social formations that they foresee emerging in the near future.

In what way is Singapore becoming more diverse?

Minister Desmond Lee began his speech by noting that while Singapore has become more “colourful” due to globalisation and the permeability of identities across borders, the issue of diversity has never been new to Singapore. What is becoming more salient, though, is how people are increasingly wearing their identities beyond race, language and religion. This is because there are now many other means of identifying oneself with others, such as through gender, interests, socio-economic status, and even shared life experiences. However, if Singaporeans group themselves tightly and exclusively across these identities, society will become segmented and stratified. On the other hand, if Singaporeans can draw strengths from their differences, diversity can be a means for strengthening social cohesion. Pointing out that identity is as much a decision on what matters as it is a matter of fact, Minister Lee said Singaporeans could recognise their diverse heritage while working towards a common future. This involves moving beyond tolerance and towards cultivating appreciation of other communities.

In delivering her presentation, Professor Paulin Straughan noted that with Singapore's increasingly diverse population, the categories of "CMIO" are no longer enough as community identifiers. Given that over half of marriages last year involved transnational and inter-ethnic couples, children of bi-cultural households may eventually form the majority of society. In creating a Singaporean identity, she raised the need to include bi-cultural identities as well as the identities of new citizens. For new citizens, Professor Straughan urged Singaporeans to remember that Singapore had invited them to become citizens because they contribute positively to Singapore's nation-building, and encouraged Singaporeans to guard against xenophobia.

How should Singapore support emerging family forms?

Minister Lee emphasised that the family unit, commonly perceived as a couple who marries and brings up children, continues to be a fundamental pillar of Singaporean society. Despite this, there is a need to be aware of the emergence of other types of family forms in Singapore such as the extended family; the transnational couple; the reconstituted household that includes children from previous marriages; the never-married single person household; as well as the single-parent household. For example, there have been an increasing proportion of transnational and inter-ethnic marriages in recent years, standing at 35 and 22 per cent, respectively, as of 2017. Similarly, there is also a need for greater awareness of other social forms in Singaporean society — such as households where grandparents act as parents because of their child's divorce or demise, households where older siblings demonstrate parent-like behaviour, and cohabitee households comprising heterosexual or homosexual couples. While supporting marriage and parenthood is a key priority, the government has also been increasing its support for some of these emerging family forms. For example, HDB has removed the three-year debarment period for divorcees to own a subsidised flat. As Singapore's landscape changes, the government must continue to review its policies and accommodate families in different circumstances.

Professor Straughan expressed her appreciation that the definition of family is being challenged within government ministries. She offered the rationale that sociologically, "family" is a construct whose definition changes over time. There is thus a need for greater nuance when discussing the topic of family formation. For example, she differentiated between individuals who are single by choice and individuals who are single by circumstance. While the former's choices regarding family formation ought to be respected, the latter's difficulties in attaining couplehood deserve greater attention. She therefore emphasised the importance of having more longitudinal studies in Singapore that will allow for greater understanding of individuals' journeys in finding a life partner.

How can Singapore build a strong social compact amid diversity?

Minister Lee stated that while diversity will always be central to "the Singapore story", it will not be a natural move to draw strength from diversity due to the human instinct to cling to exclusive identities. Singapore's community therefore must provide active counters to this tendency. A key way to strengthen the social compact is through the provision of "common spaces", or by creating new spaces for diverse individuals to meet. One initiative that he encouraged Singaporeans to participate in was in using the SG Cares app. He explained that

this app makes it easier for individuals to volunteer for or donate to social causes. He elaborated by stating how Singaporeans would gain the opportunity to mix with people from different backgrounds in the course of giving. Another initiative which Minister Lee highlighted was BRIDGE (Broadening Religious and Racial Interaction through Dialogue and General Education); its “Ask Me Anything” programme is a series of community-driven initiatives to foster appreciation and understanding across religions in Singapore. While the conversation may occasionally get uncomfortable, this BRIDGE initiative serves to provide a safe space where Singaporeans can discuss sensitive issues respectfully. On the whole, Minister Lee reminded Singaporeans that their duty to the future generation is to always strive to appreciate diversity, and to resist calls to adhere to exclusive identities that will only pull individuals away from their broader national identity.

Professor Straughan took Minister Lee’s point as an opportunity to call for greater support for those who suffer from the many types of mental illnesses, such as clinical depression or Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. She cited statistics which indicate that one in six adults suffer from one or more category of mental illness, and expressed regret that many of them hide their conditions due to social stigma. This social stigma is entrenched in popular culture because of the media, which portrays negative stereotypes of the mentally ill while shying away from giving positive coverage of those who have become successful despite their mental illness. Pointing out that mental illness is a chronic disease like diabetes which will not go away even if it is hidden, Professor Straughan expressed her wish that marginalised individuals will one day be able to come out and be recognised as valuable, contributing members of Singaporean society.

In both speeches, Minister Lee and Professor Straughan emphasised that building a cohesive society is not the role of just the government but one that requires the effort of the entire community. In the end, it is not government policy on its own that decides social norms, but is instead society that shapes social discourse and the direction in which it evolves. The building of a social compact for the next 50 years therefore requires strong involvement from all Singaporeans.

Discussion

Associate Professor Eleanor Wong opened the discussion session by directing a question at each of the speakers. Minister Lee was asked if he thinks it is the government’s place to be neutral to the life choices that people choose to make. In the context of this question, she wondered if any discussion on the topic of Section 377A could really be avoided during the session. Professor Straughan was asked for her opinion on whether the relative calm that is present in Singapore with regard to the discussion of sensitive topics would continue, given the rise in divisiveness that is occurring overseas.

Minister Lee’s reply was that debates over such policies go beyond legal arguments and discussions about constitutionality as it involves the hearts and emotions of people. For the case of Section 377A, the future of Singapore envisioned by activists and their opponents are of two very different societies. He argued that any form of social change would not be of substance if it happens too easily. Nevertheless, Minister Lee recognised that Singapore has evolved from the past where LGBTQ issues were spoken about in whispers to the present day

where it is actively discussed. For example, the Singapore of today has gay bars as well as the Pink Dot, an event supported by many Singaporean businesses. He explained that with issues such as these that are fraught with personal values, the discussion must be robust and respectful. If Singaporean society can navigate through that, Singapore's children can then decide for themselves on their future. Come what may, no matter how diverse Singaporeans' viewpoints are, they should hold together as one society because that is all they have.

Adding to this, Professor Straughan reminded the audience that discussions of race used to be very difficult even for leaders, and that social change takes time. While she acknowledged that some individuals feel that they cannot wait, she cautioned against engaging in types of activism that may end up pushing an agenda so strongly that it results in "two steps backwards". Instead, she encouraged those who desire to change society to identify the nexus of influence in Singapore and insert themselves within that nexus. This is because no change will come about if a group that is challenging the status quo expects the other side to simply concede. Stating the example of parents who look to the government for guidance on how to raise their children, Professor Straughan reiterated the need to avoid stigmatising anyone and to create safe spaces that allow individuals of alternative sexual orientations to come out. This is something which Singaporean society has yet to accomplish.

A participant noted that the "CMIO" categories might become antiquated in the future if the number of transnational and inter-ethnic children continues to rise. This was followed by a question about the possible ways for Singapore to transition beyond these categories. Minister Lee acknowledged that while the "CMIO" categories are artificial constructs, they have served Singapore well by enabling dialogue between diverse communities who previously did not see themselves as part of a broader community. While legislation like the Ethnic Integration Policy that are based on "CMIO" categories ensure that Singapore's housing estates remain a microcosm of the country, modifications such as the introduction of double-barrelled race categories show that the government adapts to the changing composition of Singapore to ensure that their policies always help rather than hinder families' growth and development. With regard to the rise of transnational families, the opportunities and challenges of the future will be determined by where and how these individuals anchor their roots. Minister Lee said that if transnational children are born with identities that reflect the strengths and cultures of their parents, they would be able to face diversity with greater understanding, acceptance, and tolerance. Rather than insisting on a melting pot where everyone loses all trace of their cultural origins, it is better to have a broader Singapore that allows people to retain the identity of their places of origin.

A participant observed that while the government professes that it adapts to emerging family forms, it however seems to choose to recognise only specific types of family forms. For example, only certain kinds of transnational marriages are "privileged" by the government such as those between Singaporeans and white expatriates, while other kinds of transnational marriages are hindered such as when foreign wives are denied Permanent Resident status. Given these observations, the participant wondered if there is a government desire to shape or limit people's choices on the ground.

Minister Lee replied that the government had no such preference for certain transnational families. Its priority is to support strong, stable families, and as such have put in place multiple

mechanisms which function to do so. These include formulating the list of criteria required for applications for long-term visit passes, Permanent Residence, and citizenship. He acknowledged that there are individuals with extremely low socio-economic status who marry and have spouses who are equally underprivileged. In cases where families may not be entirely stable because of the stresses and strains of life, it becomes necessary for society to intervene and support them. Some examples raised by Minister Lee were that of older spouses with younger wives and foreign spouses with low education who have young children. For each of these cases, the government exercises discretion on the type of support it provides, such as by making rental housing available to them.

Two participants revisited Associate Professor Wong's opening point relating to the controversy over Section 377A. They argue that while Professor Straughan said that the acceptance of marginalised communities is a matter of community action rather than that of the government, it must be acknowledged that the government does play an important role in setting societal norms. As norms are set in a certain way by law, they thus enshrine what is right and wrong to the public. These, in turn, pose difficulties to those who do not fit the established norms such as individuals who have alternative sexual orientations, suffer from mental illnesses, are marked down with criminal records, or are physically impaired. Minister Lee replied that he understood their concerns.

One participant asked how he is to deal with his feelings of inadequacy after scoring badly on his 'O' Levels examinations. While he is now studying in a polytechnic, he is worried that his previous low grades will continue to count against him in his future endeavours such as in university applications even if he works hard to demonstrate improvement since then. In her response, Professor Straughan acknowledged that Singapore has put too much emphasis on paper qualifications. Nevertheless, she urged the participant to have optimism and believe in the government's promise to teach employers to evaluate their applicants in better ways. On a broader level and in moving forward, she stressed that Singapore ought to delink itself from the outdated hallmarks of excellence that capitalist economies still bear. She clarified that prestige is, after all, a social construct. It is imperative for society to continuously rethink how prestige is to be seen and how to accord people appropriate levels of respect. Such considerations include the need to raise the wages of those at the bottom quartile of society so that every person who is gainfully employed can afford to grow a family.

A Malay participant noted that when doing volunteering work, he noticed that vulnerable families tended to be Malay. He therefore wondered if stereotypes create self-fulfilling prophecies. Minister Lee replied that it is important to have honest conversations about assumptions and about the position and development of minority ethnic communities. However, it is also important to make a call to action for people to join the government in pursuing its action plans. While campaigns such as the Yellow Ribbon Project, Silver Ribbon Project and the Enabling Masterplan are designed to make positive changes in society, they should be implemented with active and equal involvement from partners in the community. Progress not be seen as top-down only when implementation involves support from the ground.

Minister Lee ended the session by expressing his wish to evolve a new form of proactive social work. He envisions it to be an integrated approach that enables rather than disables, and that welcomes all people who want to make a difference. In the end, while ongoing debates serve

to enlighten the community on the issues that Singapore faces, these must ultimately translate to action on the ground.



Minister Desmond Lee, Associate Professor Eleanor Wong, and Professor Paulin Straughan

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