Community needs to be proactive in fight against racism

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The Straits Times, 8 August 2013

The findings of a recent study on race have given Singaporeans reason to be optimistic about the future of race relations in the country.

The Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and OnePeople.sg study on Indicators of Racial and Religious Harmony found that younger and better educated people were more likely to have at least one friend of another race.

The study, which was released last month, also revealed that six out of 10 of the 4,131 respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposition that the country was free from both racial and religious tension.

One possible conclusion is that racial differences have become less salient in Singapore in recent years as living standards rise and the values and aspirations of Singaporeans converge.

Such an interpretation, however, needs to be treated with caution. Race, as a marker of identity, is something most Singaporeans are still keenly aware of. This can be seen in high-profile incidents such as former NTUC assistant director Amy Cheong's rant against Malay weddings at void decks on Facebook in October last year.

Structural racism is kept at bay in Singapore through sanctions and state policy. For instance, the Presidential Council of Minority Rights ensures that no policy intentionally or inadvertently discriminates against any minority group.

However, the domain of racial prejudice and collective discrimination such as what may happen in the neighbourhood or the workplace is not so easily managed. This is essentially because racial prejudice is learnt.

Race is an important part of a person's self-identity. Identifying oneself as a member of a particular race protects against possible threats to one's self-esteem.

Further reinforcement comes when people associate with homogeneous social groups. Because there is little diversity, knowledge of other groups in society is likely to be limited. A predominantly Chinese social group, for example, is unlikely to understand the nuances of Muslim wedding culture and make concessions for it.

And because racial identification is closely linked to an individual's self-identity, the resulting prejudice is unlikely to be amenable to change.

Additionally, since people tend to feel anxiety when they come across evidence challenging their world views, a sense of consistency is generally sought out in forming decisions and opinions.

Take, for example, someone who believes that the Chinese are grasping and calculating. Should such a person encounter a self-sacrificing, compassionate, generous Chinese person, he or she may find it difficult to reconcile this with his or her world view. Psychology suggests that such individuals are likely to focus instead on the traits of the Chinese person encountered that support, rather than subvert, the previously formed opinion.

In other words, racism will continue to persist as long as differences do. Indeed, everyone is a little racist - in that we seek solace in commonalities.

The problem arises when the cultural or racial differences displayed by other groups are assessed negatively. How can such undesirable assessments be managed?

First, it is necessary to move beyond a superficial recognition of cultural and racial differences. The aim should be to encourage dialogue so that differences can be better understood and appreciated. This means asking questions that might seem ignorant. Asked in the right spirit, however, such questions should not be dismissed as revealing disrespect.

Unfortunately, the respondents in the IPS-OnePeople.sg survey did not show much interest in intercultural understanding and interaction. But asking questions about cultural practices or personal theological beliefs might lead to discoveries of important commonalities.

Dialogue helps identify racial biases by forcing participants to articulate their reasoning processes. In this way, people are challenged to provide evidence for their tendency to attribute certain characteristics or habits to particular racial groups.

Imagining counter-stereotypes of a particular racial group could further aid the process.

In a study done at the University of Virginia on ways to ameliorate racial bias, it was found that

unconscious biases could be limited by asking people to imagine meeting individuals who do not conform to the common racial stereotype.

If a society has a view of Malays as sport-loving and the Chinese as book-loving, for example, imagining Malay scholars and Chinese soccer players might help challenge those assumptions. It could also promote greater openness to the potential of others. Perhaps giving more publicity to individuals who do not conform to such popular stereotypes could assist in this process.

But the fight against racism does not simply involve people using their imagination in this way. It also requires the community to be proactive.

As Singaporeans, we must not succumb to the bystander effect. Rather, we should step in to redress racist situations in our everyday life whenever we encounter them. We should speak up for those who have been unfairly treated. Only then will we feel invested in a cohesive society that can see beyond colour.

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