

## **Traditional view of family likely to persist in Singapore**

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The recent public discussion on the Our Families forum organised by students at the National University of Singapore (NUS) was not surprising. A number of people - in letters to the media and on Facebook - had asked why the NUS Students' Political Association, which organised the forum last Thursday, did not ensure that the three speakers they invited represented a broad range of views.

I chaired the session.

The three speakers were Member of Parliament Baey Yam Keng; Association of Women for Action and Research (Aware) programmes and communications senior manager Jolene Tan, and the deputy executive director of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) counselling group Oogachaga, Leow Yangfa.

While all three had previously advocated varying shades of liberal views on sexuality, the latter two have different views from those who stand for traditional families.

People who support traditional families are clearly concerned about what they see happening across Western societies. Marriage there is being redefined, gay couples are legally allowed to become parents, and cohabitation and single parenthood have become widespread.

Twenty years ago, as an undergraduate, the introductory sociology textbook I used had a section in it titled "Alternative Family Forms". It was an American textbook and was authored by John Macionis. It stated that "while more traditional forms are still preferred by most, marriage and the family now represent a range of legitimate lifestyles". The author dealt with four alternatives - one-parent families, cohabitation, gay male and lesbian couples, and singlehood. Evidence for the legitimacy of these forms was demonstrated by appealing to the fact that there had been appreciable changes in the proportion of Americans who had chosen alternatives to the traditional family. For instance the prevalence of one-parent families had increased by 10 per cent over 20 years.

Years later, when I taught an introductory sociology course, I used the same author's updated textbook. The author had kept most of his text intact apart from updating family statistics, since there had been a sizeable growth in alternative family forms. But the most apparent addition was a section where he discussed the question - should we save the traditional family?

It was now no longer enough to state that there was a range of legitimate options for forming a family; but that the traditional way of conceptualising the family was under serious threat.

There is no consensus among family scholars about traditional families.

On one side, conservative scholars argue that alternative family forms weaken the institution of the family and therefore increase the likelihood that more children will grow up in conditions

which are less than ideal. Their prescription, well articulated by Rutgers University sociology professor David Popenoe, is to "replace the me-first attitude with commitment to our spouse and children and publicly endorse the two-parent family as best for the well-being of children".

On the other side, feminist sociologists such as Judith Stacey of New York University say that "all democratic people, whatever their kinship preferences, should work to hasten (the traditional family's) demise".

Professor Stacey rejects the traditional family because it transfers cultural capital from one generation to another and thus perpetuates social inequality, causes women to be subjected to male patriarchy, and denies homosexual men and women equal participation in social life.

If there is any consolation for conservatives in Singapore, it is that any real traction for the redefinition of family is probably a distant possibility. In the United States, the currency for the discourse of redefining the family stems from the sheer reality that many families already do not conform to the traditional two-parent family form.

However, in Singapore, the overwhelming number of children grow up in households with their fathers and mothers.

Singapore's experience is much less a product of individual choices than the force of social policy.

In Singapore, traditional notions of the family have been accorded a special status because the Government views the family as the building block of society. In a wide-ranging interview in 1994 with *Foreign Affairs*, an American magazine that discusses global affairs, then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew noted that how the family was conceptualised was at the heart of the distinction between the Asian and Western models of development.

After World War II, Western governments fulfilled the obligations that once were placed on families. As he told his interviewer, the then managing editor of *Foreign Affairs*, Fareed Zakaria, providing welfare benefits targeting the needs of the individual "encouraged alternative families, single mothers for instance, believing that government could provide the support to make up for the absent father".

For Mr Lee, tinkering with the family was disconcerting. He was quoted as saying: "I'm not sure what the consequences are, and I don't like the consequences that I see in the West."

The research on the outcomes of children born in non-traditional families is not conclusive and is often fraught with methodological problems.

Some argue that when research shows poorer outcomes for alternative families, it is not fair to conclude they are flawed environments for raising children since alternative families are given less support than traditional families. Unless disadvantages are removed, comparisons would be difficult, they argue.

But whether or not the latest research shows positive outcomes for these children, it is unlikely Singapore's social policies will quickly follow their Western counterparts to redefine the

traditional family. Neither will the concerns of those who feel stigmatised and marginalised by state policy be strong enough to shift policies on the family here.

The Government probably believes making such adjustments would entail taking too much risk for society and the state. With the uncertainty revolving around the outcomes of alternative families, implementing liberal family policies might lead to undesirable social outcomes. If that happens, it would be difficult to reverse those policies.

Conservatives can count on the traditional concept of family persisting and informing public policy in Singapore. In Mr Lee's words from the 1994 Foreign Affairs interview: "We have a whole people immersed in these beliefs... It is the basic concept of our civilisation. Governments will come, governments will go, but this (the family unit) endures."

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