

Why we need more light, less heat on sexuality issues

Pink Dot 2015, a rally in support of LGBT rights, held at Hong Lim Park. Views on LGBT issues by the uninformed middle

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The past debates on the rights of LGBT (lesbians, gays, bisexual and transgender) individuals and their implication on public policy in Singapore have generated much heat. These debates have also almost exclusively centred on the arguments of religion versus rights.

Though these two perspectives matter, they leave out other fields of studies, from science to philosophy, that ought to be considered. Additionally, the narrow focus means that those in the middle ground, who may not be well informed on LGBT issues, remain unaware of other perspectives.

This is further exacerbated by the severe lack of LGBT resources from diverse sources, which are able to provide different points of view.

The lack of diversity in the debate is worrying for two reasons. First, the religion-versus-rights-only debate does not lead to mutual understanding. This is illustrated through a 2014 study done by researchers from Nanyang Technological University. They analysed nearly 10,500 comments left on two different online petitions in 2007 that called for a repeal or retention of Section 377A, the law that criminalises male homosexual sex.

They found that the “retain” side argued almost exclusively from a religious perspective. The “repeal” side, however, focused on the rights perspective. Neither side engaged one another or invoked other perspectives.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the Government justifies its LGBT policies based on public opinion. At a Singapore Perspective Conference 2013 organised by the Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said “the conservative roots in society” is the reason that the “status quo will remain”. The question, then, is on what basis are the uninformed middle ground, whose views influence state policies, forming their opinions on LGBT issues? Possibly, their views are based on half-formed impressions derived from incomplete facts or arguments.

Beyond rights and religion, the other domains of knowledge which ought to matter include philosophy, ethics, history, science and anthropology.

Anthropology will help us answer questions about the nature and diversity of sexuality and family structures. Science, in particular psychology and biology, can shed light on whether homosexuality is nature or nurture, and if it exists in other species.

History will tell us if homosexuality and non-heterosexual, non-monogamous families are part of our Asian heritage. Ethics provides a compass to navigate the waters of right and wrong. Finally, philosophy illuminates concepts and points to the relevance of all the above.

EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE

These fields of studies are vast. They may even raise more questions than answers. But knowledge — not just of the facts, but of the concepts, arguments and the logic that are essential to making decisions on matters of public interest — is crucial.

Indeed this knowledge is essential to the proper working of a democratic society, one where citizens make decisions based on the best of what they ought to know, not on what they think they know, or gleaned from hearsay or from partial knowledge.

Who provides and how to provide the range of information mentioned above?

First, just as the Government provides resources for citizens on other issues, it should also provide resources on LGBT issues. This is especially so as it cites public opinion as the reason for maintaining the status quo on LGBT policies. This can be done through all its agencies, including statutory boards such as the Health Promotion Board and the National Library Board (NLB).

An excellent start would be with NLB's recently announced 19-member advisory panel to review library materials, which may include books that have LGBT content. The NLB should ensure that its panel members, who include taxi drivers, students and corporate leaders, have access to the full range of diverse information in order to fulfil their roles.

Panel members should then deliberate this information instead of solely drawing from their own perspectives and understanding of an issue. Political scientists who study deliberative democracy, which is concerned with improved collective decision-making, have shown that fuller knowledge of the issues at stake results in better outcomes in decision-making.

Such information should also be made public for citizens to deliberate.

Second, non-governmental organisations, academics and individuals should also add to the pool of knowledge by going beyond rights and religion and into the areas mentioned above. Their views might be different and even contradict one another, but it is the process of sifting through conflicting material that makes us better decision makers.

Of course, exposing people to facts contrary to what they previously thought does not always result in them changing their minds.

Academic studies by American researchers such as Mr Brendan Nyhan and Mr James Kuklinski have shown that misinformed individuals who care strongly about a topic (on, say, whether Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, for example) will hold more strongly to their beliefs even when they are presented with facts that disprove their beliefs.

This is even true of supposedly more open-minded, "politically sophisticated thinkers".

As the American novelist Mark Twain quipped: "It ain't what you don't know that gets you into trouble. It's what you know for sure that just ain't so."

As bleak as this sounds, there is a silver lining. Other studies have found that the misinformed are more likely to consider other facts and change their beliefs if they feel more secure about themselves, or if the information is presented directly to them.

Furthermore, the Nyhan and Kulkinski studies did not focus on those who do not hold strong views and who are ignorant of the many facets of an issue. This group of people would benefit from the diverse and factually correct information and arguments.

So, the next time the middle ground are asked to participate in a survey on LGBT issues, they would hopefully be able to give a more considered response.