

Analysis: Peeling away S'pore's Class Layers

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What is your age? Your race? Neither question would seem out of place in an opinion poll in Singapore.

But try this: Are you working, middle or upper class?

The question might seem unusual because, for a long time, the concept of class has been taboo in Singapore, intuitively at odds with the idea of a meritocratic society where people can advance by dint of hard work.

But class is a defining division in society here, argues National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Tan Ern Ser. The class a person falls into shapes his attitudes and choices, Associate Professor Tan says in a new study titled "Class and Social Orientations". It is scheduled to be published in the next quarter.

Prof Tan based his findings on a 2011 survey of 2,700 Singaporeans, who were asked for their views on a range of issues, such as factors for success and politics.

Results showed the working, middle and upper classes tended to have distinct attitudes, but it was harder to discern trends across races and age groups.

By class, Prof Tan means income as well as the socioeconomic group someone thinks they are part of. By and large, there is a big overlap - most middle-income people think they are part of the middle class, for instance.

While class distinctions are not new, they have come into sharper focus in recent years amid greater worries about income inequality.

Even as the government has boosted help for the lower-income to narrow the divergence between the haves and the have-nots, the income gap still crept up slightly last year, according to the annual Key Household Income Trends survey released this week.

"Class plays a big role in shaping how people think," says Prof Tan, who heads the Institute of Policy Studies' Social Lab.

He adds: "In many ways, class can explain differences in how Singaporeans perceive their career prospects, how satisfied they are with their lives, and how much they can influence policymaking in Singapore."

THE INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

For starters, all classes are still confident that meritocracy works in Singapore, but there may be signs that social mobility is slowing for the lower and middle classes.

The respondents, aged 15 to 74, were asked to rank six factors they thought are needed for success.

The results, from most to least important, were: education, ability, hard work, connections, luck and a rich family background.

But the survey also picked up an interesting trend suggesting that classes are becoming somewhat entrenched: If your father is university-educated, you are more likely to be as well.

The finding was based on information that respondents aged 25 and older gave about their education level and that of their fathers.

Out of the university-educated fathers, 63 per cent had children with degrees.

But out of the fathers with secondary-school qualifications, only 37 per cent had children who made it to university. And of the dads with primary or lower education, just 12 per cent had children with degrees.

The figures tell the story that while all classes have chances to improve their lot in life, "as much as we talk about meritocracy, background still matters. The class you come from does influence your destination", says Prof Tan.

The survey also asked people what they believed they needed to achieve "success".

Those in the upper class - households that earn S\$8,000 (US\$5,899) or more a month - are more likely to believe that having connections and a rich family are important.

But those in the working class - households making up to S\$4,000 a month - tend to believe more in luck as an ingredient for success.

Says Prof Tan: "Having a degree is not enough. Social capital matters, and knowing people is helpful. I'm sure there are a lot of graduates coming out, with a degree but no connections, so they don't get an internship and they don't get their first job."

To help those in the working class who have neither a rich-family background nor connections, NUS sociologist Vincent Chua suggests promoting relations between classes as actively as relations between ethnic groups.

Such connections create chances for people from different classes to share resources with each other, adds Dr Chua, who studies elite school networks here.

Current efforts at levelling the playing field at the early stages in kindergarten are commendable, he says. For instance, the Ministry of Education has set up its own kindergartens in the heartland to provide quality education at affordable rates to the lower- and middle-income groups.

The Kindergarten Financial Assistance Scheme also subsidises the pre-school fees of children from low-income homes.

"But there is more work to be done. While every school can be a good school, the quality of resources is simply not the same in terms of networks, school histories and exposure," says Dr Chua.

GETTING INVOLVED IN POLITICS

The upper and middle classes felt more politically alienated than their working-class counterparts, with those earning S\$8,000 per household or more a month being the most dissatisfied.

Prof Tan estimates that half of Singaporeans are in the middle and upper class.

The study defined such alienation as the gap between people's desire to take part in the political process, and the opportunities they think they have to do so.

This suggests that the upper and middle classes want to participate much more than they currently do in politics, but feel they cannot. "These are the groups to reach out to," says Prof Tan.

Political parties must show that the views of these groups matter, says political watcher and Singapore Management University law associate professor Eugene Tan. "They do not like to be talked down to. They want to be spoken with as equals," he says.

One way parties can win over the upper class, who are unlikely to worry about bread-and-butter issues, is by addressing their views on "post-material" concerns, such as national identity, social justice and environmental protection. But parties must be genuine, as "'window-dressing engagement' is going to result in more alienation and cynicism", warns Prof Eugene Tan, a former Nominated MP.

It may also be harder for the ruling People's Action Party in particular to win over politically alienated voters, since "the political system is very much dominated by the ruling party and these people feel somewhat alienated from it", he adds.

By and large, options to participate in the political process abound, he says. For example, people can write to office-holders or the newspapers, blog, join a civil society group, or help out at Meet-the-People sessions.

But on the part of the middle and upper classes, they should not expect preferential treatment in the process of political participation, as the views of others have to be taken into account as well, Prof Tan adds.

TAKING CARE OF THE FAMILY

Classes also support their families for different reasons.

Broadly speaking, more top earners tend to look after their parents or have children out of love, while more lower-income earners appear to do so out of social obligation.

About 68 per cent of top earners say that they financially support their parents out of love, compared to 45 per cent of those in the lowest income tier.

The other two reasons - which more lower earners cited - thrown up in the study were repaying parents for raising them, and the expectation that children should support their parents financially.

Similarly, 75 per cent of people in the top income tier said that having someone to love was their main motivation for raising children. Only 35 per cent of low-income respondents said the same.

But social obligations are not a reliable basis for such transfers between generations, argues Prof Tan Ern Ser. He cites data showing that seniors who do not have enough to live on also tend to have poor relationships with their children, who may themselves be poor as well.

"People who need the most support may turn out to be the least likely to get it," he says.

This is why experts argue that policymakers should also look to strengthening family relations, while continuing to boost retirement adequacy through programmes like the upcoming Silver Support scheme, which will pay a bonus to needy seniors without enough savings or family support.

Anita Fam, a council member of Families For Life, a non-profit organisation that promotes resilient families, says the survey results point to a need to help working- and middle-class families in supporting their children and their ageing parents.

On one level, this involves more community-based support like eldercare facilities for families who want their ageing parents to live with them, but are unable to look after them in the day.

On another level, families could do with emotional support and encouragement to strengthen familial bonds, reckons Fam.

Families For Life, for example, comes up with opportunities and ideas for families to spend meaningful time together, such as organising picnics, she says.

NUS sociologist Paulin Straughan calls for more flexible work arrangements, so that parents feel free to spend time with their children without fear that their careers will suffer.

And Prof Tan Ern Ser suggests public campaigns that emphasise love, to encourage family members to support each other: "When love prevails, filial piety becomes a by-product of love."

SHARING THE PIE WITH WHOM?

When it comes to social support, most Singaporeans expect that the working class and the middle class should get some help from the government.

About 70 per cent of respondents believed that middle-income people should qualify for government subsidies. In addition, some 28 per cent believed middle-income people should get more cash transfers. However, both these ideas received more support among the middle class than the working and upper classes.

This expectation of the middle class reflects a higher demand for the government to support their aspirations and reduce their anxieties, says Prof Tan.

Subsidies to help the middle class with the cost of living are actually already in place, says Nanyang Technological University economist Walter Theseira.

For example, public housing is priced at a discount, and investing in public transport infrastructure most benefits the middle class.

But as for entitlements for the middle class such as cash transfers, economists say that Singapore should be careful of treading this path.

Supporting a large middle class with permanent entitlements is not financially sustainable, as taxes on the top 20 per cent will have to be "unbearably high", says Bank of America Merrill Lynch economist Chua Hak Bin.

Sharing the fiscal windfall with the middle class is more justifiable in boom years, but these exceptional years are becoming less frequent, he adds.

"The government will have to guard against over-promising on entitlements for the broader middle class, especially when demographic pressures will intensify in the coming years," says Dr Chua.

Identifying with class

The upshot of all this is that class divides may matter more than we think. "If Singaporeans begin to feel that they're stuck in life, then class will be an issue," says Prof Straughan.

"If people feel they will never move up in life, no matter how hard they work, then they will begin to identify with people in the same class, rather than with larger society," she says.

"When people feel that there are others like them - 'it's not just me, everybody else suffering the same' - then they are more likely to be vocal and push for action," she explains. At the same time, practices within classes become institutionalised.

This is how personal positions on issues solidify around class lines, especially for members of the working class.

But Singapore is not at this stage, says Dr Theseira.

"Class is not unimportant, but it's not something that we've inherited for a very long time," he says, compared to the "landed gentry" class in Britain, which has been around for centuries.

In Singapore, classes are much less entrenched as social mobility was fairly rapid in the 1960s to 1980s, and many families made their fortunes only in the last one or two generations, he notes.

Therefore, individuals - of all classes - can still turn things around for themselves.

"Class means something different when you have mobility and opportunities to change your fortunes. As long as Singapore continues to have that, class should be less indicative of who you are deep down as a person," he says.