

Gap in ethnic groups' views of race relations: Poll

Minority groups more likely to trust Chinese in crises than other way around

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Should a crisis like the severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) break out again, Singapore's Malays, Indians and other minority groups say they trust that most of the Chinese will lend a helping hand.

But a recent poll has found that the trust is not always reciprocated.

While over 60 per cent of non- Chinese said they trust a majority of Chinese to help in a crisis, that proportion drops to around 50 per cent when the Chinese were asked about Malays, Indians and Eurasians.

The difference between the attitudes of the Chinese majority and the other races was not confined to situations of crisis. The findings from a recent study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and racial harmony advocacy group OnePeople.sg point to a narrow but noticeable gap between the majority and minority ethnic groups in their attitudes towards race relations.

The Chinese were not just less willing to trust other races in a crisis, a small but significant number also said they did not feel they could learn from other racial groups or that it is good for Singapore to be made up of different races.

The results sparked a lively discussion yesterday on the dynamics of majority and minority group relations at a forum on the findings.

Reflecting on the 10-point gap in the responses on national crises, IPS research fellow Mathew Mathews said the minority races are more likely to trust the Chinese as they would probably have more chances to interact with them. Whereas it is likely at least some portions of the Chinese - being the majority - would have less experience with the minorities.

This is also the case in other societies, where the majority group will always treat the minority group with "a little bit more suspicion", said Dr Mathews, who led the study.

He added that the disproportionate chances for interaction between the majority and minority races might also explain other findings.

One was that while respondents generally affirmed the importance of Singapore being multiracial, the Chinese were slightly less positive.

Some 59 per cent of Chinese respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "You can learn a lot from other racial groups", compared with 69 per cent to 75 per cent of respondents from the other races.

Some 71 per cent of Chinese respondents agreed or strongly agreed that it is a good thing for Singapore to be made up of people from different racial groups, compared with 79 per cent to 82 per cent for the other races.

Former Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan, one of four panellists yesterday, wondered if there were "structural issues" in Singapore, such as Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools, which have a focus on Chinese culture. People from SAP schools have lamented to him about the lack of opportunities to mingle with other races, he said.

The panellists and audience also discussed what responsibility the majority and minority groups should bear in integration.

"The thing to do is to make yourself assimilate," said an audience member who studied in the United States and is the only Chinese working in an Indian firm, citing how she wears kurtas to work.

But Nominated MP and panellist Eugene Tan felt that in the local context, it is crucial for the Chinese, as the majority community, to "take the lead in... trying to bridge the gap and trying to reach out to the minorities".

Sociology Professor Kwok Kian Woon agreed, saying that it can be common for Chinese Singaporeans to speak in Mandarin even though non-Chinese are around. While there will always be an "asymmetrical" relationship between the majority and minority in a society, there should be more effort on the part of the majority to relate, he said.

The first step, said Dr Mathews, is to develop sensitivity and understanding. Removing stereotypes is also key to building trust, he added.

Dr Mathew Mathews is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies