

## **THE FUTURISTS; Weathering social storms in Singapore**

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Sociologist Tan Ern Ser has been studying Singaporeans all his life and now wants to know even more about what they think, feel and worry about at night.

He wants to understand how families in Singapore are coping with life and its stresses and how family members are communicating with one another.

He also wants to know whether Singaporeans are more optimistic about life compared to 50 years ago.

And even more than that, he is keen to know what can be done to reshape policies that can help Singaporeans meet their aspirations of wanting a bigger house, a better car or a higher degree but are finding it tough to achieve.

So he will be sending interviewers across Singapore later this year to get the answers from 5,000 families.

And then, every year, interviewers will drop in on the same families to find out how their lives have changed. They will seek updates on how families feel about their housing dreams, educational aspirations and movement up the job ladder.

"Rather than study evidence on a piecemeal basis, we are, metaphorically speaking, hoping to build a house brick by brick. We don't want to have bricks thrown all over, as we would not be able to construct the big picture," says Associate Professor Tan.

Such a wide-ranging longitudinal study has not been done here before, and it will be valuable in tracking how resilient Singapore families are.

Resilient families have the ability to bounce back when faced with turbulent social changes and future shocks - such as a natural disaster, a medical crisis like Sars in 2003, or a terrorist attack.

Surviving these social blitzes helps families, communities and countries grow stronger. The findings of the study will provide critical insights for policymakers to assess the effectiveness of current policies and develop new ones to address longstanding problems.

Knowing what is actually happening in Singapore society will help ordinary Singaporeans too, says Prof Tan. "We will be able to help, say an anxious 80-year-old grandmother, understand why her career-driven children and school-going grandchildren don't see her as often as they used to. Or how the neighbourhood is culturally more diverse than before.

"Some of the things that are changing in Singapore society can be bewildering to an elderly person. It's like suddenly the world has changed for them and is not like what it used to be when they were growing up as children."

### **HOW FAMILIES COPE**

THE islandwide study, called the Panel Study on Social Dynamics, will be a key project of the Social Lab, formed last year at the Institute of Policy Studies.

Prof Tan, 59, a well-regarded sociology lecturer and researcher at the National University of Singapore (NUS), has done comprehensive research on several social issues linked to ethnic relations and ageing, among others.

His deputy at the Social Lab is Dr Leong Chan-Hoong, 42, a statistician and a psychologist by training. He has done extensive research on migration and intercultural relations in Singapore.

They will have a team of seven researchers and administrative staff, including sociologists, psychologists and statisticians.

Dr Leong says: "To assess the risks a society is facing, we need to constantly keep tabs on the tempo and experiences of people as they go through changes."

Singapore is a newcomer to such long-term studies and follows in the footsteps of the United States, Britain and Taiwan.

The findings of the overseas studies have provided insights into the way families have evolved over time.

They have also enabled researchers to link long-term outcomes to past events, and infer future possibilities based on the observations of current trends.

Pioneering work on families was done by the University of Michigan in the United States. Started in 1968, the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) began with 5,000 households and now surveys more than 7,000 households. The studies have found how families have coped and changed over the years.

The findings shed light on the changing jobs Americans have held, fluctuations in income levels, the status of married couples, childbearing patterns and the educational demands of Americans.

The Social Lab invited Dr Frank Stafford, a chief researcher in the US study, to discuss with Singapore academics and civil servants the challenges faced in carrying out such long-term research.

### **COMPLEX SOCIETY**

In the Singapore survey of 5,000 households, Social Lab researchers will be asking families several questions.

They will want to know the number of times family members eat together, whether they talk to each other in person or use Skype and who takes care of financial problems when they suffer a serious setback.

They will also ask how many hours they spend on leisure activities with the family, and to list significant changes faced in the previous 12 months - who got married, divorced or died, who retired and which child sat the PSLE or O levels.

"Singapore as a country has become more complex and has made the job of leaders tougher. People nowadays are less confident," says Prof Tan.

His deputy, Dr Leong, points to the angst middle class Singaporeans feel about finding and keeping jobs. Many worry about being replaced by foreigners. Parents also worry that their children might not make it to the middle class and may slide down the social ladder.

The survey will also look at the whole spectrum of families. This includes the study of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues and how these affect the institution of the family.

Today's society is more diverse and pluralistic and the state has a more challenging task in balancing between competing demands and interests, says Dr Leong.

While gay groups say they lack basic equality and are being criminalised for their sexual orientation, many Singaporeans hold conservative views on homosexuality.

Politicians stepped in last month and called for tolerance of different views when some Christians joined Muslims in urging followers to wear white in protest against a gay rights rally.

The findings from the Singapore study will provide significant leads on how some families weather social and economic storms better. These leads will help Singaporeans persist and even thrive in the midst of unforeseen problems and social disruptions.

**This is the third part of a five-part series on experts in Singapore involved in futures studies.**