

Measuring Race Relations: Half Full or Half Empty? Some People Seem To Wish The Challenge Of Multiracialism Would Just Go Away

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Half empty or half full - this is the usual way to describe the state of race relations in Singapore. For the longest time, I took comfort in gauging it this way. It was an effective coping mechanism, whenever one comes across Singaporeans who fall back on stereotypes when dealing with one another, or who make insensitive remarks betraying ignorance about minorities. This was not representative, and not the only way to look at the situation, I could tell myself. My closest friends from the majority race are nothing like that. It was all a state of mind: the glass was still half full.

But sometimes things cause you to reappraise that position. A survey conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg was one such prompting.

First, the good news is that Singaporeans tend not to have a problem working with colleagues or having neighbours of another race. The survey did find that Malays and Indians feel they have to work harder to prove themselves at the workplace, but perhaps this is inevitable among minorities.

They also appear comfortable about having friends from another race but the figures decline markedly when it comes to other private- sphere decisions like accepting a spouse or in-law from another ethnic group. The gap between the public and private space comfort levels is not too unsettling, one could argue. As a country, we are told repeatedly our unity is fragile and that beneath us is a tinderbox of ethnic emotions that could go up in flames if an irresponsible person lights a match. So, we have been taught to tread carefully in the public space.

Indeed, the survey confirms the findings of a similar study done six years ago by two academics showing that when it came to public- sphere activities, racial and inter-religious ties are consistently sturdy.

But there are other findings from this recent survey that are harder to fathom.

Only 71 per cent of Chinese believe it is a good thing that Singapore is made up of people of different racial groups. The corresponding figures for Malays and Indians were 80 per cent and 79 per cent respectively. Although they make up a clear majority, it is astonishing to discover that three in 10 of the majority race would still prefer an all-Chinese nation.

Perhaps it is because of an innate preference for racial purity. Or maybe it is because our national messaging has misfired with its repeated warning that our multiracial makeup is and always will be a fault line threatening our stability. Instead of developing the conviction that this

calls for multiracialism to be carefully managed, there are people who wish the challenge would just go away.

Whatever the explanation, the fact remains that, as Singapore approaches its 50th year of nation-building, a sizeable number still do not accept the central pillar of that project.

To make the picture more depressing, only 59 per cent of Chinese believe they can learn a lot from the other racial groups. Significantly more minorities were open-minded, with affirmative answers coming from 75 per cent of Malays and 69 per cent of Indians.

The numbers of those prepared to say that they see no value in other cultures are too large to be dismissed as due to new citizens from mono-racial motherlands.

Yes, it may be because as the majority race, the Chinese have not had to reach out. Minorities have had to wrestle with the existential question of their place in this country. But is this good enough? Are we happy with what we have achieved?

Another set of figures confirms this gap - more than 62 per cent of non-Chinese believe they can trust more than half the Chinese in a crisis. By contrast, only about 52 per cent of Chinese believe they can trust more than half the Malays or Indians in a crisis.

Clearly, Chinese Singaporeans lag in their trust of other races and their appreciation of multiracialism.

This is not terribly surprising. Chinese who start out with stereotypes or outright animosity can basically retreat into a Chinese world. It is possible for them to pick schools, neighbourhoods, workplaces and leisure avenues with the racial homogeneity they seek.

This is virtually impossible for minorities, who are forced to interact with other races regardless of how they feel about it at first. In most cases, this results in a softening of views and even a genuine appreciation of others.

Thus, there is a racial imbalance in levels of commitment to multiracialism. Yet, it has been the minorities who are disproportionately at the receiving end of messages that they must make the effort to integrate and fit in.

The survey results suggest minorities have made headway. The other hand needs to clap now.

Had I been polled, I believe I would have answered in the affirmative for all the questions. It is not out of naivete but because I see hopeful signs even as I lament the latest results. One in particular stands out and it was during the dialogue that followed the release of the survey last week.

A polytechnic lecturer stood up to ask why nurses were barred from wearing the tudung. He was sharing what he knew from his students in a health sciences school. They had been instructed

to remove their headscarves before going on clinical attachments or starting full-time work in hospitals.

He wondered aloud: "How much are we as a society willing to tolerate differences that different members of a population bring?"

He was spotlighting an issue that goes beyond individual-level prejudice. It is about a questionable institutional practice that is a cause for consternation among the many young Muslim women who want to enter a noble vocation in which Singaporeans are in short supply.

And so here was a Chinese man, publicly speaking up for his female Muslim students, with no agenda of political point-scoring but just a desire for fairness - this tells me that we can count on Singaporeans to stand up for the core principles for which the Republic came to being.

It was the kind of sign that suggests that the glass of Singaporean multiracialism is far from empty.

At the same dialogue, scholar Kwok Kian Woon went beyond this metaphor to paint the picture of a good society, which lives by certain values, including how it embraces minorities and the vulnerable.

It can be a Singapore commitment, "a project that we can all proudly share in", he said.

Individuals and institutions may want to do some soul-searching about whether they are committed enough to this ideal.