

## Racial harmony a work in progress

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Singapore's earnest approach to improving racial and religious ties is reflected not just in various state policies and social initiatives but also in persistent efforts over past decades to honestly gauge the state of relations.

Previous surveys, like the latest one by the Institute of Policy Studies and OnePeople.sg, have provided much reassurance even as they revealed that, in some areas, overall sentiments fall far short of the ideal. The willingness to probe such home truths openly is a testament to Singaporeans' desire for greater self-understanding in order to bridge any discomfiting social chasms.

The latest study is a baseline effort to track attitudes relating to "comfort with diversity, intercultural understanding, interracial and religious friendships and perceptions of interracial and religious tension, discrimination and exclusion". Its 10 indicators paint a largely positive picture - for example, Singaporeans overwhelmingly affirmed the absence of racial discrimination when using public services and a high proportion felt no racial and religious tension exists here. Analysing such attitudes is never easy and some might discern apparent contradictions in the findings. For example, while embracing diversity ranks third on the list of indicators (70 per cent said it is good to have different racial groups here), only half are interested in understanding others' customs. This is worth probing.

Still, the optimism in race relations here is unmistakable, providing some comfort after a series of jarring revelations - racial postings of a scholar and of former NTUC executive Amy Cheong, an undergraduate's comment that the sight of interracial couples made his skin crawl, and anecdotes of discrimination at work.

Such dissonant comments tend to emanate from individuals rather than groups, pointing to the level of ties which deserves much more attention going forward. For example, the weak incidence of close interracial friendships (the lowest-ranked indicator) shows up again a dichotomy in public and private domains. While 90 per cent of Singaporeans are comfortable with local-born members of other races as a neighbour, employee or colleague, only 45 per cent have a close friend (someone they can confide in) of another race. This trait is less evident among better educated, higher-income earners as "people from similar class backgrounds share similar values and lifestyles", according to the study's leader. The young are also more likely to have cross-racial friendships, with shared experiences in schools and during national service presumably playing a part. The challenge is to spread such effects more widely. Harmony will falter if there's difficulty to be in tune on a personal plane.