

The Bad: Disparity in views could be unsettling

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THE answers of the Chinese to some questions in the IPS-OnePeople.sg survey raised eyebrows.

When asked if they could learn a lot from other racial groups, 59 per cent of Chinese respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they could.

This compares to 75 per cent of Malay respondents and 69 per cent of Indian respondents.

Asked about the findings, Acting Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Lawrence Wong told Insight that more should be done to correct the imbalance.

"We can do things to better sensitise the people to issues surrounding diversity," he said.

The survey team put it down to the majority-minority effect.

The Chinese make up about 75 per cent of the resident population of citizens and permanent residents.

Dr Mathew Mathews, the principal researcher of the survey and a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), said that by virtue of their sheer numbers, the Chinese may not have had as many opportunities to interact with other groups.

Being the majority, they were also less sensitised to issues of diversity such as discrimination, as it would not affect them as much.

"Minorities certainly benefit more from multiracialism compared to the majority, and so you can expect that they will be more open and positive to this," he said.

But despite the logic, the disparity could be unsettling for the minority races.

Former Nominated MP Zulkifli Baharudin said the gap was a cause for concern, as this was despite the best efforts to promote racial integration among the different groups.

In another study in 2007, a team from the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University had also found that the Chinese were "least receptive towards the non-Chinese".

Mr Zulkifli said it was dangerous for such attitudes to get entrenched in a multiracial society.

"Every Singaporean needs to work on multiracial harmony," he said, noting that every group must pull its weight. He urged people not to fall back on stereotypes to evaluate others, and to be aware of falling back into the comforts of one's own racial group when choosing friends.

"As a member of the majority, you have to be more sensitive," he said.

The addition of new Chinese from China and Malaysia could also complicate the picture.

Anthropologist Lai Ah Eng, from the National University of Singapore's University Scholars Programme, said: "They may bring with them their notions and baggage about 'Chineseness' and about Malays and others."

But Dr Mathews said the fact that younger Chinese respondents in the survey had replied more positively compared to their older counterparts meant attitudes were changing.

Still, the survey also raised a potential red flag in the finding that across all races, there was less acceptance of foreign-born Singaporeans of another race, compared to Singaporeans of another race.

This may be a concern for the future because, while Singaporean citizens make up 62 per cent of the total population now, by 2030, they could be just 55 per cent, according to government projections.

This influx could put a strain on the social fabric by complicating Singapore's ethnic make-up, said Dr Lai.

Singaporeans had taken years to develop tolerance and acceptance required of multiracial living. But the massive scale and rapidity of immigration will make it hard for "the organic, spontaneous and time-consuming development and evolving of norms" to take place, added Dr Lai.

The problem is worsened when new Singaporeans are slotted into categories of races of Chinese, Indian, Malay and Others, and thus seen as sharing the homogeneous culture of their Singaporean-born counterparts.

But many of today's Chinese and Indian immigrants do not come from the same areas of their countries as those who moved here in earlier years, and may have different cultural practices.

Those from mono-cultural societies may also take a while to get used to living with people from different races who may not speak the same language.

"There are essentially new diversities even within the races, which can be distressing to immigrant and local-born who find it hard to adapt to such diversities," said Dr Mathews.

One consolation, though, said IPS senior research fellow Leong Chan-Hoong, is that those who choose to come to Singapore are already the "self-selected groups" who may be more willing to accept the multiracial environment.

A plus of immigration is that it can make Singaporeans more aware of their similarities, noted Dr Leong, who referred to the infamous curry pot incident of 2011.

In that incident, a family from China complained about the smell of the curry dish their Singaporean-Indian neighbours were cooking. Many horrified Singaporeans jumped to the defence of their fellow curry-lovers.

"From the positive angle, immigration has also made our multiracial background a more integral part of our identity," he said.