

Whose 'community norms' are policies based on?

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PREVAILING community norms have often played a part in defining morality in Singapore and other traditional societies. Even those who may not subscribe to such norms privately may strive for consensus in issues of morality in the public domain. They may value community ties and accept that community norms should prescribe appropriate and publicly acceptable behaviour.

But traditional notions of sexuality and marriage are shifting on a much larger scale, if we go by the outcome of public opinion surveys routinely conducted in many developed societies. What impact will these changes have on community norms in Singapore?

World Values Survey

THE World Values Survey (WVS), which is conducted in nearly 100 countries, provides one such platform to analyse these attitudinal shifts. Two waves of the survey have been done in Singapore - once in 2002 with about 1,500 respondents and the second, a decade later in 2012 with nearly 2,000 respondents.

In each survey, Singaporean respondents were asked, among others, a series of questions about morality, ranging from bribery to homosexuality. Respondents had to choose a number on the scale of one to 10, with one denoting that an act was never justifiable and 10, that it was always justifiable.

Over the course of a decade, scores for several questions both internationally and locally have shifted away from the "never justifiable" spectrum of the scale. For instance, the mean score for divorce in the Singaporean waves of the WVS has moved from 3.4 to 4.4. In the case of homosexuality, the score shifted from 2.4 to 3.6.

This shift might be the result of an increasingly better-educated population uncomfortable with choosing the "never justifiable" stance for issues related to sexual morality. Education broadens perspectives and leads to a preference for positions which are more nuanced. This was evident in the 2012 wave of the WVS where those who had more education were more likely to justify abortion, divorce, sex before marriage and homosexuality compared to those with less education.

However, the great majority of Singaporean respondents still choose options close to the "never justifiable" position on matters of traditional morality such as divorce, homosexuality and premarital sex when compared to Western societies such as Australia, the United States and the Netherlands.

Among Australians, in the most recent wave of the study, the mean score for the item on whether premarital sex was justifiable was 7.7. It was 6.9 for homosexuality and 7.1 for divorce. These scores are much closer to the end of the spectrum, indicating that these actions could be

"always justified" compared to the Singaporean scores of 3.8 for premarital sex, 3.5 for homosexuality and 4.3 for divorce.

It is fair to say then that Singapore society is still rather conservative compared to many Western societies and in fact, also more conservative compared to a number of developed Asian societies such as Japan, Taiwan and South Korea. Respondents from these East Asia societies were more likely to choose positions closer to the middle of the spectrum. Malaysians were however substantially more conservative than Singaporean respondents.

One question to ask is whether any shift in public attitudes in Singapore about sexual and familial norms is the result of changing attitudes of the younger generation.

A look at the WVS data for Singapore suggests so. The mean scores for those who were younger were clearly closer to the middle of the spectrum - between never justifiable and always justifiable.

For instance the mean scores for those between 18 and 25 years when it came to the justifiability of homosexuality was 4.3, compared to 3.9 for those between 26 and 35 years, 3.4 in the case of those between 46 and 55 years and 3.1 for those above 65 years.

The more liberal views of younger cohorts extend to other areas of sexual and family norms.

IPS survey

IN ADDITION, the findings of an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Survey on Race, Religion and Language, which was conducted from December 2012 to April last year, bear out this generational shift.

In the IPS survey, the questions examining morality were patterned after the much-referenced American General Social Survey and the British Social Attitudes Survey, where respondents are asked along a continuum how wrong certain actions were. They were not a checklist of wrongdoings but were aimed at testing moral beliefs, which are often framed in terms of whether an action is "wrong".

Fewer of those between 18 and 25 years of age stated that a particular act was "always wrong" or "almost always wrong" compared to the middle-aged and older.

For instance, 48 per cent of those between 18 and 25 years stated that sexual relations before marriage was always or almost always wrong. This compared with 65 per cent of those between 46 and 55 years and 73 per cent of those above 65 years of age.

On sexual relations between two adults of the same sex, it was 65 per cent for the youngest group, 85 per cent for the middle-aged and 89 per cent of seniors who said it was always or almost always wrong.

Only 28 per cent of those between 18 to 25 years seemed to believe that living with their partner before marriage was always or almost always wrong compared with 53 per cent of those who are middle-aged and 63 per cent of seniors. In a number of other areas such as the morality of

extramarital sex and pregnancies outside marriage, consensus was high across age groups.

It would appear that more among the youngest group are liberal - at least when polled. But longitudinal studies of this cohort are necessary before one can draw conclusions on whether their views will remain stable as they marry and parent.

Public opinion surveys have their detractors. Critics note the hypocrisy of respondents who voice their disapproval of various behaviours but do not live up to these standards in private.

But these surveys must be taken as a reflection of popular opinion, not a detailed study of individuals' moral consistency. When rigorously conducted, these studies reveal attitudes and moral beliefs of a society that are useful to policymakers, especially when comparisons are made over time and between those of different demographic profiles.

How much Singapore intends to stick to a more conservative morality in the face of massive cultural change globally is yet to be seen. Whether such change is positive or not for our society to function well will require a careful observation of other societies over time.

Whose norms?

BUT already, surveys suggest there is an emerging generational difference in receptiveness towards premarital sex, divorce, homosexuality and cohabiting before marriage.

In such a situation, when "community norms" are referenced as the arbiter of public morality, it is worth considering what set of community norms are being referred to: those of the young, the middle-aged, the seniors? Or an aggregate? And if the latter, will evolving moral attitudes also result in a change in community norms?

It is possible that some among the young will change their views as they progress to middle age - something we need better longitudinal studies to establish, but there is a suggestion from the surveys discussed, that there is a growing tolerance for different models of sexuality and family.

What is clear however is that it is imperative that local public institutions adapt to the reality of cultural change and complexity - they cannot operate as if there is one set of "community norms".

What is needed is a process by which specific institutions engage what they consider are the relevant stakeholders and segments of the public if the notion of community norms impinge on their day to day decisions and operations. To deny this reality and therefore not engage in sufficient dialogue or tweaks to social policy might leave Singapore unprepared to deal with the possibility that younger cohorts are prepared to countenance non-traditional options of sexuality and family.

Those who do not subscribe to conservative values should also be mindful of the current climate of opinion. Pushing hard against them, something common in many Western societies, may not be appropriate in a society which is still largely conservative. This may polarise society and make constructive dialogue difficult.

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